

IN AND OUT OF EGYPT

THREE STORIES

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THE SUITOR

IRRATIONAL EQUATIONS AND CHARADES IN JUNE

RHEA AND COUSIN HARRY

THE SUITOR

I met him many years after the great disappointment, not to say heartbreak, he caused me. He is now an old man and, anyway, I too, am getting along in years. He is a widower and I have been divorced for some time. I live alone just like he does because my children are studying in Canada where we have some money and property. After the children left, I moved to an apartment close to his and, quite by chance, we met on the street, *mon petit* Paul and I, and our old peculiar and conscience-stricken erotic friendship resumed with the same intensity minus the sexual factor, which he claimed he still does not understand. He did not understand what a blooming flower like me found in a wilting one like him. He got it half right. He too was a flower.

In our days, it is commonplace to find beautiful youth. Beautiful old people are a rarity and are so wonderful to contemplate. Paul was a handsome young man but for me he was outright beautiful in middle age. The hair graying but intact, the sculpted face, the white strong teeth, the wondrous smile. I saw women lose themselves in that face. But it was not only that. It was much, much more. It is the reason we are back together, inseparable friends. Wonderful friends hooked on each other's company. There is simplicity, modesty and tenderness in that man that is out of the ordinary. He is cultured and well read and there is no way one can get bored in his company. Oh, we talk for delightful hours now that my own amorous life is in steep decline. But there is another reason why, some ten years ago, I was crazy about him. It shall come out partly in the story and more explicitly in the epilogue.

For I have undertaken the task of recording an ordinary and passionate love story that, on the way, became extraordinary with a sequel that was not to be. Thwarted by guilt and the last-minute doubts of a Narcissus. For he must have been a Narcissus, *mon petit* Paul, to have left me high and dry the way he did. More than anything else, I had lost a friend. The sex would have been an added intimacy and I never expected from him the performance of a twenty year old. I had tasted some of that and though orgasms are heavenly releases, they are not always enough. My husband was an accomplished lover and difficult as it is to leave a man who satisfies you sexually, I finally left him to escape his constant bad moods and insufferable behaviour. Two children tied me to him longer than I would have otherwise tolerated.

It is hard to believe that the depression that gripped me after Paul disappeared from my life lasted many months, almost a year. Nevertheless, I recovered a stronger person. One usually does, if one recovers. I often wondered if Paul left me from strength or from weakness. Probably, a little of both. In any case, one corrective action I took as soon as I was normal again was to send my husband packing. I was bitter at Paul and thought he acted selfishly, succumbing to the petty scruples of a generation ago. I did not see why I should be generous with Tony who was, if anything, many more times as selfish.

My father died a few months later of a heart attack. A lot of grief, of course, because he was a wonderful father to the whole family including my self-indulgent mother and I loved him dearly. A lot of grief but with it a little inadvertent recompense because he left me a reasonably rich woman. Rich enough, at any rate,

not to need to work, giving me the opportunity to try my hand at something I always dreamed of doing - to write. I started off with a novel and published it at my own expense as no publisher would accept it and gave the copies away to friends and acquaintances. I then started writing short stories in French and English and many were accepted and published in magazines and literary journals. I was, step by step, making a name for myself.

Years later when I met Paul again, it felt as if I had won a lottery. I would write his autobiography in the form of a fictitious story. He resisted the idea telling me he was a nonentity, that in his last professional post he was a minor employee, that he did nothing worthwhile in his life and so on. I told him I was not certain but suspected he had a long-term passionate love affair and he said he could not bare his soul to me. I told him his reticence showed he did not love me. He said he did, as much as his sons. Perhaps more. I was the daughter he almost committed incest with. He loved me more than I could ever imagine. I told him to stop lying and he consented.

We spent hours talking and taking notes and I condensed this mountain of words to a hillock of sentences, reminiscences and emotions. I am in it, of course, a minor, incidental player, almost an accident, though Paul denies it. I do, it is true, start and end the story. I could also write a larger part for myself but I would feel less than honest even if this is supposed to be a work of fiction. I asked Paul what the story's title should be and he characteristically suggested "The Pathetic Suitor". Perhaps the reader shall figure out why. But I did not think "Pathetic" is an apt adjective for a man who, despite his weaknesses, loved so much and was so much loved.

Finally, I should like to introduce myself. I am "Amy" in the story. May the reader forgive me for talking of myself in the third person, like royalty, but I do so for the continuity of the story. I am peripheral in it and not always present and when I pop in, I want to be Amy and not use the intimate, all-knowing "I" for there are still so many things "I" do not know.

The Story.

It was at a reception in her house that Sonia gave him the transcript of Marquez's e-mail. She was busy and beautiful, vivacious and gracious, flitting here and there like an exquisite butterfly to entertain her guests. She came up to him, held his hand in a way that multiplied his heartbeats and told him,

"I have something for you."

They both smiled. That phrase had a past in their lives.

"I have been waiting so long," he said.

She gave him a peck on the cheek.

"It's not what you think, Paulie," she said. "I shall get them."

She left for a moment and came back with a few folded sheets. She gave them to him smiling quizzically.

"Do you still read a lot?" she asked.

"Not as much," he said. "Do you?"

"It's my job... Excuse me, Paulie. I'll be back."

She left to join a noisy group that was calling her and he only talked to her again as he left, to thank her, kiss her and say good-bye.

He read the transcript at home before going to bed and wondered if Sonia was trying to tell him something. However, she said, 'It's not what you think.' She

annulled his hopes right off. Then why did she give him that particular e-mail, which was bound to trouble him? He would not debase himself and call her in the hope of something concrete only to get inconsequential small talk and reveal to her his anguish. All he could do was wait. He had been waiting a long time.

Ever since he read them, they kept haunting his mind this last written legacy that Gabriel Garcia Marquez e-mailed his friends. Regrets about his life and how it should have been lived. He advised them to be open, impulsive and not only to give but also to express often and explicitly all the love they could muster to their dear ones and people in general. Fall in love again and again, he urged, even in old age, for when you feel you can no longer do so then you are surely dying. Impossible, unrealistic counsel of a dying man. Idealistic, beautiful and dangerous. They planted a seed in Paul's vulnerable mind, at his vulnerable age.

He was sixty and as one of his vulgar friends said, caressing his wife's backside was as thrilling as caressing his own. He loved his wife but the passion was gone. He was discreetly flirty with the women he met in the business circles he moved in, in the hope that something dreamy and sensual might flesh out but nothing concrete had ever come of it. Something always seemed to go haywire just when things seemed promising. A married man who does not want to jeopardize his marriage needs a special set of conditions that are never easy to find or arrange. The liberality of American suburbia where couples seemed to coexist with lovers on the side to relieve sexual boredom was not compatible with his and his family's moral makeup and traditional upbringing. With his wife, they had moved to Paris some ten years ago carrying the ethical baggage of the Middle East.

He loved his wife and his family and felt uneasy about the seed that Marquez had wedged in his psyche and was flowering and making his heart leap whenever a pretty woman was close by. And they were so many of them. So unbearably plentiful and available. But not for him. They were too young and free and in need of companionship, a good time and even an eventual marriage, to enter a furtive love affair. An affair with secret rendezvous and afternoon love sessions in second-class hotel rooms with a sixty year-old man. Sex was too free and easy to settle just for that. In any case, sex was a complicated issue where a woman was concerned. It was never as purely sensual as it was for a man. A woman had other unfathomable needs tied to it. It was hardly ever a simple case of physical gratification.

Beauty, like intelligence, is a gift of nature but unlike intelligence it is not always useful or an advantage on its own. Paul was exceptionally good-looking. Despite ongoing health problems that needed constant medication and surveillance, he looked ten years younger than his age and unfailingly attracted interested glances and inviting half smiles from women of all ages. It is often affirmed that it is irrelevant if a man is handsome or ugly. What matters is whether he is charming and seductive or not. Paul did not possess these two qualities in particular profusion but he was reserved and polite and always seemed to attract women's interest even if this evaporated little by little by his subsequent inaction and failure to follow up. It was not easy to be a Casanova with limited resources and a loving family. Yet his good looks kept temptation on the forefront and his need for emotional and especially sexual renewal was hounding him more and more. As time flew by, and it flew by so fast, Marquez' advice assumed an urgency he could not ignore. He felt he would be as good as dead if he did not fall in love again. He often thought that marriages should have a universally accepted expiry date as far as sexual fidelity is concerned. It was just a general idea. Its impracticality and details, its emotional dimension did not worry him and he never seriously considered them.

He entered his room at the Frankfurt Hilton at five in the afternoon after completing the assignments for his job. It was July and the day was unusually warm for that time of the year. Not very pleasant to move about with suit and tie despite the almost ubiquitous air conditioning in the city. He unpacked his small suitcase, showered and lay in bed. Nice room, nice bed, nice, useless satellite TV he never watched, nice, glib newsmagazines he could not read. He was tense, unsure of himself. Had he, finally, found her? It was madness. But it worked out almost on its own. As inexorably as ancient tragedy. Only it was not tragedy. It was not comedy either, nor farce. Was it perversion, was it kinkiness? Can love ever be put in a straightjacket? Love is thoughtless and strikes at will. It is often perverse and always enslaving.

For the past year he had been trying, almost desperately, to find a lover. With a thousand precautions he secretly dated a few women. Dinner and talk of unhappy, boring marriages and a few erotic kisses in the car on the way home. Plans to see each other again, stumbling on inquisitive, suspicious, grasping husbands or feminine queasiness about sleeping with two men at the same time. The one divorcee, who invited him upstairs to her flat for a drink, at the last moment, revolted him. He was hardly able to kiss her. They just talked for a while and then he left claiming a headache, feeling a fool.

And now he had the smile he could not resist. The youth he never contemplated, the adoration he could not quite conceive. He had known her all her life. He had never, ever considered her. Fate threw her at him a few months earlier, in this same city, in this very hotel. Flung them together with insidious stealth, with a thousand misgivings in his mind. He had just finished some negotiations for his firm. It was nearing midnight and he went up to the hotel's nightclub for a drink to ease the tensions of endless talk and meticulous readings of a minor contract. As he was drinking at the bar he saw her dancing energetically to the loud and heady music that made, even him, twitch his legs and move his body. He had not seen her for a couple of years. He had been told by her father that she had become a successful executive in a firm that bought wholesale, unsold merchandise from large department stores and resold it to third-world countries and small budget-shops that were proliferating at that particular moment in Paris. He drank a second whisky and then a third and she was still at it. In this vivacious prancing one is not visibly tied down to a partner but she seemed to be with a young man because they were constantly exchanging smiles. She looked gorgeous. She had slimmed down and even her large breasts seemed to have reduced to the right size. Her blond hair was short and naturally curly, her large eyes as beautiful as ever and her smile, well, there were not many like it. She must have been nearing forty and looked like a young girl.

Paul hardly ever danced but on an impulse got up and on the dance floor started a subdued quickstep trying to keep the rhythm. At first, he felt faintly ridiculous but the music and the whisky helped and was soon enjoying himself and started edging towards her. She was once again smiling at the man when he moved between them and continued dancing pretending not to look at her. Suddenly she jumped at him.

"Est-ce possible, mon petit Paul?" she cried.

Petit? Well, hardly. But she always called him *mon petit* Paul and he loved the tenderness in her smile as she said it. She slipped in his arms and he nearly squeezed her to death. They kissed warmly many times and then Paul turned to the young man and told him with a smile,

"J'ai license, elle est ma nièce."

She was not his niece. It would have been strange if she were for when they resumed dancing her smiles and impulsive kisses were exclusively for Paul. Joyful smiles and guileless collisions of hugs and kisses on the cheeks. She was not his niece though he always called her that. She was almost a daughter. The daughter of a sweetheart in his past. One whose lingering memory never left his being.

He left them after a while. He felt the annoyance of the young man and returned to the bar. Ordered another drink and kept his eye on the dance floor. The music was pounding and invigorating. The strobe lighting swiveling, colorful and hallucinatory. Even the elderly in elaborate evening attire had taken to the packed dance floor. Had lost their inhibitions and their hands and thick bodies were moving in vain imitation of supple youth. Arms rising above heads in modern tribal supplications for instant ecstasy. Facial expressions contrived and quaint. Without the music, they would have looked absurd and paranoid.

Amy was weaving in and out of the crowd. He caught glimpses of her. She was dancing alone, lost in a dream world of the senses, of captivating sound and throbbing rhythm. Her smile was gone. The young man stood motionless at the edge of the dance floor. Paul wondered who he was. He was slim and tall with an impeccable hairstyle and horn-rimmed glasses. His regular features might have been enhanced with contact lenses but they would have spoiled the aura of the successful junior executive that he conveyed, the air of assurance. Probably earning more than I am, thought Paul. He was finishing his fourth drink when he saw them leave the nightclub. He felt dizzy. I must call her, he thought vaguely. He did not know why. Their sudden, overwhelming, mutual affection caught him unawares. Was he imagining things?

Moments later he left the nightclub. He took the elevator down to the sixth floor and ambled towards his room. He heard Amy's voice travel down the corridor beyond the bend, loud and shrill, rapidly talking, explaining or protesting, he could not tell which. Then the young man's voice, quiet and impatient. Paul stopped. He did not want to intrude on a personal moment. He waited and heard Amy start again in very rapid French and then the quiet, insistent male voice. Suddenly, her voice rose in exasperation.

"Mais, non. Mais je te dis, non !"

A slap. Her cry. Another slap.

Paul broke into a run. It was not just for Amy. He hated bullies and their lordship of women. They touched a raw nerve. As he reached the corner he saw the young man towering over her, his arm raised for another slap. With a further two strides he reached him and with all his pent up nerves yanked him by his collar and suit from behind. The young man, surprised, staggered backwards and nearly fell over. When he regained balance he stared in blank astonishment at Paul.

"Listen you *espèce de maquereau*, you do that once again and you will find your nose broken and your front teeth missing," hissed Paul.

Before the young man could recover, Paul took Amy by the arm and led her to his room which was a few steps away. He led her to an armchair and she sat down. Her face was flushed and she smiled uneasily at Paul.

"Quel con," she said.

Paul was still trembling with anger and agitation. He was hardly ever violent. He was usually patient and unflappable and was surprised at his own aggressive reaction. He sat on the bed facing her. He was still dizzy from the drinks at the bar. Amy looked at him and smiled taking the two slaps and a red face in her stride.

"Ouf," she said, *"quelle histoire! Merci mon petit Paul."*

“What was that all about?” asked Paul.

“Stupid ass. He was annoyed at our friendliness. He said I kept looking at you erotically.”

“Oh dear, I ruined your evening.”

“Ruined my evening and opened my eyes,” she said smiling.

“Who is he anyway? Are you having an affair with him?”

“He is a colleague from work and I travel with him sometimes for business. I slept with him a few times lately and he thinks he owns me. It is amazing that the male frame of mind is still anchored in the past. As if the feminist emancipation and equality never happened and the male is still lord and master.”

“Why, Amy?”

She understood the question.

“Because things are not working at home. Because Tony is acting strange. He is sulking all the time. Perhaps he cannot cope with the fact that I am earning the money and keeping our household going while he is in and out of work. He takes no interest in our home or the children and comes and goes without bothering to tell me anything. We don’t even make love any more. I think he has other women. So, I look around a little, too. Is that wrong? I know you probably disapprove but I was not made to be a nun.”

“Oh, my little Amy, I cannot pass judgement. Life is too complicated for that. I am just sorry that your family life is in crisis. I am sure it will pass. Especially if Tony finds a steady job. And I must come and see the children. Your dad and mom tell me they are both very beautiful.”

A knock at the door. Paul stood up from the bed where he was sitting and opened it. The young man was standing there, expressionless.

“I want Amy,” he said.

Paul pictured him once again towering over Amy, his arm raised menacingly. Without the slightest warning, almost despite his will, his hand flew instinctively and landed a resounding slap on the young man’s face. The glasses went flying. The dazed young man tried to keep his balance and a backhanded follow-up landed on his other cheek. With a loud gasp he staggered again but did not try to defend himself. Without his horn-rimmed glasses he looked young and vulnerable. Not the type to slap a woman around. He looked at Paul again in astonishment and seemed unable to utter a word. Two doors opposite opened slightly and worried faces over pajamas peered at the commotion. Paul was almost as shocked as the young man. He pulled himself together and told him quietly,

“That was a small repayment gift from Amy. Keep away from her or else I shall keep my promise. Your nose and teeth shall be next.”

Paul slammed the door in his face. He was shaky once again and was already feeling sorry for the young man. His passivity and surprise, the myopic search for his glasses on the floor softened his anger. The phone rang. The hotel reception desk inquired if anything was the matter.

“Nothing at all,” answered Paul.

Amy laughed.

“Why did he slap you?” Paul asked.

“After you left us on the dance floor, he stopped dancing, started sulking and wanted to leave. I already have one person sulking at home. I did not need another when I was having such a good time dancing. And you, my little Paul, what a surprise! I was in a wonderful mood. You dance pretty well, you know. You have a sense of rhythm.”

“The rhythm and agility of an elephant.”

“No, no,” she said and laughed. “Truly, you dance very well.”

“Beauty, they say, is in the eye of the beholder. So is your estimation of my dancing. Graded with lenience and affection. But go on with your story.”

“Yes, well, anyway, I told him to leave if he felt like it. I wanted to stay on and dance but he pulled me away practically by force and we left the nightclub. As we came here he wanted me to go to his room. I refused and he kept on insisting as if I were his odalisque. Of course we had an argument. What a silly ass! He was charm personified and turned out to be just another male chauvinist pig. The world, it seems, is full of them. The funny thing is, he gave no indication of his true character before. Well, that’s the end of him for sure.”

They talked for a while and he accompanied her to her room. A kiss, a smile, a lingering look, a reluctant goodbye. Next day they left for Paris on separate flights.

A strange, unequal, perplexing relationship was born that night. A friendship, an intimacy, a need to talk, to see each other. To touch and caress and hug affectionately, not yet erotically. The daily telephone call, the midday lunch break, a rare outing to a cinema, the holding of hands and the warmth it engendered, the need to keep it all secret. And then, one evening, as he was driving her home, Amy kissed Paul on the mouth and told him she loved him. A new page was turned. A new page filled with tenderness and love, passionate kissing and petting. A late adolescence. A love stultified by Paul’s past history and present misgivings that prevented its consummation. A love that, despite Amy’s eagerness and insouciance, needed time to build up the audacity to complete itself. To find a way out of labyrinthine relationships and constraints. Or just the formidable excuse that Marquez seemed to provide.

Thankfully, the day was over. All day he muddled through the business with intrusions of Amy. Prices and delivery schedules with flashes of her smile. Conclusions of deals with the conclusion of their love. They had coordinated their trip to Frankfurt. It was his escape from Egypt. Of conventional morality. The parting of the waters. The severing of inhibitions. Perhaps, the wandering in a wilderness like Sinai. He lay in bed and tried to rest. His brain was whirring at hypersonic torques. Thoughts and daydreams alternating with incubi. Fantasies with reality. Voluptuousness with shame. Hedonism with scandal. A naked Amy next to him offering her adoration and her sex. A looming collapse of his world. A young body to resuscitate an old. An old body unable to cope. He was entering his sunset years. The sundown of his virility. But that was it! He did not want to feel dead before he died. And he, too, was in love. Disastrously, perversely, idiotically in love.

Memories were flooding in, feeding his inhibitions. He thought of Sonia. Sonia was still so beautiful. Age and maturity seemed to make her more alluring. Paul’s heart always ached when he saw her. There was this secret intimacy between them that was never explicitly apparent. It sometimes surfaced in their glances. Their handshakes and public embraces had that extra squeeze and lingering seconds of special meaning. She was never exclusively his but a sort of magnetic field bound them throughout their life. A tug of physical attraction kept active and binding by the lifetime crossing and weaving of their paths. They led and lived their separate lives, mostly in different countries and always seemed to bump into each other. The ups and downs of their existence constantly brought them together. Fate seemed to ensure that at such moments they were in close enough proximity to provide succour, relief and, always, happiness to each other.

Paul lay in bed and thought that he ought to sleep. Amy would be arriving later in the evening. She had work in Frankfurt the following day and the next. They would spend two nights together. Like a reluctant virgin he had finally decided to take the big jump. The big risk that might unravel his well-ordered life in so many ways. But was that not better than feeling that his life was sinking in a quagmire? A slow, boring trudge to the grave? That he would not ever again taste the naked body of a woman? The thrill and magic of love and sex? He had arranged for dinner at the nightclub. She would dance to her heart's content. She would smile her heavenly smile at him and, later, still throbbing with the pulse of the music, offer the body that both induced and tortured his daydreams. The body he longed for so desperately and found so hard to take.

Memories were flooding in. Second thoughts and doubts following in their wake. Paul wanted to rest and sleep but a final accounting forced itself in the gears of his whirring brain and racing thoughts. In a sense they calmed him down. Memories are the past. They are non-threatening and always fancied to be better than the actual fact. If they are bad, the distance of time has cooled emotions and one views them dispassionately. If they are at all happy, they bring on a nostalgia flavored with the sweet sorrow of their loss and the bitter happiness of having lived them. Paul Panopoulos was steeped in them. A Greek, born in Egypt when Egypt was a blessed country. That was how Paul thought of it. The Egypt of his youth. A poor but peaceful, tolerant, cosmopolitan and sensibly populated country. Before the abrupt awakening of Arab nationalism and the Moslem renaissance. He conceded the drawbacks of those days but the ills of modern Egypt seemed much more intractable. Overpopulation, dictatorship and religious fundamentalism were a mixture that had changed its face and blighted its future. For all the love he felt for the country of his birth, for all his happy childhood and adolescence there, Egypt had become as foreign to him as Timbuktu.

Flashes of memory.

Their house, downtown, on the main avenue. A huge apartment block. A spacious, old-style flat with high ceiling. Grandmother still alive. Sitting all day on a chair near the window. Grumbling at Paul's and his sister Ismini's slightest unruliness. Instructing the servants non-stop. Sparse traffic on the street below, much more pronounced in the sky. Crows and hawks still, precariously, sharing the city with the people before their eventual dislodgment. Poverty pronounced. Many people walking barefoot. Working class women covered with a black shawl, the milaya, their faces covered with a black veil. The tarboush almost universal. A bright red angular fez, like an upturned flowerpot, with a black tassel hanging on the side. Worn by effendis, beys, high-ranking army and police officers and even by the king in his official portrait and on Egyptian coins. Tramcars clanging by. The street often cleared for the king. Policemen placed every few meters all along the way. Moderate crowds. Excitement. A long wait for His Majesty. Eventually a motorcade. Limousines and motorcycles in bright red and black. The royal colours. Cheers and clapping. King Farouk marries a commoner, Narriman. Fouad, the heir to the throne, born. Democracy in Egypt. Political parties. Pashas and Beys. Instability. Premiers and governments popping up and down. Corruption, political squabbles and noisy street demonstrations. 1948, Creation of the Jewish state. First war with Israel. Sirens and blackouts. Shafts of light searching the skies for enemy planes. A couple of bombs land near the palace of Abdin, the king's official residence. Defeat. Defective-arms

scandal. The seed that rallied a bunch of disgruntled army officers; formed the secret core organization and precipitated the Revolution a few years later. Demonstrations and riots. Stone throwing and charges of policemen with shields and batons. The family balcony, a panoramic observation post of political developments. British garrison in the Canal Zone. January 1952, Cairo in flames. Anti-British riots. The famous Shepherds Hotel and others burned to the ground together with cinemas and shops. Looting and anarchy. Paul and family abandoning the flat as the conflagration of the shops below began spreading to the flats above. Half the flat gutted by fire. Revolution on the 26th of July 1952. The king deposed. Egypt, a republic. Revolution leader, General Mohamed Naguib, passing below. The crowds, immense and delirious. Mohamed Naguib deposed. Gamal Abdel Nasser passing below. The crowds, immense and delirious. Saddled with “Jimmy” for an eternity. Egypt improving and deteriorating at the same time. Nationalizations, sequestrations, the public sector, socialism, cooperatives, the decimation of the rich industrialists and landowners, banning of political parties, concentration camps, the emergence of army officers as the new elite, corruption ever-present, repeated defeats in wars with Israel. In 1956 and the 6-day war of 1967. Abdel Nasser resigns. The masses cannot part with the leader that emancipated them, changed the face of their country and shamed them. He has been too long at the helm. He is the father figure, the Prophet of the underprivileged and of Arab Nationalism. They feel lost without him. They bring him back.

Memories of school.

The Gezira Preparatory in Zamalek. A coeducational junior school with all-female English staff. Stocky Mrs. Wilson, the headmistress. Kind but stern. Mrs. Swinburn, second-in-command. A busybody. Tears, the first day. Bewilderment. Not a word of English. Mrs. Lee, a dynamic, short and skinny teacher terrified Paul. Punched the naughty children on the shoulders. Asked him at lunch if he would like some more of the inedible custard pudding. He did not understand and used the only word he knew, Yes. Nearly vomited with the effort to swallow the second helping. Learnt to say, No, thank you. Sent them to the toilet two-by-two. Streams of piss forming a cross. Peeking at his partner’s penis. Still friends. Boys who piss together, stay friends forever. Paul, good at sports, a fast runner. Good at boxing and hockey. Learnt the manners of an English gentleman. To be a good sportsman, a modest winner and a good loser. A lesson on the hockey field: he took the ball, dribbled it on his own, past the defense, across the entire field, and scored a goal. Mrs. Porch called him. He expected to be congratulated. Instead, his ear was pulled rather violently and was told that in team games he has to be part of the team and not play on his own. What he did, she said, was a pretty awful exhibition. Some memories he shall take to the grave. A lovely English girl called Margaret Glover who looked at him in adoration. At the Gezira Prep, he had no time for trifles. Half a century later he still thinks of her. And another memory that makes him smile. Because Zamalek was close to town, his father would take him and Ismini to school in the morning and send any car available from the car pool of the business to bring them back in the early afternoon. Paul liked nothing better than when no car was available and one or the other of the two trucks was sent to fetch them. He would not change them for the finest limousine. The flowers the pupils had to bring, in turn, every day in class. The boxing matches with other schools. Prize Giving Day and the disappointment of his father when he came home empty-handed.

The English School in Heliopolis was the family's dream. Paul's father, initially, tried to enroll the children there but was told that there were no vacancies. He was advised to send them to the GPS and was assured that they would, later, be accepted for the senior school. He was incensed that the daughter of their Armenian neighbor was admitted and wondered on what criteria these decisions were based. He would often drive Paul and Ismini past the school on their Sunday outings. They would first stop for a while outside the tall iron railing of the racecourse, which was close to the school and watch a couple of races go by. The spectacle of the horses galloping at breakneck speed with the colorfully garbed jockeys crouched on them, whipping them to extract that extra bit of effort, always fascinated the children. So did the crowds, the portly, cigar-smoking racehorse owners and their liveried chauffeurs and limousines, the scores of paupers in tattered galabeyas betting their meager wages and the deafening crescendo of yelling from the podium as the horses reached the finishing post. It was always a good occasion for Mr. Panopoulos to tell the children that fascinating as all this hubbub was, no one ever came out a winner in gambling. Then on to the English School, which was nearby.

Paul, even today, remembered those days with a torrent of memories flooding his brain. It was the magic, carefree period of his life. He remembered how after the racecourse they would drive outside the school, which at that time was at the edge of the desert, and would stare at it as if it was the Promised Land. The building was impressively large, light brown in color, four stories high and it had a central part with a grand, awesome main entrance flanked by two pillars, which bypassed the first floor and supported part of the second. Two wings extended on either side of the central building at an angle and were considerably longer than it. The junior school was housed, separately, in a smaller, newer building inside the school grounds. The playing fields, gymnasium and the squash and tennis courts would have made any English public school proud with the reservation that despite the efforts to plant trees, the lack of ample water at the time meant that except for a few green patches the dominant color of the grounds was the light brown of the hard-packed Heliopolis desert sand.

"Well, it won't be long now," Mr. Panopoulos would tell Paul and Ismini, "In a couple of years it will be your school. I still don't understand why they accepted Nubar's daughter and they could not accommodate you in a small corner of this vast building. Still, after the GPS you shall have six full years in this school and then off to England. English, my children, is the language of the future."

Nubar Khachadourian was the next-door neighbor of the Panopoulos family. He was a good looking Armenian with a ready smile and an exceedingly polite manner. So much so, in fact, as to give an impression of stickiness. He was an engineer and was highly placed in an Egyptian government department. Though younger than Mr. Panopoulos, a comfortable friendship sprang up between the two and at least two or three times a week Nubar and his wife would be at the Panopoulos household for a drink and a chat in the evening. In fact, as usually happens, it was the two housewives that started a friendship and mutual visits to each other's house for coffee to break the drudgery of the daily routine and this, eventually, extended not only to the husbands but also to the children.

Ismini found a friend in Nubar's daughter Sonia. They were the same age and their English education enabled them to communicate easily although whenever they found it convenient or a word or expression would not come to mind, they switched spontaneously to Arabic since neither spoke the other's language. Paul was a year and

a half older than the girls and did not pay much attention to Sonia in the first years of their acquaintance other than to indulge in some good natured teasing.

The Greeks in Egypt had a certain conceit of superiority towards the Armenians. It was perhaps due to the sound of their language which is harsh with an emphasis on consonants and makes Armenians less amenable in adapting to the accents of other languages. English, French and Arabic are spoken, by them, in a decidedly Armenian enunciation. Otherwise the two communities were much the same. Both were large and together with the Italians and to a lesser extent the French and English, had their community schools, clubs and hospitals and even their own newspapers. When the native-born foreigners started leaving Egypt after the Revolution, the Greeks and Armenians were the last to depart. One frivolous peculiarity which the Greeks made much fun of was the Armenians' weakness for pastrami. Paul teased Sonia about it imitating a strong Armenian pronunciation.

"Armenien tu es, bastourma tu manges," he told her and she would retort, *"Panayoti tu es, fasolada tu manges."* Panayoti being the most typical of Greek names and fasolada the Greek national food of dried white beans.

The 26th of July Revolution found the Panopoulos family vacationing in Greece. In 1952 the times were still comparatively tame and the revolution was a shock but the coup was bloodless and initially nothing much changed in Egypt. King Farouk was packed off in his yacht Mahroussa to Italy, the elected government was retired permanently and a Revolutionary Council took over the governance of Egypt with no clear aim or ideology other than to rid the country of the politicians and corruption. The first objective was easy; the second was easier said than done.

The adage that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, once again proved its veracity and resilience. If there was any idealism in the new rulers, it soon faded and self-interest, that invincible motivation of mankind, took over. Well, perhaps not altogether. Who can fathom the motives of that small group of officers who dared to organize a revolution and had Egypt fall like a ripe fruit in their hands? Who can fathom the subtle changes that power in the course of time wrought in their minds?

A few years later, they plunged headlong into socialism. It was the up-and-coming ideology of the fifties and sixties and it did hit more than two birds with one stone. The political and commercial flirtation with communist Eastern Europe and especially Russia was the slap to the West for their refusal to help Egypt with the building of the High Dam at Aswan. The appropriation and redistribution of land from the large landowners, the nationalization of private industry and the many unjustified sequestrations were not only highly popular with the masses but broke up the power of capitalism in Egypt and established the basis of a permanent dictatorship by the ruling clique of officers headed by Abdel Nasser. One cannot turn a blind eye to the benefits of the revolution but neither can one ignore the extensive inefficiencies of socialism and the oppression of a paternalistic, self-perpetuating, all-powerful government. The plague has yet to be cured.

In October of that year Paul and Ismini enrolled in the English School. Paul in the first form of the senior school and Ismini in the last of the junior school. The dream was fulfilled. The preparations had been made. Summer and winter school uniforms bought from Sednaoui's. They seemed to come straight out of the illustrations of Enid Blyton's books. For Ismini, a light blue summer uniform with short sleeves and white collar and a blue beret. For winter, a dark blue uniform of heavier cloth worn over a white shirt and tie and a blazer with the school badge and a dark blue beret. For Paul, khaki shorts and stockings, white shirt and tie and a cap for

summer and grey flannel shorts, woollen stockings and a dark blue blazer with the school badge for winter. It was not quite Eton but the English School in Cairo did adhere to the trappings of British public schools. The organization was that of Enid Blyton's fictitious dream schools except that it was coeducational with the boys in one wing of the school building and the girls in the other.

The senior school staff was in its majority English males. They were remote, polite and not too friendly with the students and all possessed the air of English superiority that was not flaunted and, in a way, accepted and held in respect. Most were bachelors and were strange, solitary people with their quirks, which the students never failed to detect and make fun of but were dedicated educators in the best British tradition, which few other nations can match. The headmaster, a man of few words, was both low-key and a daunting figure who moved about in his flowing, black university gown. He, and most of the English teachers, resided in the school's two last floors together with the student boarders. The student body was divided into four houses for each sex and each had student prefects to keep discipline and organize sports practices and other small chores and, not least, to shell out punishment for any transgressions of the school rules. All sport competitions within the school were between the houses.

Ismini entered another sheltered haven of young children and an all-female English staff not different from the GPS. She had the added pleasure of having Sonia as her classmate and this eased the change of environment considerably. Paul's entry was a far greater upset though one must not exaggerate the strain. The young are quick to adapt and to learn. It was the continuing process of education not only in languages, geography, mathematics and all the other subjects taught in school but the opening up of the limited horizons of the life he had been leading. In a class of mostly older boys, Paul was assailed by a class culture that was novel and unfamiliar. The domination of the physically strong, the high regard in which the good athletes were held and the contempt shown to the hard workers and academic achievers. His very sketchy information on sex was further confused by the jokes and obscenities that were constantly aired and used and was shocked by values and behaviour that negated his own. Also the fact that corporal punishment was used as a disciplinary measure appalled him.

Flashes of memory.

Buses arriving at a side gate. Boys and girls streaming down, berets and caps on their heads, bags heavy with books. Straggling to the quadrangle, dumping the bags in piles on the ground. Conversation, jokes, raised voices until the electric bell drowns them and eight long lines start taking shape, arranged in 'houses', girls on one side, boys on the other. Prefects straightening them out, searching for unpolished shoes and droopy stockings, reminding boys of the football practice and taking down names for late buses. The teachers start arriving on the platform formed by an open-air corridor with stairs to the quadrangle. The housemasters scrutinize their uneven lines where conversations and pleasantries flow up and down the lines and from one line to the next and have mini-consultations among themselves. The headmaster arrives last in his flowing robes. Silence. He confers for a few minutes with the teachers. At the GPS the headmistress used to say, 'Good morning children,' and a very loud chorus of the whole school replied, 'Good morning Mrs Wilson.' Here, with a reserved, crooked smile he delivers a subdued 'Good morning' that neither expects nor receives a reply. After a few announcements the Head Boy calls, 'Break off.' The Christians file into the school theatre for prayers and the infidels and heathens go to

the classrooms. The prayers were of the Anglican variety with a hymn, a passage read from the Bible and the Lord's Prayer. At the GPS all religions joined the prayers, sang the hymns with gusto and recited the Lord's Prayer in a loud sing-song. At the English School, the Lord's Prayer was a gruff, barely audible mumble.

After the prayers, the lessons begin. Three classes, three different subjects and then the small break, a half-hour rest out in the grounds. Students munching sandwiches made at home or bought at the Tuck Shop with soft drinks and ice creams. Running and shouting of the young, small groups of older boys and girls talking, some pairings off of couples for long romantic walks in the ample playing fields and, sometimes, manias gripping the whole school for a few days, such as hopscotch, hula hooping, skipping games with a rope or games with a ball. All too soon, the electric bell. Two more lessons and lunch.

Filing in the huge dining room with murals of British history painted by students. Standing along long tables, waiting for the headmaster to stride in and say grace, 'For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful.' The racket of chairs and benches as the students sit down. An army of white-clad waiters serving the food. While waiting, consuming improvised hors d'oeuvres of bread sprinkled with salt. Sating huge appetites with unsavoury food. Petitioning the waiters for more than the regular allotment. Gratefully accepting leftovers from other tables. Thanking them. Beggars can't be choosers. The loud buzz of conversation eventually stops. A sudden silence. The racket of students standing up. The headmaster already on his feet, says grace, 'For what we have received ...etc,' departs with the teachers and the students file out for the long break.

A lovely, hour-long break for a game of football, a race, a fight, getting all red and sweaty in uniforms and ties, ruining the shoes. Teasing and joking and chatting with the girls until the bell packs, once again, the classrooms for another two lessons. Then, the slow amble to the buses. Putting on regulation caps and berets in case prefects are lurking nearby. Some staying on for game practice. Football, the first term. Hockey and athletics, the second. Cricket, the third. Inter-house competitions at the end of the terms. Interminable cricket matches, in summer, with iced lemonade and thin cucumber and tomato sandwiches at the end and no clear understanding by the uninitiated of which side has won. It is not so important. It is a game for gentlemen. Also, other special events in between: Sports Day for the athletic finals and the awarding of cups and medals to the top athletes; matches with other schools akin to foreign invasions, the Progrés inter-school athletic competition and others.

On the social side, Parent's Day, where the headmaster gives an accounting of the school's progress in the presence of the British ambassador. The School Dance and the boarder's regular Saturday night dances in which boarders issue invitations to a small number of day students.

A whole world of its own. A moulding factory of human beings. Not only to educate and pour knowledge into their minds but to form their characters and to install ideals. A healthy mind in a healthy body, hard work, tolerance, an open mind and above all the sense of fair play. The English School was perfectly suited for this task. Not less because of the large number of different nationalities and religions in the student body. The majority were obviously Egyptian Moslems but the presence of twenty other nationalities and the catalytic presence of the British educators who taught through their personal paradigm instilled in the students an absence of racism or ethnocentricity and a tolerance for religious beliefs other than their own. Paul

doubted that such a congruence of factors existed even in the public schools of England. He always remembered his days at the school with great affection.

It was the school that brought them together. Sonia was in and out of the Panopoulos household practically every day. She studied regularly with Ismini and because the homework load was moderate much of their time was spent in chatting and gossip and listening to music. Paul, much to his chagrin, never managed to find out what all the talk and low-voiced conversations were about and vented his frustration by constantly teasing them. They made a show of annoyance and asked him to leave them in peace but, in truth, they enjoyed his presence and boisterous playfulness. He often caressed Sonia's hair and she slapped his hands and would not permit the slightest familiarity. He would tell her that he had decided to marry her and she would make a face and answer, 'Very funny!' Meanwhile, he would say, he considered her his girlfriend and when she would come to the senior school, he would take her for long walks in the school grounds. She would laugh and turn to Ismini and tell her, 'Your brother is mad.'

In the mornings, they would take the same school bus for the half-hour journey to Heliopolis. While Paul and Sonia were down on the street on time for the bus, Ismini was always late and the bus would often wait for her, which, nevertheless, did not daunt her in the least and make her change her habits. Paul and Sonia would chat for a few minutes on their own and it was clear to them even at that tender age that a mutual affection was budding.

The following year, Sonia and Ismini entered the senior school. They were the prettiest of the new crop of girls entering the first form. Ismini was blond with long, straight, fine hair done in a *queue de cheval*. She had large eyes, unfortunately, partially concealed by a pair of glasses and a normal sturdy body that was still developing. She was adept at all the games she played and was a fast runner and a fine athlete. For that reason she very quickly became popular and well known in the athletic circles and the school in general, being as it was totally sports-oriented. Some of the glory rubbed off on Paul whose athletic performances, despite his keenness and love of sports, remained mediocre. In a male oriented world, Ismini was Panopoulos's sister. Who is Panopoulos, would be the next question. That chap in the second form. The quiet, good-looking boy. Thus her popularity put Paul on the map, so to speak. Not to mention that, at one time or another, most of his classmates had a crush on Ismini.

Sonia also had large, beautiful eyes and was equally pretty but of a different type in that infinite variety of female beauty and allure. She was smaller, thinner and seemingly more fragile than Ismini with black hair of a thicker texture and had an extremely white complexion. Her eyes were a strange bluish gray and there was an aura of sensuality about her even at that age that became ever more evident as she grew up. She did not possess Ismini's prowess in sports nor her striking presence. Her subdued beauty captured you only after you noticed it. Strangely, not many people did. She was nowhere near as popular as Ismini.

Paul, more or less, ignored them at school. He smiled at them when he came across them and was not above showing off when he felt they were looking at him and an opportunity presented itself but despite his banter at home with Sonia he did not have much intercourse with girls at school. He did not make good his threat to take her for long, romantic walks on the school grounds. On the other hand he would go and watch her play netball when they both happened to stay for games in the afternoon. His friends started suspecting that he was sweet on Sonia although he did not open his mouth to confide to anyone.

“Nice girl, Panopoulos,” they would tell him with sly smiles. “Lucky you, to have her living next door.”

“Oh, she’s okay,” he would answer casually changing the subject and trying not to blush.

One day she looked him up during break and asked him to tell her mother that she would be staying for sports after school with Ismini. The other boys laughed. She had addressed him as Paul.

“Paul? Who’s Paul?” they teased her. “Don’t spoil the senior school traditions. Here we do not have Christian names. This chap is called Panopoulos.”

She laughed and repeated her request to Paul.

“Please, Panopoulos, tell my mother I’ll be staying late for sports.”

The next day, on the street, when she came down for the school bus he said,

“Good morning Khachadourian.”

“What’s this Khachadourian?” she asked, smiling.

“Didn’t the boys tell you? In the senior school we call each other by our surnames. Better get used to it straight off.”

He, too, had lost his first name on the first day at school.

“Not for the girls,” she said.

“Women are fighting for equality. Why do you object to being called Khachadourian? After all, yesterday you called me Panopoulos.”

“But I am a girl and I don’t like being called by my surname.”

“You cannot pick and choose the parts of equality that are convenient.”

“Oh, do as you please,” she said, annoyed. “I suppose when you get married you shall call your wife by her surname.”

“When we get married, I shall call you Sonia.”

“With your strange ideas I don’t think I would like to marry you.”

The bus arrived and Ismini appeared just at that moment and further exchanges on surnames, female equality and marriage were postponed. But, little by little, the name stuck. At first Sonia would not respond when he addressed her as Khachadourian and their relations cooled down somewhat but she eventually got used to it, forgot her initial aversion and their friendship resumed where it had left off. Their short chats on the street while waiting for the school bus were something both looked forward to. For the first few years it was the only time they were alone and were able to talk and exchange opinions and ideas from which even Ismini was excluded. Later, they shared an interest that developed and fed their intimacy. A budding interest in literature. They exchanged books and discussed their contents and authors. Although neither one was outstandingly intelligent, their literary bend was genuine. Ismini did not share it. Whenever they began talking about this or that book, she would groan and say,

“Oh God, not again.”

Paul initiated Sonia to agnosticism. He devoured scientific articles and would try to explain the way he saw things.

“Please, Paul, I do not feel comfortable not believing in God,” she told him.

“Let us not discuss this subject.”

“But Khachadourian, you must face facts. How can one possibly believe the fairy tales that most religious teachings propagate when evolution is a scientific fact and evolutionary research is coming ever closer to proving that man evolved from the apes? Furthermore the fact that the universe is so unbelievably, so infinitely large and chaotic makes you think twice about the nature of God. If there is such a thing.”

“Oh, shut up Paul,” Ismini retorted. “Just shut up.”

“I am not talking to you, Ismini. I am talking to Sonia.”

“Sonia doesn’t want to hear either.”

“Listen Khachadourian, it takes courage to reject the benevolent image of God that the church likes to spread and to think straight. But you must be brave. In any case, if you need comfort you can rely on me,” he would add with a smile.

“Ha, ha, ha,” the two girls would sneer in chorus. But whereas for Ismini that was the end of the controversy, in Sonia’s mind the ideas would germinate and provoke thought.

In his last years at the English School, he spent more time with Sonia and Ismini. He listened to the gossip of the two girls and learned about the relationships, friendships and alliances that took place in the girls’ side of the school. He found out that girls were more subtle and complicated than boys. More underhand and their friendships more superficial and self-serving. It seemed to him, boys were guileless and simpleminded by comparison. It was the sort of thing he would discuss with Sonia. They would analyse behavior and draw general conclusions from school politics. He told her of stories he heard about the unmarried female English teachers living in the school building having furtive affairs with the older boy boarders. And about the athletics master who was married, being seen kissing the athletics mistress who was pretty, much younger than him and not his wife. She would not believe them. He was not sure he believed them either. But, he would tell her, there is no smoke without fire. Ismini sometimes participated in these conversations and sometimes was absent.

Paul was already half in love with Sonia, with her eyes and her smile. He loved the way she walked and held herself. She was growing to be a beautiful young woman with a type all her own. She had grown taller and her slim body was what the French call *faux maigre*. The curves are there but do not shout. More feminine than sexy. Paul hugged her playfully and caressed her whenever he had the opportunity. When Ismini was present, Sonia pushed him off. When she was not there she accepted his petting with a few protestations just for the form.

“Oh, not again,” she would say with a smile and fake displeasure.

“Yes again!” he would cajole, caress her face, her hair and kiss her on the cheek. Now and then a kiss would brush on his for Sonia was also more than half in love with the handsome Paul.

In his last year at school, their love was finally mutually avowed. It was early evening and he was alone at home. He called her on the phone and told her to come over. Opportunities come and go and sometimes take ages to reappear. This was a golden one.

“What for?” she asked.

“I have something for you.”

A minute later, she rang the bell and came in with an expectant smile. She asked for Ismini and Paul told her they were alone. He made her sit down on the sofa. He went inside the house as if to bring this something but in reality he needed to brace himself and work up his courage though he was quite sure that Sonia was more than fond of him. He often caught her staring at him. But would she respond to this resolute overture? He returned with a pounding heart and sat next to her. She asked what it was he had for her and he said, “This,” and kissed her on the mouth. She did not react but she did not push him away and he kissed her again and again until her mouth and tongue began giving signs of life. He was seventeen and Sonia sixteen and shocking as it may sound, in their prudish and sheltered family upbringing neither had kissed anyone else erotically before.

Paul began to put his theoretical information on the French kiss into practice and inched his tongue on her lips and cautiously inside her mouth. For a moment she was passive and savoured the strange tactile sensation of another wet, warm, not totally smooth but perky and rousing tongue in her mouth and then responded with her own timid movements and explorations. Moments later, their passion building up, they were kissing with beating hearts and heavy breathing in the best erotic tradition.

They stopped after a while to take stock of what had happened. They were both flushed and happy. It is, after all, one of the truly magic moments of life. The first kiss. He felt his erection pushing the fly of his trousers and hoped she would not notice. He caressed her hair and face tenderly and put his hand on her breasts. She did not push his hand away as he expected.

“You are so beautiful,” he told her. “I dreamed about this moment so often. Do you love me?”

“Shouldn’t you first tell me you love me?” she asked with a smile.

“You know I adore you.”

“I like you too, Paul.”

“Like? Is that all?”

“For a girl, that is quite a confession.”

“Does a girl mean more than that when she says that?”

“Sometimes.”

They embraced and started kissing again. Paul fondled her breasts over the school shirt she was still wearing. They kissed and exchanged tender compliments and avowals of love together with bits of conversation, gossip and little jokes and generally had a very joyful hour of love play which, being their first romantic encounter, was also relatively chaste. For when Paul made Sonia lie on the couch and stretched next to her and his fondling progressed to her body and legs, she stood up and said that that was as far as it would go. Paul, who had no further expectations in any case, was hugely satisfied with the point at which their relationship had reached. He was in love with Sonia more than ever. He was in high spirits and, humorously yet earnestly, on a bended knee proposed to her.

“Sonia, will you marry me?”

She laughed.

“I have become Sonia again?”

“Please answer me.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I know it’s too early. I know I shall be leaving to study in England next year but let us promise each other that one day we shall be married. Let us get engaged between ourselves.”

“Did you know my father is thinking of immigrating to Canada? I cannot very well stay behind.”

“A nuclear holocaust may break out, too,” he said with a smile.

“Remember our talks? We were saying that girls, in the last analysis, are more realistic than boys and that boys are more simple minded and romantic. Here you are. You are thinking of marriage five, six, seven years from now. Who knows where we might be. You will meet plenty of other girls in England and I might fall in love and marry another person in Canada.

“You really are terrible Khachadourian.”

“If you keep on calling me Khachadourian I shall never kiss you again.”

“I love you Sonia.”

“I love you, too, Paul.”

They snatched every opportunity to be alone together. If Paul's house was empty for a while, he would call her. If Sonia's people were away, she would call him. At school they were always in close proximity during break periods and sports. They did not indulge in solitary walks but kept within eye range of each other. They communicated with glances and smiles and in the bus they sat together next to Ismini. In the mornings, they came down for the bus ten minutes earlier than their usual time to be alone with each other those extra few minutes.

On Sundays, Ismini attached Sonia to the family when they spent the day at the club. She was aware of the romance and went out of her way to help the courting couple. Paul initiated Sonia in the game of squash and tennis and in the late spring and summer of that year, they swam regularly at the club swimming pool. Ismini, a fine athlete in whatever she undertook, had her own group of sport enthusiasts and usually left the couple alone.

When Paul's family left for Alexandria for the summer months, Paul stayed behind with his father and managed to meet with Sonia every day. Their sexual activity, facilitated by an empty flat on weekends when Mr. Panopoulos was away with the family, moved very gradually but steadily from kissing to the very brink of sexual intercourse. Virginity was at a premium in those days and not for a moment did Paul envisage deflowering Sonia. They reached their orgasms by other equally pleasant means and it must be emphasized though it is implicit in the narrative that they were very much in love.

In early October, a heartbroken Paul left for England. He was accepted in a provincial university to study engineering. Most of his school friends who had left for England at the same time were centered in London and he traveled there nearly every weekend staying at one or another of his former classmates to go out to the cinema or a theatre or even a dancing club. London was a fascinating city and these weekend trips went a long way to overcome the loneliness of the week of study in the dull and gloomy university town. But though he loved London and relished the sense of freedom, the liveliness of the student milieu and the abundance of available, pretty and sexually liberated English girls, his heart was stuck on Sonia. He did not indulge in the mad girl-chase, the novelty of easy sex and the sleeping around that his friends practiced.

He was casual about sex. He was not chaste on principle or out of loyalty; rather, it was a lack of interest. Even when he was out on the odd date, he had the cozy feeling at the back of his mind that his true love was home waiting for him. He wrote one letter every week to his family and two or three to Sonia. He wrote to her about his university, about London, his experiences and impressions and generally tried not to sound sad or depressed when he told her how much he missed her. She replied less frequently having little new in her routine that Paul did not already know. What troubled him was the fact that Mr. Khachadourian's plans on emigration were proceeding on schedule. He even made Sonia apply to a number of Canadian universities.

In early June Paul returned to Cairo for his summer holidays. The family was in quorum to receive him at the airport and happy as he was to see them, he looked eagerly around to see if, perhaps, Sonia had come along as well. She was not there and Ismini told him that the Khachadourians were about to leave for Canada. Sonia had been accepted at a university in Montreal to study literature and they wanted to be there on time. She stared at him intently to see his reaction and did not miss Paul's look of dismay. She started crying and Paul could barely keep a straight face. She was losing her best friend and shared in her brother's pain. Despite their petty youthful

quarreling over the years, Paul and Ismini, in their later teens, had grown to appreciate and value one another beyond the obvious affection of brother and sister. Then, she wiped her eyes and smiled.

“Well,” she said, “the news is not all bad. I shall be coming to London. I have been accepted for a two-year diploma course of Architectural and Interior Design.”

They arrived home just before midnight. Ismini went next door to call Sonia despite her mother’s objections about the late hour. Sonia came in smiling. A little pale, too. She said good evening to the assembled family but her eyes were on Paul. Paul, in agony, hardly managed to smile. His eyes were locked on Sonia. They shook hands and kissed decorously on the cheeks. They kept looking at each other and could not think of anything else to say. Ismini came to the rescue with some small talk and a few minutes later Sonia said good night and left.

The next day Paul slept late but in the afternoon, at his urging, Ismini invited Sonia to the club and as soon as the three of them got off the taxi, she tactfully went searching for her friends. Paul and Sonia, holding hands, went for a long walk on the golf grounds. It was a well kept course of undulating grass hillocks, sandy traps, round holes with festive small flags on leaning sticks pinpointing them and lovely ancient trees. Keeping a lookout for hurtling golf balls they made their way to the small dog cemetery at a far corner of the course which was usually empty. They sat on the bench of the absent mourners and laughed at some of the inscriptions on the mini tomb stones. Here Lies Our Beloved Smouchie or Goldie, 1961-1970 or Antar, May He Rest In Peace. They were indecently gay in the midst of rich-dog deaths and their tombstone memorials, talked animatedly, exchanged compliments on their looks and stole a few kisses between the coming and going of the small groups of golfers trudging after errant balls. But inevitably, the cloud that had darkened their lives emerged in the afternoon sunshine. It was looming in their thoughts, a dull pain in their hearts and it finally came out.

“You know Sonia, I was thinking, our life is like the novels we read so avidly. We practically grew up together almost like brother and sister and just when we fell in love, when things are truly wonderful, a cruel event spoils everything. But novels do not end there. They go on and sometimes they have a happy endings and sometimes not. I wonder what will happen to us.”

“Sometimes I try to cheer up by thinking about the famous question, Is it better to have loved and lost than to have never loved? I have no doubt about the answer. Have you?”

“No. But we haven’t already lost, have we?”

“No. Perhaps not. Who knows? I think my father has taken the right decision. There is no future for us in Egypt. Foreigners are leaving in droves and he wants to leave while he is still relatively young and will be able to find a job. He is also thinking about my prospects and education. We can't get married now and even if we could it would be a mistake. We have to meet other people. All we can do is keep in touch and see what happens. If our love survives we shall know it is for life.”

“I think you do not love me as much as I love you.”

“Oh Paul! How can you say that? It’s not fair.”

“I love you so much I cannot think straight.”

“I love you too, Paulie.”

They embraced and kissed passionately and the desperation of their kissing deepened their gloom. A passing golfer whistled, poking fun at them and they stopped, left the little cemetery and walked hand in hand to search for Ismini.

The following week Paul's family left for Alexandria. Paul refused to go with them claiming he wanted to see his English School friends and spend some time with them. Mr. Panopoulos would join the family, as was the custom, on the weekends and the empty flat was the aphrodisiac that fired and made possible the consummation of the young couple's desperate passion. Sonia asked Paul to make love to her properly and overcame his reluctance by telling him that, at seventeen, she was old enough to decide whether or not she would remain a virgin and experience full sexual intercourse. Paul bought a dozen condoms from a street vendor and the couple not only made passionate love but used them up in two days.

Apart from this frenetic activity whenever the flat was available, Paul and Sonia were almost daily together. Sonia found the means with various lies and stratagems to her strict but gullible parents to spend the days at the club with Paul and go to the cinema or for an interminable ice cream soda in the evenings. They were almost inseparable and sick with love for each other. As their time was running out, their passion increased in inverse proportion. And time did run out as it inexorably does for everyone and for all situations and one early morning Paul found himself with Ismini at the airport bidding good bye to the Khachadourians. Sonia and Ismini were in tears and Paul very close to them. The parents with glazed eyes said good bye and issued an open invitation for Paul and Ismini to Canada. Brother and sister tearfully hugged and kissed Sonia so hard and so long as if to store a surfeit of her presence and her love in their being to last them till their next encounter.

Paul left for England a week later and Ismini a week after that. Paul rented a tiny one-bedroom flat for her and thus acquired, at the same time, a more amenable and personal *pied-à-terre* in London for himself. Henceforth he would stay with Ismini for his London weekends. And so life continued for brother and sister in their new, study oriented routine. Ismini found her bearings in the new city soon enough but though she made friends at college she did not form any intimate relationships and looked forward to Paul's weekly visits. News from Sonia came a few months later after she wrote to Mrs. Panopoulos to get Paul's and Ismini's addresses.

A sporadic correspondence started between them but with her move to Canada, her letters were less emotional and more formal though by no means aloof. She missed their friendship and companionship and wrote with nostalgia about Egypt and her difficulties of adjustment to her new adopted country. She was happy with her university studies but could not get used to the cold weather. With Paul she was affectionate but again in her writing style the former emotional tone of her love letters was missing. He persisted for a while to talk of their love and their future and his longing to see her again but the vagueness of her replies, notwithstanding her warm language, caused their correspondence to wither as time went by. So did his dream of a life with Sonia. The thought of her still caused cramps in his stomach and a momentary despair which was, however, quickly dissipated in the busy routine of his life and his studies. He started looking at girls with greater interest and had a few affairs that relieved his sexual tensions and loneliness but never even remotely attained the intensity of his love for Sonia.

Two years went by. Paul returned to Cairo to enter his father's business. Ismini married a Greek diplomat she met in her final year in London and left Egypt to live the nomadic life that her husband's profession required. Paul's correspondence with Sonia had ceased completely and a year after his return his mother, who kept a regular correspondence of a half dozen letters a year with Mrs. Khachadourian, announced that Sonia had recently married an Armenian friend of the family. Paul was stunned and a sense of loss suffused his being. He had expected to hear this

sooner or later but when it came it was like a punch in his stomach. He wrote to congratulate her in an emotional and generous letter and, surprisingly, a regular, friendly and intimate correspondence sprang up between them. They exchanged news, views and ideas. It was, he wrote to her, something like the early morning ten-minute street encounters before the school bus came, an eternity ago. She was amused. He wrote he was in his father's business. Originally, he did not wish to return to Cairo but his father insisted as he was getting old and had no one to help him. He was trying to make a life in Cairo. Life was easy but dull. Well, Sonia knew all about it. The only reasonable option to make life bearable was to get married and raise a family.

Sonia noted the contrast. She wrote to him that although she was already married she was not quite ready to raise one. She had graduated in her B.A. with honors and entered graduate school. She intended to pursue an academic career and at the moment was reluctant to have children. It was a point of friction with her husband. He was about ten years older than she was and wealthy and her parents energetically promoted the marriage. She had not formed any romantic attachments until that time and let herself be persuaded to marry Haik. She was honest enough to admit that his wealth seduced her as much as his charm. Well, she was happy enough. No financial problems just some objectionable traits in his character. For one, he was extremely jealous. He wanted her to stop her studies because he did not like her mingling with all the young people at university. There was the subtle and furtive daily interrogation about the people she came across and worked with. Did he not understand, she asked Paul, that this constant picketing had an opposite effect? That even if she had no intention of being unfaithful, this attitude would push her to think about it? And in a letter she asked a question that sent his heart thumping. Aren't we lucky, she wrote, to have lived such a passionate love affair? To have loved so selflessly and intensely? Inevitably Paul drew some tentative conclusions from these letters.

Haik Papazian was the largest importer and wholesaler of French perfumes in Canada. He was, however, facing strong competition and incursions by rival businessmen in the well-known brands he represented. He traveled often to Paris but at one point he considered transferring his headquarters to Paris to be in close and constant touch with the various manufacturers. Distribution was the easy part of the game; the important thing was to safeguard his sources of supply. Sonia objected to the move as it would perturb her university studies and future career and he suggested that she should go to Paris, to the Sorbonne, to see if she could transfer and continue her studies there. She would have to brush up her French but a few months of intensive study would suffice. Sonia wrote to Paul about her forthcoming trip and Paul asked if she would like him to join her there for a few days since she would be alone. Her answer was enthusiastic. She said it would be a lovely opportunity to see each other again.

He booked at the luxurious Paris hotel where she was staying though he could hardly afford it. He arrived from the airport at noon and felt feverish as he waited for her in his room. She called him up at three just as she came in and asked for his room number at the reception. Her voice was a time machine removing him from the present, transferring him five years in the past, taking his breath away. He took the elevator to the lobby and when he saw her he did not quite know how to behave. They smiled, shook hands and kissed on the cheeks and then, as if realizing how ridiculous that greeting was and how unrepresentative of their feelings, they embraced tightly for a long time. They drew apart and looked at each other. Five, six years had gone by since they parted. Five years in their early twenties do not make much difference except perhaps provide a degree of maturity both physical and intellectual. And yet

our lovers scrutinized one another and exchanged sincere compliments on each other's looks. Sonia was blooming, attractive and elegant and Paul neatly dressed, as good looking as ever and in trim shape thanks to regular sporting exertions at the club.

Neither had lunched and they decided to skip the hotel restaurant and go to a nearby bistro. Again Paul was unsure how to behave. He did not know how much familiarity a married Sonia would tolerate and he walked next to her on the street. His heart was overflowing with love. It was all coming back. Of course, it was always there, dormant, deep in his soul but now it was gushing out. She snuggled close to him and passed her arm around his.

"I won't eat you," she said and smiled.

He smiled too.

"I wish you would," he told her. "I am quite ripe for that."

"Sweet and tasty?" she teased.

"I don't know. You'll have to try me out."

They entered the bistro and ordered food and wine and while waiting they small-talked looking deeply and searchingly at each other's eyes. So many secret things left unsaid in their detailed and intimate correspondence.

"So wonderful to see you, Paulie. I write to Ismini now and then and she promptly replies. Do you miss her?"

"Of course I do. We had become very close during our two years in London. I almost felt betrayed when she got married. She seems to be happy. My God Sonia, I can hardly believe we are sitting again together at a restaurant having lunch. Remember our ice cream sodas in Lappas and Groppi? One sip, talk, talk, talk, another sip, talk, talk, talk and so on for hours?"

"Yes. Oh yes. For me, Egypt is one big bundle of nostalgia. I think of Cairo and our school with vast tenderness and yet I would not want to return to live there again. It is the past. It is over. I just want its memories, not the real thing. How is Cairo these days?"

"Expanding unbelievably fast, modernizing in some aspects, regressing in others, getting more and more crowded, polluted and dirty."

"Are you happy, there?"

"Not really. I try to make the best of it and to work out my frustrations at the club. Swimming, squash, tennis. I meet some school friends there and we have a drink at the bar now and then."

"No girls?"

"Nothing serious. You are still my girl."

She smiled wistfully.

"Yes I am. Your sweetheart living two continents away and married to someone else."

"It does not matter. You are still my love. Always shall be."

She reached across the table and stroked his hand.

"This is life. I suppose it is only the very strong and ruthless that master it. And not for trivial things like love. Power and money are the great aphrodisiacs. Us others are blown left and right by circumstance."

"Are you happy, Sonia?"

"In some ways. If being very comfortable and without serious worries is happiness, then, I am happy. I have my studies which I love and keep me busy, a lovely house which I do not have to upkeep because we have a maid and I have my parents in close proximity. As I have written to you many times, I did not marry for love. I love Haik but I was never in love with him. He is very generous and loves me

but this extreme jealousy he exhibits has become something of a nightmare. What did you do, whom did you see, what did he say...on and on. It drives me mad. He wants to know everything about me, past, present and future.”

“I don’t blame him. So do I,” said Paul.

She laughed and held his hand again.

“Morally he is decades behind the times. Never touched me before marriage. Just before we got married he asked me if I was a virgin. I told him that that was an uncivilized question but so as not to get a shock later on, the answer is no. He asked me how I lost my virginity and I was so annoyed I was extremely vulgar. I said, ‘just like most women, when a male penis penetrated me.’ I did not care if he turned round and left. He went all crimson but he pursued his questioning. ‘I mean when and where,’ he said, ‘under what circumstances.’ ‘Listen, Haik,’ I answered, ‘I did not ask you under what circumstances you lost yours. So let’s leave it at that.’”

She laughed and continued.

“Oh, he’s not bad. He is very open handed with money and wants the best for me. It’s just this harping around my person and my every move that gets on my nerves. You were never a jealous person.”

“I had no need to be. I saw the love in your eyes. You had eyes for no one else.”

“In our little European circle in Cairo who else would there be? You were the handsomest boy around.”

“While in Canada, am I to understand, the field is wide open?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact it is.”

“Then Haik is not unreasonable to fear for his young and very beautiful wife.”

“Would you be worried?”

“If I did not see love in your eyes, I would be.”

“Is that why you are staring at me so intently?”

“Yes, my dear. I am trying to find out where I stand.”

He smiled and went on,

“I am also staring because I cannot yet grasp the full extent of reality, of my happiness. I have been somnambulating ever since I took the plane from Cairo. Is that you actually sitting opposite to me? My Khachadourian? Chatting with me, holding my hand? I am afraid it might be a dream again. I have had such dreams before and I do not want to wake up this time.”

She smiled and pinched his hand and then placed it on her face.

“Wake up, my starry-eyed Paul. Feel the flesh and blood. My God, you are not made for this world. If you do not change you shall be one of the losers of life.”

Paul did not understand what she meant. His hand was on her face and he caressed it tenderly and gently stroked her ear. He was gaining confidence and it seemed to him a path was being traced in the mist of their emotions. He was sure Sonia was not happy in her marriage. They were flirting again like old times and they talked gaily throughout their meal. The fine red wine which they consumed with abandon was coursing in their bloodstream making Paul audacious and Sonia reckless. They were happy and flushed with wine when they left the bistro and on the street he held her arm in his. They walked towards the hotel slowly and a little unsteadily holding each other tightly. On the way he stopped.

“I have something for you,” he said.

She turned her face at him and smiled.

“You fibber,” she said, “you’ve played that trick before.”

He kissed her on the mouth. He felt her melting and softening and her tongue was as wild as his.

They reached the hotel, retrieved their keys from the reception desk and walked slowly, holding hands, towards the elevators. They stopped and looked at each other and smiled, waiting for the elevator to arrive. Paul was trying to figure out the opening words to the final chapter. His wine-soaked, emotionally overloaded brain seemed jammed and Sonia with abrupt earthiness provided them.

“Your room or mine?” she asked.

“Whatever,” he said.

They chose her room and as soon as the door was shut they wrapped their bodies into an endless embrace and their love into an endless kiss. They started swaying, losing their balance. They were out of breath and dizzy and fell on the bed to continue their turbulent kissing in a delirium of love words. Then they stood and undressed throwing their clothes left and right. They laughed at their hurry and desperation. Naked, they lay on the bed again and enfolded their bodies with arms and legs. They kissed, struggled and moaned in the delicate and intense moments before penetration when passion is building up through the intimacy of nakedness, the need to touch and fondle, the warmth of the body, its color, its texture, the feel and odor of flesh.

Suddenly, Paul remembered.

“Oh God, I have no condoms.”

“It’s all right,” said Sonia. “I’m pregnant.”

Paul was shocked momentarily. A person in love is rarely generously disposed to outsiders. His malady makes him selfish. And yet, it flashed in his mind that he was the outsider, the trespasser. If Sonia was happy, so was he.

“How wonderful, Sonia,” he said. What else could he say?

“Not so wonderful, Paul. I did not want a baby right now.”

It was hardly the moment for explanations and their love absorbed all their senses and intellect. A give and take, selfish and generous, giving and self-seeking, rhythmic and formless, prosaic and imaginative, structured and inventive, prehistoric and delightfully novel, in and out of agony, in and out of ecstasy, in and out, in and out. At twenty five, sappy with wine it can last for hours.

That was how it was with Sonia and Paul.

They lost the sense of time in a marathon of lovemaking where exertion and endurance were rewarded by voluptuousness and sensual pleasure. They reached orgasm and collapsed, disengaged and lay on their backs to regain their breath and cool their bodies. A faint smile of elation on their lips, the odor of lovemaking in the air. They were quiet for a while.

“I wonder if the baby is still alive,” said Sonia with black humour after the contortions and stabbings of love and her multitude of multiple orgasms.

“Five years of our privation packed in one session,” said Paul exaggerating but only slightly.

“My God, I have never experienced such orgasms before. They were almost worth the separation.”

Paul kissed her and pretended he was leaving.

“See you in five years,” he said.

They laughed. They could not open their eyes and cuddled up again, legs and arms entangled, breathing each other’s breaths, and slept.

They woke up in darkness, kissed, caressed, made love again, dressed and ordered sandwiches and champagne. Their appetite was hearty, the wine exhilarating.

Almost an aphrodisiac. They talked, joked and kissed and were tender and funny digging up their common past, their love, their sexual awakening, their inexhaustible passion, the tricks and lies to their families to spend a few hours together. Everything that attached them five years ago. They ordered a second bottle and like a second sexual union, they consumed it less avidly, sip by sip, chatting about their lives and their concerns.

“What a wonderful light-hearted wine,” said Paul. “Just right for the occasion. You know Sonia, somehow I feel sorry for your husband. I keep wondering why you are in my arms. Not that I would change anything. I am so utterly happy. The thought of parting drives me crazy. But I suppose these are essential ingredients in an illicit affair. Guilt, love and happiness, the excitement of the forbidden, the glorious feeling of sexual satiety and, finally, the sweet sorrow of parting. Except that my sorrow will be poisonous. In the last analysis I regret nothing even if I shall go into depression for months.”

“So will I, my darling. You were right, Paul. I am not happily married.”

“I never said a thing.”

“Oh, not explicitly but you would not have tried to make love to me if you thought I was happy. I know you well. You are the closest person to me. You love me and I trust you. Do you want the truth?”

“Of course.”

“I am unfaithful to my husband. Not often. On the right occasions. Discreetly and carefully. This is not the first time.”

Again, Paul was shocked. He stared at her silently. He did not know what to say. His love confused his morals. He would not accept that Sonia was depraved or doing something that was wrong. It is life that plays tricks on you. You just react to situations and try to survive.

“I love him because he is kind and generous to me and despite his enervating interrogations which after all are not misplaced. But sexually he leaves me cold. I feel like a prostitute who is there just for his money and the easy life he provides. Especially so when we make love and I feel not a thing.”

“Oh Sonia, leave him. Come with me. Your baby shall be mine.”

Sonia smiled.

“Wake up Paulie,” she said.

“Did I say something outrageous?”

“No, my love. You said something very dreamy and impractical. But I’ll think about it.”

“It was obvious to Paul that she was humoring him.”

They talked for hours. Sip by sip. Kiss by kiss. About his life. About hers. She could not envisage returning to Cairo. She had delineated the life she wanted. An academic career that fulfilled her and made her feel useful in teaching and spreading her love of literature to young minds. Haik fitted in perfectly by providing the means, his support and his love. The child that was coming was a complication to her plans but money solves problems. She would have a nurse take care of it. The projected move to France was another hurdle to overcome but she was examining the possibility of transferring to the Sorbonne. The initial feelers were encouraging. It might work out after all. Otherwise she would veto it and Haik would comply.

Paul listened silently to her plans. He had nothing much to say. His life was dull with no prospect of change. He knew, now, that Sonia was out of his reach. He tried to draw comfort from the conviction that, however things might turn out, it was better to have loved and lost than to have never loved. At least his loss was beyond his

control whereas Sonia's loss was of her own making for another objective, another ambition, for a life-style of wealth and security where love was peripheral. She would have transient love affairs and perhaps call on Paul for stronger emotions. She did love him. He had no doubt about it. Nevertheless, money and security were more seductive or, in any case, more practical. He began understanding that love to a woman is a more complicated proposition than it is to a man. He embraced her and kissed her in the middle of a sentence. She was surprised at his sudden outburst of passion. She kissed him back and he started undressing her. She smiled at his rush.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"We haven't got much time."

"We have three days."

"Please don't remind me. I feel like crying."

"Why my Paulie?"

"Because I love you, you silly girl."

"I love you, too, my darling."

They made love again and again and hardly slept that night.

Three days they spent together. In the mornings Sonia would go to the Sorbonne to meet the professors in charge of the Literature department and Paul would walk aimlessly around the city, enjoying the charm and liveliness of Paris, the well dressed, attractive young people busily going about their business, the beautiful old buildings and shops with their tasteful, luxurious merchandise, the Seine and its bridges, the Louvre and the Luxembourg art galleries and all the other tourist attractions. He would meet Sonia for lunch and they would return to the hotel for passionate lovemaking. In the evening it was long, meandering walks in the Quartier Latin, Montmartre, Place Pigalle and Place Clichy. It was a magic world of art and sensuality. It fitted their mood and the two lovers, walking hand in hand, talking gaily, laughing and kissing, were living an enchanted reverie. It lasted all of three days. They parted on the fourth with aching hearts without the certainty of meeting again with just the consolation of their forthcoming correspondence.

Sonia and her husband did not move to Paris as soon as they expected. A baby girl was born called Amy and Sonia continued her studies for a PhD. A second baby girl was born two years later and Sonia was awarded her doctorate a few months after giving birth to Alice. She and Haik finally decided to move to Paris when she was offered a lectureship at the Sorbonne to teach a course called Advanced English and English Literature. It suited her perfectly as a good part of the teaching would be in English. In these last two years she attended courses in French and her proficiency in that language improved considerably.

Paul met Sonia again about a year after she and her family had settled in Paris. He was on a short holiday in Greece and decided to fly for a few days to Paris to see her. He wanted to surprise her. He called her on the phone from a café close to her apartment.

"Paul!" she exclaimed when she heard his voice, "how nice of you to call. How are you?"

"I'm fine Sonia. I miss you and I wanted to hear your voice."

"Oh, that's terribly sweet."

"Can you come down at the l'Oréal Café?"

"What for?"

"To join me for a coffee."

"Good God!"

Five minutes later, they were in each other's arms embracing and kissing. They sat down for coffee laughing at her shock and talking animatedly. She was nearing her thirties and had lost her girlishness. She was an attractive, elegant young woman with the maturity not necessarily of age but of the prime of life. A maturity and self-confidence that comes from higher education, culture and financial ease. Perhaps also from parenthood. Paris had been kind to her. She was smartly dressed and displayed that special Parisian air of sophistication. It seemed to Paul as if she had ascended a level he could not attain. And yet their old intimacy remained intact for Sonia of the many men was essentially a one-man woman. Perhaps it is unethical to condone her numerous infidelities to her husband and admire her constancy to Paul but the fact remained that her love for Paul was deep-rooted and there was no reason for it to change.

Paul was as handsome as ever, as sweet as ever and as in love with her as ever. His diffidence and decency touched her in the face of the general brashness and baseness of the world and his passion and sexual avidity for her excited her because unlike her other casual affairs this one was saturated with genuine feeling and love. He was the only man that truly aroused and fulfilled her sexually. Life sometimes pushes one in paths that do not make for happiness, and adjustments, ethical or not, are made to compensate. Sonia was not resolute enough to resist her family's pressure to marry the well-heeled Haik and was not disposed to leave the luxury he provided when she found out she was not happy with him but was gutsy enough to seek sexual gratification in casual, short-lived affairs. There are no saints in this world. There never have been. Just hypocrites and moralizers.

They talked for a couple of hours and renamed l'Oréal their Groppi in Paris. Alas, it was their Groppi for just one afternoon. She invited him next day, which was a Saturday, for lunch to meet Haik and her children. He arrived punctually at two at the modern and luxurious building where she lived. When the door opened, three pair of eyes were upon him: Sonia's, Haik's and Amy's. Even the one-year-old baby was taking precarious steps towards him. He kissed Sonia and shook hands with Haik.

Haik was a big portly man with a round, chubby face and a bushy mustache. The type of face one would find in Turkey and the Middle East in every coffee shop but without the swarthinness. His hair was thinning. A washed out blond color turning prematurely gray. He was not good-looking but undoubtedly conveyed the aura of wealth and power. His eyes blatantly disclosed the shrewdness of a businessman and together with an air of self-confidence would not let him pass unnoticed and might even be considered as charm in the right circles. He spoke English and French with the semi-American accent of Canadians. He was polite and hearty with Paul though Paul sensed he was concealing a wariness and suspicion towards him. Little Amy, now three, was not particularly pretty but had Sonia's eyes in a larger version and her father's blondish hair. Unlike Amy, Alice was a veritable little doll, sociable and friendly.

They sat at the salon for an aperitif and Haik's first question was, "How do you find your girlfriend ten years later?"

"We were next door neighbors, Haik, never boyfriend and girlfriend," said Sonia smiling at Paul.

"Quite another person," said Paul. "A sophisticated Parisian, not the little girl that smacked me when I annoyed her."

"She is teaching at the Sorbonne," he said proudly. "Ah, but you must know that. There is a regular correspondence between you two. Can you imagine, she never lets me read your letters? She destroys them after reading them."

“Letters are personal,” said Sonia. “Even the lord and master should not read them. One must have a modicum of privacy even if they are completely innocuous.”

“There she goes. Showing off again. Using words I hardly understand.”

“We just exchange news,” said Paul. “She is nostalgic of Cairo and I write to tell her so and so got married, so and so died.”

“I did tell you, Haik, that Paul reads a lot and we also discuss the books we read.”

“Yes, and Sonia being a PhD in literature, I ask her expert opinion on what I read and what to read next.”

They all smiled politely.

“And how is Cairo?” asked Haik.

“Well, ever since I returned from London about ten years ago, I keep expecting the country to collapse but it keeps limping along. Its problems are multiplying but it keeps surviving.”

They had lunch attended by a maid and Amy sat at table with her nurse. The baby had already eaten and was taken for a nap. Amy was a grouchy child, sniveling and protesting at every mouthful. She spit out her food, spilt her fruit juice and made a small mess on the starched tablecloth in front of her. Throughout lunch she monopolized the limelight with her antics interrupting and stultifying all nascent conversations. Sonia was cool and patient but Paul was glad when lunch was over and after a decent interval got up to leave. He thanked Haik and kissed Amy. Sonia accompanied him to the elevator.

“Tomorrow at eleven I shall come to the hotel,” she whispered to him.

He shook her hand, kissed her decorously thanking her in a loud voice and in another whisper, added,

“I shall be waiting.”

Haik was off to Canada for a few days of business and that Sunday morning, at eleven, they put the Do Not Disturb sign outside the door and made love on and off till late afternoon lunching on sandwiches and champagne. She returned home on time for the habitual telephone call from Haik. On the next few days she would meet him directly after her lectures and they would spend the afternoon in bed. Their time together was more confined and they preferred to use it quenching their passion and having their conversations naked in bed. They cuddled and kissed with the blinds open, with the gray, rainy skies providing the pale glow and snug atmosphere that made them reluctant to go out and the effort of parting so difficult.

“You rejuvenate me my Paul,” Sonia told him. “You are my psychiatrist restoring my frayed nerves, calming me down. You are as much my medicine as you are my pleasure.”

“Perhaps pleasure is your medicine,” Paul told her smiling. “Do you take it regularly?”

“I try. I am careful. I want neither emotional attachments nor the reputation of a slut. Frenchmen seem to take these things in their stride. They are much less complicated in sex than Canadians. Much more detached and casual and this suits me pretty well. Do I shock you?”

“I have come to accept your sexual independence. The only thing that would shock me and devastate me is if you told me you did not love me.”

“How can I not love you when every love session is a visit to paradise? You are truly the man that has marked my life.”

“And you the woman I cannot get over.”

“Perhaps this idealization persists because we are apart. Because we meet for three days every three years. And, of course, because we have a common past. We shared the most wonderful and idyllic growing up. As deep and passionate a love as any in the novels we read. Do you know I still have reveries about those days? I thought of writing a novel about our love but I decided against it. I was not sure I would be able to convey the wonder, the heady emotion of those two summers of lovemaking. I was afraid it would be boring.”

“Are we boring each other, my love?” Paul asked with a smile.

She laughed and continued,

“Only pornography would do justice to our affair. I am joking, of course. For even that would be a mere shadow of the real thing. It would be a misrepresentation because we were, we are, so much in love.”

The lord and master returned to his not so faithful Penelope on the fourth day and Paul left for Greece. The parting was less emotional than usual. They were getting used to meeting and parting. They hoped it would go on. It was beginning to be sweet sorrow, after all, for they made vows to meet sooner than the habitual three years.

They met again a year later when Sonia wrote to Paul that her husband would be away on an extended business tour in the main Canadian cities. Again with her work, house, children and the regular suspicion-laden telephone calls from Haik, their time together was circumscribed but their bliss rather than diminish was more intense. Like a racehorse in a race, the more he is reined in by the jockey the more he tries. A fact of life for racehorses and lovers.

He told her he had a steady girl. She was worried. She asked questions.

Why did he not write to her about it?

He wanted to tell her face to face. To answer her questions. To reassure her.

Did he love her?

Perhaps not yet. It's somewhere between liking her very much, enjoying her company and loving her.

Did they sleep together?

At thirty what do you expect?

Was he thinking of marrying her?

“Not yet, but it might come to that, just as it might not.”

“Which means, yes,” she said quietly.

“Why are you depressed all of a sudden? There is just one Sonia in my life. Not Maria, not even God himself can erase my love for you. You tell me Haik is away and I leave Maria and come galloping to you. Anyway, you are married. You have lovers. Why should I stay single?”

“It is not the same thing. I do not love my husband and I am not in love with my lovers. You shall get married because you love her. You have not got my temperament or my recklessness. You are a different person and that is why I am drawn to you and our relationship has been so solid. It is not only the sex. I know it for certain, if you marry this Maria, I shall lose you.”

“No one shall separate us.”

“No one but ourselves.”

He kissed her. They made love more passionately than ever but a cloud cast a shadow in Sonia's mind and her happy chatting would stop now and then and she would be silent. Paul would kiss her.

“Nothing will change, my darling,” he would reassure her.

“Strange as it may sound, you were my anchor, my ballast in life. Far away in the background you were a constant presence. I knew I had somebody who loved me

and whom I trusted blindly. A brother who was also my wonderful lover. When I am with you I am the Sonia you loved in Cairo not the sophisticated adulteress, not the cultured university lecturer or the rich society lady. With you all my masks fall away because I feel the need to match your simplicity and modesty. I cannot pretend with the boy who did not change from the time of our first kiss. Please Paul, even if we stop being lovers let us always be friends.”

Sonia’s predictions and wishes came true.

Paul married Maria. They went on a two-week honeymoon in Portugal. On their return they stayed for two days in Paris. Sonia invited them for lunch. Haik was very jolly and hospitable. He was probably relieved that Paul was finally married. He mentioned again the correspondence in a jocular way. One could see it was something he could not swallow. He said he supposed it would now stop. Sonia smiled and said she did not see the reason why a friendship should stop now that Paul was married.

Amy had grown. She was seven years old and was going to school. She had calmed down and lost her irritability. A well behaved little girl, she was also growing prettier. Her hair was curly and her large, beautiful eyes had Sonia’s strange hue. Alice was an older version of the former sweet tempered, sociable little doll. She was quiet and simply happy to be with people.

The two unhappiest and most awkward persons were Paul and Sonia. Neither had really accepted the fact that their love affair was definitively over. Well, at least, it's carnal part. It was only now when they came face to face that the full realization struck them like a slap on their face. They did not know how to behave. They kept looking at each other but when their eyes met they looked away. Sonia was constantly scrutinizing Maria. Comparing herself to her. Wondering how Paul would fall for such an insipid person. She was smiling and polite but Paul felt Sonia’s resentment for Maria, the person that had separated them. He felt his bond with Sonia was very much alive and the feeling that she was now out of bounds made him sick with longing to talk to her tenderly and tell her he still loved her. He was depressed and uncommunicative throughout lunch. Sonia too was unusually silent. Luckily, Haik was in top form and compensated. He talked non-stop with Maria and told her silly jokes. He offered her a huge bottle of perfume.

For the first time Paul questioned the wisdom of marrying Maria. He was not unhappy with her. It was another kind of love. Less intense and passionate, with an affinity based on companionship and common interests. They got on well together and she did love him and take care of him. With Sonia it was something else. He had kept up his correspondence with her but no longer derived the same satisfaction from it. Since his marriage it had once again become more formal and had lost its former intimacy. The proof was that Sonia no longer destroyed the letters and Haik had occasion to secretly read them. It was not obvious from the letters’ conventional style that their friendship would survive but it did and the wish that Sonia expressed to Paul a few years back was fulfilled. More than that, their attraction for each other never withered with time. Invisible currents of feeling, of love and desire unfolded and enveloped them whenever they were in close proximity. Fortunately or unfortunately, these occasions became rare as the years went by.

Paul and Maria were invited to spend a week with Haik and Sonia at their summer villa in the south of France. They had not seen each other since Paul’s honeymoon visit ten years before. Sonia wrote that it was high time they got together again. Paul, much as he wanted to see Sonia was reluctant to take the decision. He remembered that last visit and the torture he went through but Maria was enthusiastic and told him they would never have another such opportunity. He, finally, agreed and

told Maria that she should go on a diet to lose weight. After her second pregnancy six years ago Maria had let herself go. He did not want her to compare unfavorably with Sonia. Through their letters and the exchange of pictures he knew that Sonia had kept in shape whereas his thin and beautiful Maria had become plump and her face pudgy.

They left with their two boys, Nicholas and Mike, on a flight to Paris and took a connecting flight to Nice. Haik and Sonia received them at the airport and they drove to a nearby fashionable summer village where the villa was situated. Paul regretted his decision the moment he saw them. Both the hosts were very hearty with Paul and Maria and fussed over the boys. The decade that had passed affected them in different ways. Haik had aged visibly. He gave more the impression of being Sonia's father than her husband for Sonia was, if anything, better looking than ever. Paul felt his love flare up again. Maria had lost weight but the effort of dieting made her look faded and drawn and he felt let down by her appearance.

Paul could not take his eyes off Sonia and Sonia could not take her eyes off Paul, because like her, the older he got the better he looked. He felt the most extreme frustration and misery to be near her and not to be able to touch her, to kiss her, to utter tender words and make love to her. He acted with awkwardness and reserve towards her while his heart pounded. Their eyes were wary and questioning when they met searching for a solution to their impossible dilemma. But there was none and it reflected in their gloomy attitude. Paul never told Maria of his love affair with Sonia and she could not understand the source of his bad disposition. She tried to make up for his sulking by being extra sociable and friendly mainly with Haik and Sonia's girls because Sonia was polite but distant. She went a long way in keeping an air of normality in the small group. Amy and Alice had become pretty young ladies. They each had a small motorcycle and were quite independent of the grownups coming and going as they pleased. They had started going out with boys; to the beach in the mornings, coffees in the afternoon and dancing in the evenings. Amy was already seventeen and Alice fifteen.

Things improved the following days. Sonia and Paul resigned themselves to the status quo. There was nothing much they could do about it. With the comings and goings of the holiday routine, the boys' boisterousness, Haik's high spirits and Maria's efforts, a smattering of conversation surfaced out of the sulking pair and restrained smiles brightened their faces. They smiled instead of looking away when their eyes met and since their eyes were on each other most of the time, so was a lingering smile. They started pairing off on their evening strolls on the keys of the small village port with the luxurious yachts and fashionable cafés, at the beach in the mornings and when lounging at the lavish villa. Always within sight of their spouses but far enough to carry on private conversations unheard. Maria was constantly with Haik. They seemed to enjoy being together and this cross-matching of the couples came about spontaneously and was free of tensions. At the beach, Sonia would point out all the beautiful, topless girls to Paul and Paul would smile at her and say,

"Not interested. I'm faithful to my wife."

"Oh, sure, Sonia would retort. You're as faithful as the rest of the male sex."

"Why are we so bitter?"

"You really messed things up."

"What else should I have done? Live for three days of passion every three years?"

She was silent for a while, gazing at the sea.

"I know I'm being disgustingly unfair and selfish," she said finally. "It's just that we're in such a bind."

“Perhaps Maria and Haik will fall in love and decide to get married.”

“Ha, ha. Fat chance!”

They were silent considering the minuscule odds. Very few people win the lotteries. The Mediterranean was blue and warm, lapping lazily the white sand which stretched for miles to the left and right forming pleasant little bays. The *plageurs* rented umbrellas and mattresses to well heeled clients. A little way behind there was a bar for refreshing, colourful and exotic drinks and tables where food was served. The two couples and the boys lunched there every day and left the beach in the early afternoon for a nap at home. It was August and the beach was crowded. The beautiful young people were stretched on mattresses pasting on the sun lotions, roasting, motionless, working up a tan. Most of the women were topless and some nonchalantly ambled by completely nude. Sonia pointed them out to Paul.

“All those pretty girls,” he said.

“What about them?”

“They are nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Compared to you.”

She smiled sullenly.

“So what?”

“So nothing. I just want you to know.”

In the few times they were alone he held her hand but she pulled back. At others he caressed her hair.

“Please don’t do that,” she would say.

“Why not?”

“It makes me want to cry.”

They extended their sojourn from a week to two at the insistence of Sonia and Haik and left with happy memories. The boys had fun and Maria kept on repeating how wonderful and generous Haik was. Paul was again in love with Sonia and was both happy and tortured throughout the two weeks. She was next to him yet beyond his reach. He hated seeing Haik being tender and possessive with Sonia and also hated it when Sonia reciprocated his pampering. Sometimes it seemed to Paul that she was deliberately demonstrative to annoy him but there was no doubt that despite her infidelities Haik was a sort of father figure for her and she loved him in her own manner.

Paul and Sonia did not see each other again for another decade. Paul continued his life in Cairo with Maria and his two boys not unhappily. He kept up a sporadic correspondence with Sonia and every two or three years received an invitation for himself and his family to the south of France which he declined much to Maria’s annoyance. She could not figure out the reason of his refusal but Paul could not face again the frustration he had gone through in his last two visits with Maria. It was even detrimental to their own marriage. He could not help comparing the two women and finding Maria’s indifference to her appearance, inexcusable. Maria had put on weight and looked ten years older than he did though she was five years younger. His sexual desire for her was declining and under the right circumstances he would have perhaps been tempted to enter an extra-marital affair. But the right circumstances were not easy to come by in the confined milieu of his social circle in Cairo. And then, he did love Maria. It never crossed his mind to leave her. They had shared too many things together. Not only friendship, companionship, a mutual appreciation and understanding, the love of their boys but also, for many years, a calm enjoyable sex life that was mutually satisfying.

Eventually they did accept the invitation. Ten years had passed and Paul wanted to see if he was cured. Ten years. It was time enough. She had written to him, a few years back, that she now had a more permanent liaison with a colleague. The permanence upset him. He could swallow the one-night stands but permanence was another thing. It threw him decidedly out of the picture. He felt betrayed by this double infidelity to her husband and himself. The absurdity did not escape him but he felt he had special links with her and now they were being severed. As time passed, however, he resigned himself to the loss. Friendship remained but friendship pure and simple between man and woman is rare and precarious. It needs an undercurrent of sexual attraction to survive. And obviously this existed for their correspondence never stopped, their friendship and intimacy never faltered. He was, unconsciously, eager to see her while deluding himself that his heart was turning cold.

Of course, just a glance between Paul and Sonia threw them back to square one. It was practically a repetition of their previous holiday a decade ago. Haik, now sixty, portly, stiff of movement, baldish, his mustache and eyebrows gray and the semicircle of hair from ear to ear completely white, attached himself to the plump Maria. Sonia, nearing forty was at her peak and Paul, who kept up his sporting life at the club, was in trim shape and good looking enough to have women stare at him. Whether or not Sonia was in love with her lover did not seem to make much difference. The magnetism between her and Paul was generating waves of psychic energy, love and frustration, and in their strolls, conversations and intimacy. Paul made veiled and vain attempts to find out about her lover only to collect her coyness.

It was all the same again - or almost. The children had grown. Nicholas and Mike started going to dancing clubs, meeting girls and getting along with funny, broken French. They were good looking boys and within a few days they had programs of their own and stopped following the adults. The two Papazian girls treated them affectionately like younger brothers and helped them find their way around. They were by that time pretty young ladies. Both were married to their first and only boyfriends. Amy, now twenty eight, had become much prettier than she originally promised. A little on the plump side with generous breasts but also with beautiful eyes, an engaging smile and an easygoing manner. The general sweetness of her personality made her a pleasant and lovable person. The same could not be said for Tony, her husband, who was dour and taciturn and did not get on well with Haik. Haik often asked Maria if he was unreasonable in not accepting him with good grace.

“He has nothing going for him,” he said. “He is not educated, has no money and no steady job. He is not even pleasant as a person. I do not understand what attracted Amy to him.”

“A difficult question to answer,” Maria would tell Haik every time. “It is human chemistry, which is often a human mystery. My father used to say, ‘The smell of their breaths is compatible.’ In any case, Haik, it was not for you to choose. For Amy’s sake try and be civil with him.”

Alice’s husband, on the other hand, who had just finished the long years of medical school, received all of Haik and Sonia’s love that was deprived from Tony. He was handsome and made a good match with the adorable and beautiful Alice.

During this second vacation with the Papazians, Paul took the opportunity to tell Haik that his work in Cairo was stagnating and he wanted to quit Egypt and would Haik help him in finding a job in France. Haik promised he would and a few months later phoned Paul and asked him to come to France for an interview. The interview took place and with a little help from Haik who was very rich and was becoming even richer and influential, Paul landed a job as a sales representative in a large firm that

traded in steel products and metal sheets. He returned to Egypt, sold his business and left for Paris to start work and to rent a flat for his family. Two months later Maria and the boys arrived and a difficult period of adaptation to a new life began for the family. The boys enrolled in intensive French courses and Maria took care of the house and all its chores without the permanent house help she had in Cairo. Like in every major change, life never offers simple, unadulterated advantages. You lose some and gain some. They missed some things but were recompensed with others and on the whole, the family was satisfied with this major decision that Paul took. Life in France offered new perspectives and opportunities for the boys for whom, after all, the move was made.

The first year in Paris was a busy and anxious one for Paul. He needed to ensure that his new post would be permanent and he put in a great effort at his work. Hard work and anxiety are not a favorable background for romantic urges and adventures. It was a great irony that now that Sonia was physically within reach, Paul had neither the peace of mind nor the time and energy to pursue her. She, on her part, initiated no openings, did not hint to possible options when Paul and Maria visited the Papazians. The friendship, the affection, the affinity, even the magnetism between Paul and Sonia was palpable but it did not unite them after they said goodbye and the door of the luxurious apartment closed behind Paul and Maria.

Paul was waiting for a hint. Their correspondence where things were more or less spelt out had obviously ended and Paul no longer knew where Sonia stood emotionally. If she was with the same man or had new lovers. So he waited and waited and nothing happened. In time even the visits which he and Maria paid the Papazians became rarer as did the telephone calls. When, eventually, Paul's existence attained a more normal pace, too much time had already elapsed. The right moment to make a move had passed. The chance to grab the opportunity had flown. Furthermore, his gratitude to Haik for the help he provided was a further impediment. He did not think it moral or loyal to make a try for Sonia. So he waited for the hint that never came.

The struggle for survival stealthily steals precious years of one's life by confining you to the humdrum routine of work and home. Your life consists of little strides forward and small steps backward. Their constancy and pettiness obscure your vision. You do not see the wood for the trees. You miss your dreams and passions. Small problems loom large and insoluble and minor successes make them bearable. Family life and its responsibilities block your egotistical desires but give you the satisfaction of seeing your offspring grow. You forget your own aspirations and ambitions that were not realized because you were not strong or fortunate enough and transfer them to your children. And, one day, even they fly away and you are left with the thoughts and urgings of Marquez, which in most cases are dangerous, impractical and unattainable.

And now, here he was, on his hotel bed, his brain whirring at supersonic torques, his whole detailed life passing in flashes, being reevaluated, producing emotions, happiness, indifference, exhilaration, regrets, anxiety for the future, anxiety for the present, anxiety for now. Now that he was waiting for Amy.

He could not sleep and decided on a warm bath to relax. He filled the bath tub and lay inside. He tried to think of Amy naked. It usually produced an erection but now there was nothing. He fantasized her asking him for oral sex, opening her legs and smiling with an expression of pain which is also that of desire, of lust, of longing. He imagined her holding his penis, tonguing it, putting it deep in her throat, asking

him to penetrate her. Nothing doing. His anxiety just increased. At his age his erections had become fickle and unreliable. He was happy he had thought to bring a box of Viagra as a sexual first aid. But still he worried.

He soaked for twenty minutes and the water started getting cold and uncomfortable. He got out of the tub. His joints were stiff and painful. It's all psychological, he thought. He went into the room and dried himself. He fished the blue pills out of his bag. Must not forget to take them with me and pop a tablet in my mouth about an hour before we leave the nightclub. Must not take any chances. With Maria not even Viagra would help but Amy will surely excite me. I get erections when I kiss her. But why not now? What's wrong? It surely is psychological.

He looked at himself in the mirror. Finally, he thought, my hair is thinning. What I have been dreading this past decade is finally happening. It is falling off faster and faster. God, what lousy timing, just when I need it most. He looked again. And that belly. It's quite repulsive, all that accumulation of fat. In Cairo, the sports at the club kept me in shape. Here, the clubs are too expensive. I cannot afford them. I haven't got the time, anyway. He put on his underwear not looking at the mirror, not looking at his shrunken penis and lay, again, in bed. He tried to sleep. Nothing doing.

He tried to read and could not understand a single sentence. I'll go for a walk he thought. It might calm me down. He brought a new pair of socks from his suitcase and sat on the bed opposite the cupboard mirror to put them on. He was shocked. His beautiful, well-shaped, muscular legs, he had not seen them in a mirror for some time. They were his pride and now they shocked him. They were thinner from lack of exercise, white and hairless. Where did the hair go? Blue varicose veins were sticking out snaking their way up from his ankles to his knees. His nails were yellow and tough. Amy had not seen him this way. A well-tailored suit always covered him up. He looked at his hands. The back of his palms had brown spots and the skin was dry and finely wrinkled.

He was demoralized and lay back in bed. He could not envisage a greater humiliation than having Amy witness these awful signs of aging, of approaching senility. It was solely his fault. What did he have to fool around with a young woman like Amy for? He suddenly realized his madness. How simple he was. How naïve! Was it not bound to come out, this escapade? These things cannot stay hidden for long. What would Maria say? Maria who loved him and admired his decency and integrity? And Sonia with whom he was making love when Amy was an embryo in her womb? Sonia, the love and passion of his life. Haik who offered his hospitality and helped him so generously. Lastly, his boys who clearly hero-worshiped him not because he made money, which he did not; not because he was successful in his life, which he was not but because of his courage and persistent hard work against all odds to give his family as good a life as he was capable.

What a ridiculous wooer he was!

What a pathetic suitor for Amy!

He was in a sweat. His heart was beating hard. He felt like vomiting and he got up and dressed rapidly. Threw his clothes any old way in his suitcase, picked it up and took the elevator to the lobby. He paid his bill and before taking a cab for the airport, he asked for writing paper and left a note for Amy at the reception desk.

It's too late my darling. I am dead. No don't scream. I am alive but as good as dead. Irrevocably I tell you, with us it's all over.

Forgive me for my thoughtlessness. I have just come to my senses.

Paul.

Epilogue.

The note devastated me. I spent a miserable two days in Frankfurt and whiled the evenings sniveling and sighing in my room instead of dancing, kissing and making love to the man I had known, admired and found so terribly attractive ever since I was a teenager. I always loved him and now I was in love with him. I could not understand his reluctance to take me despite my urging. I knew it was not because he felt he had to be faithful to Maria. I surmised that at some point in the life of a man comes the need for sexual renewal especially after a long marital life. For some it is literally a tearing apart of the soul. The need, on one hand, to engage in exciting sex which has long since vanished from his marriage and time is running short and, on the other, the whole enslaving complex of family relationships, of love and emotions, habit and debt that ties him to a wife he has no reason to dislike and who, indeed, has shared with him the ups and downs of a common life. He mentioned early on how much Marquez's letters, that mother gave him, troubled him. I understand that they were the trigger to the flowering of thoughts that had probably crossed his mind but which he had diligently suppressed. He was of a different generation whose moral standards were much more rigid than the social amorality of our times.

I now know his story and one can accuse him of hypocrisy, which is, after all, so common, so universal a human trait. For it is, is it not, the trait that holds society together? If he were as morally upright as all that he would not run after a married woman and would not salivate at the thought of her for years and years, even after his own marriage, waiting for an opportunity and a sign from her to join her and continue their passion and deception.

Passion.

What a wonderful word. Passion means to live intensely. To be fanatically interested, involved to the point of madness. To be a prisoner, yes, but with what rewards! It is like a drug with a constant high, the adrenaline coursing in your blood. But unlike a drug that hooks you more and more until it kills you, passion itself, eventually dies out. It is, moreover, to my mind, a valid excuse for deception. Perhaps, the only excuse. If not forgivable, at least understandable. This is my judgment on this affair of Paul and mother. An affair that was my constant source of envy. That threw me in his arms.

I, of course, started noticing and suspecting the relationship after its sexual aspect was over. He was our guest, with his wife and boys, on two occasions, at our summerhouse on the Riviera. I was growing up, a teenager, and his good looks and pleasant manner captivated me. When I was home I was always near him to be able to just look at him and I often wondered how someone as handsome as he was could marry such a commonplace woman. The inexplicable happens in life often enough and Maria was nice but hardly his match. I started noticing that something was not altogether normal between him and mother. Supposedly, they were next-door neighbors in Cairo and together with Ismini, his sister, formed an inseparable trio. Yet during the first few days they were both moody and silent and some days later, as if the ice had broken, they could not take their eyes off each other. Anyone would notice it but daddy and Maria seemed oblivious.

The same thing happened on their second visit some ten years later despite the huge time gap. By that time I was a married woman with fully-grown feminine antennas that captured the slightest perturbations of moods and atmosphere, the meanings of smiles, of seemingly casual and not so casual glances. I had no doubt there had been something very intense between them in the past and wondered if it

was still on line. I mean physically, because there was no doubt it was there in their souls. The vibrations did not escape my arials and I could not help, once again, feeling anger and extreme jealousy despite the fact that I was newly married. I could not help comparing Tony to Paul who even at the age of fifty was gorgeous and charming whereas my Tony, though a good lover, was a near opposite. I also suspected that my mother was having casual affairs throughout her life, which I could never pinpoint but which, nevertheless, antagonized me and little by little caused me to despise her for her infidelities to my boring, unglamorous, money-oriented but loving and generous father.

Deep in my heart I wished to take Paul away from her. It would be a sort of revenge for many things. For her being beautiful, intelligent, cultured and the darling of society, which I never was. I hated her for despising Tony and being indifferent and disdainful towards me but mainly for being a faithless and self-centered wife. The truth is I did not possess any of her many gifts. Not her beauty or her special type and certainly not her intellect. Ironically, because I have repeatedly articulated my bile against it, I seem to have fully inherited her avidity for sex and penchant for adultery.

So much time has gone by and I still wonder if all those feelings of inferiority towards my mother fired my passion for Paul. I nearly achieved my revenge but for my collaborator's last-minute cold feet. I do not know what would have happened had we become lovers. If God exists, he surely created this life of puzzles and uncertainties to amuse himself. Or, perhaps, to make our lives more turbulent, intriguing and interesting.

What of Sonia, my dear mother? When father died she inherited the bulk of his estate. Instead of being the glamorous society woman of concealed possibilities, she became the wealthy, merry widow. She tried to maintain the glamour and the possibilities, which she now flaunted and were henceforth mostly unconstrained and unconcealed with plastic surgery and facelifts. It was, it is, and it always shall be a losing battle. But she did find a handsome virile young man who reminded her of Paul in his prime and imprisoned him with her wealth and a marriage proposal. I cannot vouch for his other qualities for I only saw him a few times.

She called Paul on the phone quite a few years before we met by chance the second time in the street. The conversation according to Paul went something like this:

“Hello, Paul, this is Sonia.”

“Good Lord, Sonia, how did you know I was still alive?”

“Oh my Paulie, why do you sound so hurt? I could be asking the same question.”

“That's true, my dear. Forgive me. How are you?”

“On top of the world, these days.”

“How so?”

“Remember the transcript I gave you? The e-mail Marquez sent to his friends?”

“Oh yes.”

“Did you do anything about it?”

“I tried several times and missed.”

She laughed.

“Oh my Paulie, I once warned you that if you didn't change you would be one of the losers in this life.”

“At the time, I did not understand what you meant.”

“Do you now?”

“One always understands when it is too late, don't you think?”

“Perhaps. Some more than others.”

“Presumably you are always a step ahead.”

“I try, my dear, I try. Did you know that what Marquez wrote goes for women, too?”

“The older I grow, the less I seem to know, the less I am certain about things. Life is so varied and indecipherable and ultimately meaningless.”

“So what is the answer?”

“Seize the day, should be the motto. Grasp from life the small joys day by day. Make each day as happy and pleasant as you can.”

“Yes, my Paulie. You're right. And you did not follow that?”

“For a few, all too short instances in the span of my humdrum existence.”

“Yes? When?”

“On each and every occasion I was with you.”

“You're very sweet and I love you.”

“You're still my girl. There was never any other.”

“Oh, now you'll make me cry and I have happy news. Oh Paulie, life is indeed strange.”

“And the happy news?”

“I'm getting married and I called to invite you to my wedding.”

Silence.

“Paulie, are you there?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Will you come? Shall I tell you about him?”

“No, Sonia, please. I don't want to know about him and it would break my heart to come to your wedding because I am sure you are making the wrong choice. I have a feeling he is a person not only younger than you but also not worthy of you and it would depress me to see the derisive smiles of your guests. It is a certainty I have and I sincerely hope I'm wrong.”

“That was nasty.”

“No, my Sonia, I could never be nasty with you. I always tried to find good reasons for your unconventional behavior. And we were always honest with one another. You are a truly intelligent woman. But intelligent persons are not exempt from doing some very silly things. Don't you see these are words of love and pain? And I do wish you, my darling, all the happiness of this world.”

Paul was wrong, however. Sonia made the perfect marriage. She had a handsome virile poodle of a man whose only occupation was to indulge her every whim. She on the other hand kept him beautiful and elegant in expensive clothes and fancy sports cars. If he did anything sneaky on the side, that's another matter. I must confess, though, to being malicious because I never heard of anything. It's just the way life is.

And now?
I see Paul every day.
Now that the sex is out, we are as good as married.

Athens 14 December 2003

IRRATIONAL EQUATIONS

&

CHARADES IN JUNE

“Please fasten your seat belts and follow the demonstration on the use of the life jacket which is located under your seat.”

The huge jet is taxiing on the runway moving on to the principal lane and is about to take off. A letter put me on it. A skeletal letter bulging with fading memories. A letter that by any measure of probability should not have reached me. I take the envelope out of my pocket. I look at the address of the sender. I knew it so well and yet it had been totally effaced from my memory. My own address in Cairo crossed out by an old neighbor I had not seen in fifteen years and replaced by the Athens one I had given him just before leaving Egypt. It is a miracle letter, an Olympic marathon runner. It went to my mother’s house in Athens and she in her turn forwarded it to the island.

I ignore the demonstration by the pretty stewardess and open it for the hundredth time. Not because it is momentous but because fate is sometimes unpredictable and inexorable and teases us and alters our life with memories and illegible scribbling.

DeaR NicKy,

My LetteR will suRprise you. So Much Time has gone by since We lasT coMMunicaTed. I do noT even kNow if you aRe sTill in EgypT. In any case I hope it will Reach you. I puT pLease forward on The enveLope, as you wiLL see if iT Reaches yoU.

WeLL, I wRiTe to give you ouR news which UnfoRTunaTely is bad. Telly died suddenly of a ceRebRaL sTRoke as he was LectuRing aT college.

ThaT happened abouT Two monThs ago and you can iMagine ouR pain and heLpnessness. We aRe jusT coming Round To accepTing ouR Loss and geTTing back inTo the RouTine of ouR Life. Sam and NichoLas are bacK at their coLLeges on The wesT coasT and I have finaLLy found The Time To seNd you These few woRds.

Please wRite To me youR News. My God, whaT wouLdn’T I give to see you again.

ALL my Love,
SheRi.

To tell the truth, I was not shaken. Too much time had passed since I saw them last. Something like twenty years and then, even before that, I had lost all sense of friendship and respect I had for Telly. Poor Sheri, I wondered how deep and genuine

her sense of pain, her sense of loss was. How sincere her words. I wondered how those twenty years had gone by and if anything had changed in her warped family life. When I left, things had more or less returned to normal; but for how long? She was pregnant with a second child which tied her all the more to a matrimonial straitjacket. Twenty years. Perhaps, it did work out. I doubted it. Not if I knew Telly as well as I thought.

I wondered what she looked like now. Had she lost her freshness, her beauty, that pertness that characterized her? Even at thirty, before her marriage, she was the all-American girl next door of glamour magazines. Blond, blue-eyed, well-built and smiling. The sort of ideal that you do not find next door outside the movies. And her letter, which brought a smile to my lips, typically High-School American. A mixture of ordinary and capital letters indiscriminately put down because, after all, when you come to think of it, it doesn't really matter.

I answered the letter, of course, with my condolences and insincere grief and a brief account of my own clutter of happiness and unhappiness, minor successes and all too many failures. That I was now living almost permanently on an island in Greece with my fifteen-year-old daughter. Writing. That I was now almost happy and that, after all was said and done, was my main achievement.

She replied within two weeks with the same haphazard insertion of capital letters where they had no business being, with delight that I got her letter after all, with undisguised agitation that I was divorced and lived on an island. She sent me her phone number and said to phone her or else send her a long, long detailed letter. And, of course, now that there was no wife to consent or not, she expected me in the STaTes SooN.

As I could not envisage explaining the causes and intricacies of my divorce over the phone, I wrote to her a passably detailed essay (in a somewhat enhanced literary form to her's) on our lost twenty years and invited her, in my turn, to summer vacations on the island as my guest, something that would surely not please young Annie. But I doubted it would ever come to that. Anyway, what was she so excited about? We were getting on in age. I was forty three and she must have been almost ten years older. True, I had come across one or two pretty wonderful women in their middle fifties and Sheri might be in their mold but that remained to be seen. Dreams, sometimes, beget nasty surprises. Though, sometimes not. I had to find out. I asked my mother to come to the island to take care of Annie for a week or two and as I was contemplating these unanswerable questions on the plane, the surge of speed launched us into the ether.

On to a journey as tiresome but not as protracted as the one of two decades earlier, which took thirteen propeller-driven hours just to cross the Atlantic. Though the anticipation, I must admit, quite comparable. Then, a young, new, dream-world unwrapping; now, an old occurrence flickering to life. With strong enough memories and curiosity to urge me to take the trip. In any case, I had just finished a novel and my mind was blank. I needed the break to recharge my batteries. To think of something new to grapple with in my writing. Might not this visit and the recollection of the strange, almost forgotten affair fecundate my inspiration?

I vividly remember my arrival, feeling lost and disorientated after a day and a night on an airplane, with propellers still vibrating in my brain, where I was met by Telly's parents, at Logan airport in Boston. Two friendly, affectionate, middle-aged strangers, more Greek than American despite the strong local accent. His mother, my father's cousin, sent off for an arranged marriage, a generation ago, to a man she did not know, with the courage or, perhaps, resignation and fatalism of difficult times,

made a visible success of her life even if one cannot talk of the non-visible part of it. On the visible side, however, she had a very prominent son. Prominent, that is, for her class, education and first-generation immigrant status. An assistant professor of mathematics at Boston University. Mathematics was a quirk of mine, much to my father's disappointment and disapproval, who could not envisage its practical usefulness. Well neither could I for that matter but at my age that did not hold much weight. Better than nothing, he must have thought and allowed me to apply to that university. I was admitted, and his consolation was the reassurance that Telly would be looking after me.

How can I describe Telly? He hated his Greek name, Aristotelis, and said that at least Onassis had the money to bolster it, to keep people from laughing at it. As for his looks, since they say a picture is worth a thousand words and since a handful of film stars are more widely known than Mao Zedong and Hitler, I shall use such a one to relieve us of a thousand words. Telly was the spitting image of Sylvester Stallone with the qualification that a punch from Rocky would have left Telly smiling while a punch from Telly would have flattened Rocky. An odd aptitude for a mathematician. And not the only one. Telly was handsome, sociable and charming with that attribute of utter congeniality: the easy smile and ready laugh and, so, effortlessly, embodied the legendary lady killer. Which he was, carelessly, unselfconsciously, unintentionally and mostly succumbing to the temptations that came his way. He did not intimidate by his professional standing because he was totally unpretentious and uncultured. His mathematical brain, that formidable annihilator of infinities, irrational equations, Pythagorean theorems, matrices and differential geometry, could not abide a short story, a lyrical poem, a poignant painting. His favorite TV shows were cowboy westerns and in the Sunday newspapers ignored the politics and tackled the comic strips with boisterous glee.

I stayed at their home for a few days on my arrival in Boston and subsequently visited the family on every occasion I could get away from my studies and the depressing college boarding house. They had become my family in exile. An instant affinity bound me to Telly at once. It was easy to like him and definitely much less so for someone to warm up to me. Though easy-going, I was quiet and withdrawn. But mathematics bound us together. And family. This solidarity being the only Greek trait left in his character from the overwhelming American melting pot. For he could not speak, or would not speak, a word of Greek though he understood most of his parents' Greek chatter. In college he took me under his wing. He insisted I go to his office every day and he helped me with any difficulties I might have in the various subdivisions of this vast subject. Advised me on the elective subjects I should choose and even on the sports I should do, which were a compulsory part of the undergraduate curriculum. "God, Nikos, not body building. It's so boring. Try squash," he proposed. "It will keep you fit, agile and develop your reflexes." Told me about the instructors and professors, their strengths, weaknesses and idiosyncrasies. What are yours? I asked him for a laugh. He smiled. "Well," he said, "let me see. Strength: physical. Weakness: women. Idiosyncrasy: mathematics." I laughed at this succinct self-appraisal and told him I shared with him just the last one. "That won't do," he said. "Can't help you with the first one but life without women, is not worth a shit. I'll get you fixed up with a girl pretty soon."

I was dazzled by him. In college he was a personality, almost a celebrity. His reputation in the math department was as high as his popularity. Walking by his side in the college corridors, I witnessed the on-going, continuous greetings of students and staff. Pretty girls giving him the eye and bright alluring smiles. Outside he was

just another friendly, likeable fellow. He had ordinary friends because, apart from his extraordinary but specific brilliance, he, himself, was ordinary. Not a single intellectual in his crowd of buddies. Not even another mathematician. Well, just me and I was nothing much; just passionate about it. He frequented coffee bars where he met his friends and flirted with the women he knew and the waitresses and was known as the Prof. The first time I went there, after he promised to fix me up with a girl, he pointed at a pretty waitress and asked me what I thought of her. She was pretty and sexy and although probably my age, was very much an adult. I said she was very nice.

“Okay, I’ll fix you up with her. When are you free?”

“Oh Telly, give us a break. Where will I take her? I don’t even have a car,” I protested.

“Don’t worry. She’ll take you! And ask her to give you a blow-job.”

“What’s a blow-job?”

“Never mind,” he answered. “Just tell her.”

I just about managed to postpone the date for another time. I was barely a few weeks in the States and still a little lost, let alone my inexperience in sex and the *savoir-faire* of American dates with accomplished damsels and mysterious blow jobs.

I was starting to understand Telly and meanwhile I got to know Sheri. I mean even Einstein had a soft spot for the opposite sex. I read about it somewhere. It all comes out eventually, usually after one’s death, and one is amazed that the brain of such a genius was also preoccupied with the baser instincts. If you can call sex, base, which obviously you can’t because it is vastly more important than the Theory of Relativity. It is a question of life and death. So is relativity, for that matter, but relativity is the long run. The very, very long run and has to do with light, energy and mass and ultimately, the understanding of the universe. These are the questions that fired my interest in mathematics and physics and caused all those arguments with my father who was more concerned with the here and now. But I am getting off the point.

I don’t know if Telly was a genius. Einstein reputedly was, despite his soft spot and his clowning. We have this picture of him making a funny face with his tongue sticking out and perhaps he preferred comics to politics, so why not Telly? Well, Telly was not of the same caliber but his soft spot was very much softer. And he was easygoing and handsome and charming and girls gravitated to him like flies to honey. He was going steady with Sheri for almost two years and they were planning to get married. Did she suspect his gallivanting? I cannot imagine that she did not. She was a bright, down-to-earth young woman, who besides being very attractive, as I described her above, was firm and bossy in a tender manner and this seemed to suit Telly’s disposition, which was that of a thirty-something year old adolescent. He was conventional enough to want to settle down and raise a family and it seemed to me that Sheri was a good choice. Settle down was perhaps what she hoped would happen to Telly once they were married. And, mathematics notwithstanding, they were compatible in their intellects and interests. Sheri, after high school, was apprenticed as a hairdresser and beautician and no higher ambitions troubled her after that. When she met Telly they locked on each other like a virus on a cell. This is, perhaps, an unfair metaphor because it implies something bad on something good, which is never a clear-cut case with human beings. I just meant to illustrate their cohesiveness.

My freshman year was pleasant enough with hard work, with Telly’s help and his family’s open house where I was always welcome. I spent many weekends there, sleeping on a sofa in the living room, looking at Jack Paar on late night TV and spending the next day with Telly on his rounds of coffee bars and appointments with

friends, many of which were in his mold, progeny of Greek immigrants, unable to articulate a simple phrase in the language of their parents. Sometimes, but not often, for I did not want to become a pest, we went for drives and excursions or visits to other friends with Sheri. And the illicit was not missing, either. On a few occasions, he picked me up from college for a drive with young women I had not seen before. If I happened to ask about them, next day at college, he would claim they were just old friends and would I please keep it to myself.

That first Christmas and New Year I spent with my family in exile. Good thing, too, because the dorms were deserted as my fellow boarders dispersed across the US feasting with their families. Many visits were exchanged between the Greeks to keep traditions alive and reminisce about the old country and many more telephone calls went back and forth with good wishes. A lovely young lady called June Rubinski came to see Telly's parents. She was an old girlfriend of his from way back and was on particularly friendly terms with his parents. I was introduced to her but we hardly exchanged a word. Telly was not at home and she did not stay long. During the introductions, my aunt gushed effusively to me.

"This beauty," she said, "is not only an angel of kindness and good manners; she is an assistant professor of literature at Radcliffe. She came to see me often when Telly was in the army and I prayed and prayed that when he would be demobilized he'd ask her to marry him but my stupid son botched it up."

June smiled.

"Ancient history," she said.

"Isn't she beautiful? Isn't she a Madonna?" my aunt insisted.

"My God, how you embarrass me Maria," June said blushing. "Good bye, Nikos, I have to go. Nikos is for Nicholas, is it not? Such a nice name. Why shorten it?"

I smiled and blushed in turn. I was tongue-tied.

I asked Telly about her.

"Well," he said and then he smiled. "Good looking broad, isn't she?"

"She's not a broad, Telly. She's a very beautiful woman. She's a Madonna."

He laughed.

"Stop parroting my mother. I've had enough of this Madonna business all these years. Well," he started again and then paused.

"Get on with it."

"I met June at a college prom at Radcliffe. We had exactly parallel studies. In different subjects, of course. I was in my last year for my PhD at MIT and June in her last year at Radcliffe."

"You finished at MIT? Wow! Wow!"

"It was close to home."

I laughed.

"How very convenient!"

"We dated after that and fell in love."

"Did you make love to this Madonna?"

"You didn't think we held hands, did you? At twenty six?"

"Oh my God!"

"After the doctorate I was drafted for my military service and they sent me to Alaska. To an interception and decoding station near Prudhoe Bay where you spit and your spittle becomes ice before it reaches the ground. It was so miserable there. So cold you had to be careful, if you stayed out for a while, not to bump your nose on a hard surface because it might break off like an icicle. So maddening to have twenty-

four hours of daylight in summer and of darkness in winter. I stayed there for two years with a week's break at home every six months. The only thing that kept me going was June's letters. Regularly, one a week."

"Did you write as often?"

"I never answered and she kept on writing."

"Oh, how could you?"

"I am not much of a letter writer and, anyway, what was there to write about? The variations in snowfall and temperatures? Or the decoded Soviet messages which were secret and technical?"

"To tell her you love her and miss her."

"She knew that."

"How pedestrian you are. How unromantic. What happened then?"

"It's funny, when I returned to civilian life, after the first few months our love petered out."

"Just like that?"

"Yes. More or less. She was by that time teaching at Radcliffe and I was offered tenure at BU. We saw each other often but the magic was gone. We are still good friends, though."

"Forgive me if I am indiscreet. With Sheri, the magic is still there?"

"Oh Nicky, you'll grow up and understand. At our age priorities are different. We want to settle down and have children. You weigh and balance things differently."

Easter came early in the spring that year yet the weather had already warmed considerably from the icy winter months. The Greek community started organizing the traditional feast which gave it cohesion and a sense of identity separate from the other Americans, for although they were proud to be American and were loyal to the country that gave them the opportunity for a better life, they were also proud of their heritage. So after the forty-day fast, which most of them observed, they attended the midnight mass of the Resurrection and then congregated to a hired hall to eat the traditional *maghiritsa*, a thick tasty soup made from the entrails of the slaughtered lambs, whose fate landed them on the skewer before their final resting place in the abdomen of the faithful.

I could not very well refuse to join Telly's family in their religious duties and I was surprised to find out that Telly was at one with them. Not a single doubt in that mathematically programmed and razor-sharp brain of his. Where the intricacies of mathematics stopped, simple-mindedness and the kissing of icons took over. I was disappointed. Mathematicians, physicists, astronomers, anthropologists, I figured, should be in the *avant garde* of, if not atheism, at least, agnosticism. My feelings, bad enough then, seem to get more extreme as time goes by. I cannot bear the ecclesiastical ritual and its chief protagonists, the priests. I was very uncomfortable at the hall because the priest who celebrated mass was circulating in our midst and kept me under close scrutiny. Whenever he saw me drinking a highball he harassed me with cups of coffee and unctuous smiles. A girl about my age, Greek of course, for everyone in that hall was Greek even if one would have never deduced it from the patchy smattering of Greek and the few scratchy Greek records, noticed the persecution and smiled at me. Had I been drinking solely coffee, I would have shied away. As it was, the mixture of coffee and alcohol gave me the guts to go up to her.

"May I sit next to you?" I asked.

She smiled and pointed to the empty chair beside her.

"For a little peace and quiet," I added.

"Well you *have* been drinking too much," she said inferring my exasperation.

“Am I not allowed?”

“He was being thoughtful.”

“And terribly annoying.”

“But compassionately Christian.”

“Balls. He was pushy and intrusive but I didn’t want to be offensive to a silly priest just after the Resurrection of our Lord.”

We laughed and looked at each other intently.

“Where have I seen you before?” I asked her.

“In church?”

“No.”

“So you don’t remember?”

“Do you?”

She smiled.

“Of course I do. A few weeks ago at BU. As you were entering Telly’s office I was coming out. You smiled at me and I thought that smile was rather sweet.”

“Of course, forgive me. I do remember, after all. Is that why you were following the progression of highballs down my throat with such diligence?”

“Yes. I was wondering how long it would take you to fall flat on your face. The truth is, by the time that first coffee arrived, you were swaying dangerously. I really don’t blame the priest. I had the urge to do the same.”

“Oh what a sweet, caring person you are! Moreover, a BU comrade-in-arms. What is your name?”

“Laura.”

“I’m happy to have met you, Laura. Mine is ...”

“Nicky?”

“Yes. That’s what Telly calls me. Nicholas officially, Nikos for short. Should I be flattered that you have been making discreet inquiries about my name?”

“I don’t see the point of your question. I think you already are.”

“My, my, that’s an evasive answer. Let me rephrase the question. Do we have the highballs and the priest to thank for our meeting or would you have made a move to get to know me?”

“I had an eye on you and a wait-and-see policy.”

“I don’t blame you. You had to find out if I would end up flat on my face.”

She laughed.

“I hoped you wouldn’t. I did want to meet you.”

“You are very sweet.”

“But you are not. You never even noticed me.”

“You know, Laura, I am new here and a little lost. So many new faces! They are just a blur to me. When I saw you I came right up, didn’t I?”

“Okay. You’re tentatively forgiven.”

“Not permanently?”

“No. That will have to wait.”

I smiled.

“This means we shall have to see each other again. You are very cunning.”

“And I must say, you are quite perceptive.”

That was not the end of our conversation. It was the beginning. We talked in a flirty, humorous vein for the next two hours until the eating and drinking ended, with bloated bellies and heavy eyelids round about three past midnight. I called Laura next day and nearly every day after that and we started going out for dates in restaurants and movies and drives in her car to exercise her deficient American-accented Greek

and we kissed to perfect my deficient lip-touching technique on her lips and other parts of her soft, inviting body in deserted spots that a cunning girl would know . . . and . . . oh, I close for a moment my eyes, in the subdued din of the jet engines and the discomfort of my laid-back economy seat, to recall her face, her body, her voice, her intelligence and her wild, lascivious streak.

Laura was no beauty. She had a pretty face with large black, intelligent eyes, raven black, shoulder length hair, a milk-white complexion and the best part of her, a lovely, sweet, absolutely delightful smile. She was of normal height; well, perhaps slightly short for standard, well-fed American youth, and on the plump side but pleasantly so rather than unpleasantly. It was a good body, in the main, with full breasts and shapely legs that filled their jeans. That day, in the post Resurrection break-fasting binge, she was dressed formally and a little ludicrously in a black taffeta dress with pleats and frills and a décolletage of Chantilly lace coming right up to her neck and chin. Her plump arms, bare and white were begging to be pinched. Beneath, she wore a black, gossamer body stocking and black pumps. I am sure she felt uncomfortable in her mother's authoritarian but hardly authoritative taste. That, as I said, was the beginning. Her simplified, everyday clothing was tasteful and attractive and the only recommendation I ever made was that she should lose two or three kilos.

"How much is that in pounds?"

"I don't think in pounds," I told her, "I only know kilos."

"And you call yourself a mathematician?"

Laura was a sophomore majoring in Sociology. When I asked her why she had chosen such a dull subject she answered that, perhaps, it was because she was a dullard. It was the kind of reply she would give to silly questions. There was no doubt that Laura was confident of her brains and had the grades to prove it. The only difficulty she encountered in her curriculum was in statistical theory, a branch of mathematics, indispensable in the study of trends and populations, and it was this which led her to Telly, a family friend, and inadvertently to the first smile we exchanged. Her father, a first-generation Greek-American went to his native village in the old country, when it was time to get married, and returned with a wife much in the manner of Telly's parents but with the advantage that the future spouses had, at least, a look at each other. So it was from her mother that Laura acquired the modicum of Greek that often brought a smile of amusement to my face and a look of annoyance on hers. For like most American girls, the tendency to be bossy was in the culture and there was always this gentle assertion, the wish to have the last word, to have her way, not to be ridiculed.

"If I don't make mistakes, how will I ever learn?" she would say peevishly.

"And if you laugh at me how do you expect me to make the effort?"

I would hug her and kiss her and try to choke my laughter.

"No offense meant, my love, I swear it. Can I help it if it's funny?"

Her father was a plumbing contractor and had about ten people working for him, which meant he made a lot of money. That, at least, is the plumbers' income reputation in the US and it must have been true because Laura did not live at home. She shared a comfortable flat in a downtown apartment building with another girl student and drove her own car. And, of course, she must have had a mind of her own to have split away from a conservative Greek family.

Our romance progressed in a calm, pleasant, compatible manner considering we both had to work on our respective fields of study and though we saw and smiled and kissed fleetingly each other, at college, daily, and talked on the phone at night, we met mainly on the weekends. The cozy dinners were fine, the movies, the whispering

in the dark, the furtive kisses and holding hands were very nice but the long drives in out of the way, deserted spots were the best. For a new horizon was opening up for the little bumpkin from Cairo: the panorama, heady and thrilling, of sex. Little by little, the bright, sexy sophomore was teaching her lackluster but avid freshman the elements of physical engagement. All the way from heart-thumping touching of lips to heart-thumping tangling of tongues to heart-thumping touching of body parts, remote and intimate. Teaching intelligently, guessing my inexperience, leading me on as if I was the initiator and she the seduced, reluctant but giving in, hinting the next step, telling me no and acquiescing until I, the little bumpkin, finally understood that she was no virgin. That things were different in the States, that there was more to come. And one day, after a few drinks at a bar, she said her flat-mate was away and she had a hunch I would prefer an empty flat to the back seat of her car and we laughed and went up and kissed and sick with love and passion, undressed and made love. Oh, the magic of that day, I shall never forget. Again and again we coupled and fought and she could not get enough of it and neither could I until I felt my soul about to break out of my throat. When we kissed goodnight, she called me, my darling. It was the first time.

I still saw Telly at BU on most weekdays but ever since I met Laura my weekends were solely for her. He made little jokes about how I finally found my way and had no more use for him and, How was I getting on? Did I hit home base? Was Laura as hot a little number as she seemed? I was never very comfortable recounting my private affairs and just laughed it off pretending I was a little thick and did not quite get what he meant. A few weeks later he told me he would pass by me, Saturday morning, as he wanted to show me something and at around eleven that day he picked me up from the boarding house and we set off for the mystery show. Sheri was in the car and was sweet and jolly and soon we stopped outside a house in a pleasant neighborhood not far from his parents' home.

"Get out, get out," he urged. "How d'you like it?" he asked.

I looked around, perplexed.

"The house, man, the house," he said.

It was a single-family, two storey, wooden-frame; a typically New England, middle-class home with a garage. It was nice, nothing special and I figured he either was about to rent it or buy it, so I said, "It's very, very nice. Why d'you ask?"

"We bought it," he said. "We signed the contract a few days ago."

Sheri was smiling happily.

"That's wonderful. My heartiest congratulations," I gushed. I was, indeed, happy for them.

We went inside and I was shown around. The entrance was on the side and up a few steps one entered a small hallway with a staircase to the second floor and a little further in and to the right, a large living room. To the left was a bedroom and a bathroom and further inside a spacious kitchen and dining room all in one. On the second floor, three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a sitting room just as you stepped off the staircase. There was a cellar, of course, with the boiler and heating installation. It really was very comfortable if a little too large for two people. But then, families grow. I kept up comments of approval all through the display making both Sheri and Telly very happy. Afterwards Telly drove us out of the city for lunch and made a proposition. He said he had taken out a sizeable loan for this purchase and asked me if I wanted to go and live with them instead of the boarding house. It would be, he believed, good for all of us and the rent and board I would be paying them would help them out financially. I said it was a wonderful idea but when would that be?

“At the start of your sophomore year in October,” he said. “By the way,” he added, “we are getting married next July.”

“Oh Telly,” I cried, “I shall be in Cairo in July. Can’t you set the date a month or so later?”

“It’s out of my hands,” he said. “This little trollop, next to me, is three months pregnant and if we postpone the wedding even for another month, her belly will be a little too conspicuous.”

I jumped up and kissed Sheri.

“Congratulations, my dear,” I told her. “We shall make a happy family. And you, too, daddy, for doing your bit. Wasn’t too painful, was it?”

The following Saturday Telly invited me to join them for a day by the seaside. It was early May and he said after that I should be concentrating on my work, as the end of year tests were coming up in the first week of June. I said I had to see Laura and he told me I could ask her to join us. He had a bungalow by the sea about an hour’s drive from Boston and the weather was sunny and relatively warm before the summer rains and humidity. We started off at nine and by ten or so we were in our bathing costumes stretched out in the sun on easy chairs. Sheri looked smashing in a red bathing costume. Lovely breasts, lovely legs, a lovely behind; she was a superb mature woman. My little Laura slightly overweight in a two piece bikini could not compare and I went and caressed her hair and kissed her and told her she was very sexy. Telly, massive and muscular, went for a dip but after testing the freezing north Atlantic with his toes decided it was still too early in the season. Sheri took out a book and started reading.

“Oh God, those fuck books again,” sighed Telly. “Who wants a game of backgammon with me? Nicky?”

“No thanks,” I said. “I hate the game. So damned boring. I cannot imagine assistant professor Aristotelis, a fine mathematician, stooping to such a game.”

“Shucks,” said Telly. “Come on Laura; don’t let them intimidate you with their superior airs. Let’s have a game. I feel like a winner today.”

One would have thought they were in the village coffeehouse back in the old country the way they played. Loudly, slapping down the playing chips, exhorting the dice to come up with the right numbers, laughing wildly, teasing and threatening each other with devastation. I suppose that’s half the fun of the game. They played for a good two hours while Sheri was reading and I was rotating like a lamb on the spit, in the sun, to acquire a tan. After the game ended, Telly brought out sandwiches and beer and we had a snack while Laura and Telly argued about who played best, who had the better luck and who won. A difficult and, finally, unresolved question. After lunch Telly asked us to go for a walk along the beach. Sheri said she was sleepy and Laura got up to join Telly. I felt I had to stay behind to keep Sheri company. They returned two hours later and we left soon after because it was already four and it was turning chilly. It was a quiet drive back and I was not sure if there was tension between Telly and Sheri for his almost exclusive attention to Laura. At her flat Laura asked me up for a coffee and, as her flat-mate happened not to be there, we made love as passionately as usual and my own slight uneasiness about the time she spent with Telly was dispelled.

In June, both Laura and I were busy with our exams and did not see each other as often as we would have liked. The recompense was, if not excellent, at least satisfactory grades. Satisfactory for me, that is; less so for Laura who was a near straight-A student. But romance, lovemaking and a lecherous boyfriend took its toll. Meanwhile, Sheri quit her job as a beautician in a high-class salon and started running

around to repair, paint and furnish their flat. Now and then with Telly we visited the construction site, as we jokingly called it, to see its progress and from the initial utter shambles, when most of it was torn apart, it started shaping up. I left for Cairo by mid-June before it was finished and approximately a month later the wedding took place.

Well, in Cairo it was family time and seeing school friends and then on to Alexandria to our summer cottage in Sidi Bishr and the simple pleasures of the beaches with the warm Mediterranean waters and the carefree relaxation of an easy, well-serviced, privileged vacation. As soon as I arrived in Cairo I wrote a letter to Laura with my news and the dull ache of not having her near me. She did not answer the letter nor acknowledged the three or four post cards I sent her during my three month stay in Egypt. I assumed she, too, had gone away on holiday and did not receive my letter and cards.

On my return to Boston in the middle of September, I went by taxi straight to the newlyweds' flat and there I was installed very comfortably in an upstairs bedroom, for peace and quiet, far away from the living room on the ground floor where their friends were liable to congregate. A desk and a small bookshelf had been put in for my studies. Sheri and Telly seemed very happy to have me. After their wedding, the pictures of which were strewn all over the downstairs living room, they had been for a week's honeymoon to Hawaii, which they seemed not to have enjoyed due to Sheri's condition and her tendency to tire easily. She was now nearing her eighth month and her belly was huge. But she was blooming. More beautiful than I had ever seen her. She had put on a little weight and there was a new freshness and luminosity on her face and her breasts were noticeably heavier.

Of course I called Laura immediately, as soon as I arrived. Her sharp gasp at hearing my voice alerted me that something was wrong. It was not one of happiness. I told her I had just come in and how was she faring and did she receive my letter and cards. She welcomed me and said she received my letters but did not answer because she was embarrassed. She did not know how to tell me.

"Tell me what, for heaven's sake?"

"To tell you that I met and fell in love with another man."

I was silent, shocked, dazed. I could not utter a word.

"I am sorry, Nicky," she finally said, breaking the silence, and still I could not speak. "I am sorry," she repeated and put the receiver down.

I went to my room, unpacked a few things, searched for my pajamas and told Telly and Sheri I suddenly felt tired and would go to sleep though it was still early afternoon. The next day I unpacked, went to my aunt's house to tell them hello and bring home a suitcase with some belongings and books I left there for storage in their basement and my aunt drove me back home. Later Sheri asked me what was wrong.

"Nothing," I replied.

"It's Laura, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes. She's got a new boyfriend."

I was sitting down and she came and caressed my hair.

"It will pass," she said.

In the two weeks before college started, Telly helped me get an American driver's license and buy a cheap second-hand car, for BU was now quite a way off. I was very pleased with my car and went for long drives and got familiar with Boston and its suburbs but mostly I stayed at home helping Sheri with the housework and errands as Telly was all day at college for meetings and discussions of curriculums and timetables and sometimes came in quite late at night. Sheri kept telling me how

lucky she was to have me living with them though in the evenings when she watched TV I was mostly in my room reading a book but she reassured me that just knowing I was there was a comfort. I felt very lucky, too, and not for a moment did I miss the hullabaloo of the boarding house. The pain of Laura's bolting gradually faded but a tenuous shadow never completely left me. When I saw her now and then in college, by chance, my stomach tightened and my breath shortened. I tried to convince myself that she was nothing much, in fact quite ordinary-looking but a person is more than a piece of flesh. Her personality, intelligence, audacity and impassioned femininity had touched a cord in my soul and the sight of her set it vibrating anew. So like a scared rabbit, whenever I spotted her, I retreated and avoided an encounter.

A month and a half after my arrival Sheri gave birth to Sam. We called her Sam right off as if the name, Samantha, was a tongue-twister. She was a pretty, blond little thing; a little Sheri being born again. Bossy, loud and demanding, driving us crazy with bad habits acquired in her mother's comfortable womb. Sleeping all day and yelling all night, keeping us up, harassed and haggard. She bit the nipples of her mother's lovely breasts until they bled and we started feeding her baby milk formula which meant extra work, day and night. Telly moved to the bedroom downstairs and beat me to it just as I was thinking of making the move. But it's true, forty is the magic number of days after which a sense of normality enters this new miracle of life and perhaps a realization of daylight and darkness infiltrates its consciousness. We started sleeping normally again and counting our blessings which were somewhat obscure formerly. The funny thing was that I was more a father to Sam than Telly. I held her to calm her down and gurgled, baby-talked and petted her whereas Telly was strangely aloof. Was he disappointed she was not a son and was this another recalcitrant Greek gene that held strong in his Americanized soul? In any case, he did not make a move to return to his bedroom.

Sometime after the Christmas holidays, well into the New Year, Laura phoned home and Sheri answered. She called me and covered the speaker with her hand.

"It's Laura," she said. "Don't get started with her again."

I smiled. I had more or less recovered from my love-lorn gloominess and I wondered if it would be possible for me to start again with her, assuming that was what the call was all about. Laura was friendly, and in a matter-of-fact tone asked if she could see me.

"Of course," I said, and we made an appointment at a bar near her flat at eight the next day.

"What did she want?" Sheri asked.

"No idea," I said.

"Okay, just be careful," was her gratuitous advice.

We met outside the bar just as it was opening at eight. She smiled when she saw me. She looked well. Neat, in trousers and coat, well-combed but not made up. She was not out to seduce me. We kissed on the cheeks and then she hugged me tightly for a moment. That hug gave me a pang of pain. Well, things had changed but the slate could never be wiped clean. Not in so short a time. We entered and sat at a table and I got up and bought two whiskies at the bar, brought them to our table and sat down. We looked at each other and smiled.

"I spied you at college once or twice but you scuttled away obviously not wanting to meet me. Why?" she asked. "I thought you must be furious with me."

"Oh Laura, let's not go over something that's finished. No sense opening up a wound that has healed."

She held my hand and said, Okay. We talked about college, our subjects and curriculums and she asked me if I liked it at Telly's place. I did not ask too many questions and was careful how I phrased them in case she imagined I was trying to find out about her affair. Curious or not, I could never stoop to that. I got up for another shot of whiskies and when I sat down I asked her why she had asked to see me.

"I have a problem," she said, "and, under the circumstances, I don't know if you would be willing to help."

"I'd be willing under any circumstances," I replied.

She smiled.

"I did not doubt it but I had to ask. Nicky, I am pregnant and must have an abortion, the sooner the better. After I missed my second period, I went to a gynecologist and a urine analysis confirmed it. The trouble is, abortions are against the law and the doctor refused to have anything to do with it."

I was shocked momentarily but tried to keep things matter-of-fact and I asked her some questions whose answers I figured I already knew.

"Why won't your boyfriend help you?" I asked.

"He's married and he's well-known and he's afraid exposure will cost him his post. He told me to find a friend to help me."

"Are you still with him?"

"No we broke up last week."

"Promise me you'll never see him again."

"I won't," she said and smiled. "But you said you'd help under any circumstances."

"I shall. But I'd feel better knowing this affair was finished. This man went after you when his steady girl, his future wife, was pregnant. He kept on seeing you all through the very first months of his marriage and continued seeing you when his first child was born. And now he dropped you for fear he might be found out."

"Oh Nicky, it was not entirely his fault. I went along willingly."

"Why Laura?"

"Because he's charming and gay and sexy with his devil-may-care attitude. Half the college girls are after him."

"Didn't you think of his wife?"

"Women are quite ruthless where love and sex and power are concerned. Or didn't you know?"

"I'm finding out."

"But how did you guess it was him?"

"For the single and simple reason that when I returned to Boston and you gave me the brush-off, Telly clammed up. Whereas previously he kept talking about women and even asking how we two got along, after that phone-call and despite the fact that my depression was obvious, he never expressed the slightest concern, never made the slightest comment. He did not utter a single friendly word of allegiance or understanding. He simply did not want to talk about it. He knew it was a disloyal act. If he pretended to be concerned and supportive, once it was out in the open, as it was bound to be sooner or later, he would have been exposed as doubly deceitful, disgustingly hypocritical."

"Yes. This attitude was another wound of sorts. Bad for you, worse for me, I suppose."

"You are pretty callous about Sheri."

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her."

“What makes you think she doesn’t know? Doesn’t suspect?”

“I don’t know. Oh dear, life is so difficult. Do you think you can help me with my problem?”

“I shall do my best, Laura. I’ll make discreet inquiries and I’ll be in touch.”

At home, first thing, Sheri asked me,

“What did that little tramp want?”

“She’s not a little tramp, Sheri. She’s a bright, intelligent girl. And nice, too, if you can believe it. She had trouble with a paper she was writing and wanted to know how to analyze and organize some statistical data.”

“Why doesn’t she ask her boyfriend?”

I laughed nonchalantly and went to her and kissed her.

“How’s Sam?” I asked. “Is she awake? Can I go play with her?”

“No. Leave her alone now that she’s quiet. You’re spoiling her much too much and she’s turning into a shrew.”

There was a Latino from Argentina I had become friendly with in the boarding house during my freshman year. I came across him now and then in the college corridors and lately I often saw him studying in one of the libraries. He was a very good looking young man and he had the dark-haired Latin sweetness that most Anglo-Americans lacked. He was a heartthrob, a veritable heir of Casanova with, apparently, no end of passionate affairs and many a time I wondered how he managed to keep up with his college studies. I was sure he would know the ins and outs of illegal abortionists. I looked him up the day following my meeting with Laura and sure enough he not only was a mine of information, he accompanied me the same evening to a private clinic where I met the doctor, a legitimate MD, and made arrangements for Laura.

Two days later we skipped classes and by nine in the morning entered the clinic. An hour and five-hundred dollars later it was all over but we remained at the clinic till one to be sure there was no hemorrhaging. I then drove a shuffling Laura to her flat, put her to bed and kept her company till four and then rushed home so that Sheri would not miss me and start asking awkward questions. The next day after classes I visited her again. She was much better. On the third, she began attending college.

The situation at home was becoming impossible. Telly and Sheri had practically stopped communicating. There were no quarrels, no hard words, no arguments, just complete silence between them. With me, Telly, tried to keep up a semblance of normality and familiarity, asking me matter of factly, “How’s it going Nicky?” to which I answered, “Fine, Telly, fine,” and gave him bits and pieces of college news and my progress in our abstruse discipline. He had almost stopped coming upstairs. Well, he did to get clothes from his drawers, to have a cursory look at Sam and sometimes to silently watch a little TV, in the upstairs living room, with Sheri. I did not understand how this situation had built up. It was not in my character to pry and ask Sheri for explanations. I got on with my studies and hoped for the best.

In our conversations during my two days with Laura, she hinted that Telly had parallel dalliances even while he was with her but again I was torn between wanting the details and the need to remain aloof and above Telly’s squalid behavior. I was still too young and idealistic to condone or show forbearance for it. As for Sheri, I kept wondering what was going on in her mind. All day she was busy with the housework. Cleaning feverishly, almost neurotically the house, taking care of Sam, bathing her, changing diapers and feeding her and, then, in the early afternoon, cooking our evening meal.

Telly usually came in just in time for that. Sitting in our spacious kitchen, he would open the TV set and we would wait for Sheri. She did not keep us waiting. She would come in without a word and serve us before serving herself. As soon as his plate was in front of him, Telly would go at it with gusto. I pretended something absorbed me on TV and waited until Sheri sat down and started eating as well. I might think of something to say to Telly and a few words would be exchanged otherwise three pairs of eyes were glued on the screen. Usually Telly would get up for a second helping and when we all finished, Sheri collected the plates, brought whatever was for dessert and switched on the coffee percolator. The coffee, that indispensable final item of the middle-class American dinner, would be consumed on the double after which Telly retired to the downstairs living room to the other TV set that was there. Sheri collected the remains to dump into the garbage bin and put the plates in the washing machine and whenever I asked to help, she would answer, "No, you go up and study."

I recollect this impossible situation as we are flying. The memory of that second year of my studies, which had its good as well as its bad bits and certainly its strange ones, seems more and more dreamlike. Almost impossible to believe. For it went on and on this amazing sulking on both sides and the obstinate refusal to communicate. And I can only surmise at the dynamics. Sheri must have been aware of relationships I did not know and Telly's detachment must have meant that Sheri's suspicions were true. That he was on an extended tour of extra-marital amorous distraction. It was compounded, also, probably, for Sheri, by a post-natal depression, a medically acknowledged psychological condition, and a post-natal suffocation at home for him, a very particular, still unverified hypothesis. A consequence of this was that I grew ever closer to Sheri. Or rather, that she was drawn ever closer to me. She started hugging me, kissing me, telling me, What would I have done without you? Stuck with Sam and stuck with Telly. I would have gone mad.

This increasing familiarity was slightly unnerving. It put ideas into my head that I did not relish. It excited me and frightened me. There was trouble enough in this household and I did not want it to disintegrate completely. Not because of me, in any case. But it did not seem to trouble Sheri. Many a time I surprised her in her underwear or, perhaps I should say, I was surprised by her in her underwear and she made no move to cover herself up. She talked to me quite at ease in her scanty attire even when Telly was downstairs. After Laura I did not have any romantic attachments and this was something that weighed on my mind. Much as I needed a woman, I did not manage to strike a convenient friendship with a girl in college to ease my sexual needs. It was not only that I was reserved, not only that I was studying conscientiously but I seemed to be under surveillance from Sheri. She kept a keen lookout on my comings and goings. Perhaps she was worried I would restart my affair with Laura and seemed absurdly possessive. So seeing Sheri in bra and panties with that almost perfect body even after childbirth troubled me and definitely immunized me against Laura.

I kept on coming across Laura in the corridors of BU. I no longer hurried away. I was happy to see her and she was so terribly sweet and grateful. She knew she had a friend but not any more a potential lover because to her insinuating overtures I gently and mysteriously hinted that I was otherwise engaged, which, of course, was not true. After overcoming the dread of seeing her, after helping her out, somehow I did not feel I could give myself to her in the wholehearted and unreserved way I had done. It was a chapter of my life that had definitely closed.

In March, Telly went to a Mathematicians' conference in Miami, Florida. When I came in from college in the afternoon on the day he left, Sheri sent me for some shopping at the supermarket and then, after playing with little Sam for a while, after a coffee to perk me up, I went to my room to study. I came out for dinner, my mind befuddled with formulas of functions and distributions. Sheri had the table set and was in a cheerful mood. Without Telly's silent, oppressive presence and with the TV off, we chatted and laughed for a change.

During coffee, she said, "Sonofabitch."

I said, "What?"

"I wonder who he's lined up for this trip."

I laughed.

"You don't have to be so pessimistic."

"Pessimistic? Ha! I don't give a damn. I just don't know how this whole story will end."

"It will blow over," I said.

"More likely it will blow *us* over," she said laughing.

"Cheer up, kiddo," I told her. "Time for Sam's feeding-bottle and I'll go and study a bit more."

I went to my room and really went at it. I heard Sheri turn the TV on in the living room just outside. She kept the sound low not to disturb me. By about eleven, I was pooped. I put on my pajamas, opened the door and said,

"I think I'll go to sleep, Sheri. Good night."

"There's a lovely, romantic film on, Nicky, come and watch it."

"I think I'd rather sleep, Sheri."

"Oh, come on, silly. Keep me company."

I sat next to her on the couch. She ruffled my hair and said, "Thanks." She, too, had her nightgown on, a brief, semi-transparent affair that left a superb pair of legs a prey to my predatory glances. As I sat down she snuggled up to me. Took my reluctant arm and folded it around her neck, looked at me and smiled.

"That's better," she said.

We were very comfortable and silent as we watched the film. The commercials came on and we didn't move. We watched the sales pitch for corn flakes and yogurt with fruit slices, air conditioners and deodorants and then the film started again. It was an oldie and the voices and the manner of talking was different from ours, faster more staccato. Then, it was bound to come, the kiss. Sheri turned her face and looked at me smiling. It was an invitation which I could neither refuse nor accept, so I kissed her on the forehead. We watched again silently, warmly, comfortably, until the next kiss. She turned her face, again, and smiled. I kissed her on the forehead and she gave me a light kiss on my lips. For the third kiss on the screen, Sheri's kiss lingered on my lips a while longer. I caressed her face and arm.

"You're a swell kid," she said, "and sexy. I like you close to me."

And back to watching. The fourth kiss on the screen took some time coming and I smiled because I suddenly felt impatient. She saw the smile.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"They're taking an awful long time to kiss again," I explained.

She did not miss the insinuation and laughed.

"Never mind, you see the complications they're going through," she said.

"Almost as bad as ours. But, not to worry, it will all end well with a long passionate kiss."

By and by, the fourth kiss came along and so did Sheri's smile, my kiss on her forehead and her kiss on my lips, now firm and insistent, her eyes wide open looking at me, telling me, get on with it, baby. Then Sam started crying.

"Damn," said Sheri, and got up to go to the bedroom. "Wait for me," she said, "don't leave."

The commercials came on and I watched them while she cooed in the bedroom trying to get Sam to sleep again. Then Sam was finally silent and she came out of the bedroom and I nearly had a fit.

"Did I miss much?" She asked.

"No, just the commercials," I managed to mumble.

My heart was pounding about to break as she came to the couch and sat next to me. She was completely, stunningly, gloriously naked.

"Now you can kiss me all you want on the forehead," she said with a smile and pressed her body on mine.

"Are you really that warm?" I asked to lighten my agony with a jest.

"Burning," she replied.

I kissed her on the mouth tenderly and my tongue inched into her lips. But she pulled back, held my head with both her hands and kissed me on my forehead.

"Revenge is sweet," I said laughing.

I tried kissing her once more and again she pulled back and kissed me on the forehead. I lay back on the couch in a daze looking at her. She was smiling. I caressed her hair and face and then touched her lovely breasts, lightly tracing their contours, feeling their priceless weight.

"You are such a beautiful woman," I said. "Such a beautiful mother, such a beautiful lover. Who would want anything more?"

I squeezed her nipples gently and I heard her suck in her breath. The TV movie was playing and distracting me. I saw the lovers start kissing again. I pointed them out to Sheri and she laughed. I held her head and kissed her on her forehead. It was the spark that exploded the dynamite. She jumped on me and off we went.

When we calmed down I asked her if she felt uneasy.

"What do you mean uneasy?" she asked.

"I mean, guilty, uncomfortable," I explained.

She let out a peal of laughter.

"Are you serious? I feel wonderful. Never felt better in my life. I feel like a woman again. A woman who is desired and gives pleasure. And as you said, revenge is sweet. We gave that sonofabitch some of his own medicine. We owed it to him, you and I. Come; let's go to your room, so as not to disturb Sam.

We made passionate love many times that night on my narrow bed. I was awakened by Sam's wails in the morning and got up with some difficulty. It was time for college but I had not the heart to wake up a gorgeous, naked Sheri, hair splayed on my pillow, breathing with a hint of a snore. I went to Sam and she smiled when she saw me, legs and arms jerking with excitement. I changed her diapers, heated up her milk formula and fed her with the feeding-bottle. Then, I walked her up and down until her eyes closed, pacified by the warm milk in her belly, and put her back in her cot. I had a quick shower and shave and left hurriedly. I had already missed my first class.

When I returned early afternoon, I was greeted by a smiling Sheri and a hug and a kiss on the forehead.

"How was your day?" she asked.

“Hopeless,” I said. “I couldn’t concentrate. I was daydreaming throughout my classes.”

“It was worth it, wasn’t it though?” she said laughing.

Five glorious, mad days we spent like demented children. Kissing, laughing, talking, making love all over the house until Telly arrived and our activities were curtailed though Sheri did slip into my bedroom when continence became unbearable. She knew her rhythms, her infertile periods, her moments of sexual estrus and arranged our jousts accordingly. I never knew in advance of a session, though sometimes an elusive tension, a conspiring look alerted me. On the other hand, my studies regained their previous diligence and, to say the truth, this madness could not have lasted much longer without their considerable deterioration.

A change, though, was taking place subtly but surely in the relationship of the couple. There was an easing of tensions between them. Sheri had no longer the chip on her shoulder. She had taken her revenge, had eased her sexual frustrations and had calmed down. From the first day of his return, a new, friendlier attitude was evident in her behavior. She greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and told him she missed him. At dinner the dour silence melted away and small talk went back and forth with me aiding and abetting the reconciliation. Guilt, of course, despite my very great grievance induced my efforts plus the perception of my own duplicity. I had been a victim of deceit but had become a victimizer and as double-faced as he ever was. Perhaps, moreover, the fact that Telly, at that particular time, had probably run out of paramours, returned from college early, and did not go out at night was a decisive factor. He started going upstairs to watch TV with Sheri instead of watching alone downstairs. Through my closed bedroom door I heard them talk cordially and laugh a lot and though I never stopped getting electrified when Sheri visited me on occasion and I never tried to put a stop to it, after our passions were wordlessly and noiselessly spent I felt positively overwhelmed with remorse and shame. Until Telly moved into his double bed with Sheri and Sam’s cot went into the empty, third room of our second floor lest she blighted the reunion.

The next day, just as I returned from college, Sheri ran up to me happily and kissed me on my forehead.

“That’s the only place you’re allowed to kiss me from now on,” she said laughing. “We made up and made love with Telly and, baby, it was great with you but I cannot have two men at the same time.”

Well, I had expected it to happen but I had not prepared a speech and I was not quite prepared for it either. Still, I said,

“I’m happy for you Sheri and I wish you the best. I’m here today, gone tomorrow. You have Sam and maybe other children will come along and they must have a happy home.”

“Thank you, sweetie-boy,” she said, “Now give us a kiss to show me you are not sore at our break-up.” And I kissed her on the forehead which was henceforth the only place I was allowed to kiss after having the whole of that gorgeous, uninhibited, fiery and feverish body to feast on.

The second semester was coming to a close. Another month or so of classes, then the end-of-year exams before summer vacations. That afternoon and evening I didn’t do a scrap of work. I lay on my bed and sulked and thought and thought. Sulked on my own, that is, because I could not very well do it in front of them. And I hated myself for it because I was weak, selfish and a spoil-sport. I took a fast decision; a spur-of-the-moment resolve. I decided to leave BU and the family while the going was good. I no longer felt comfortable with Telly and I could not predict

which way my rapport with Sheri was heading. Her bossiness without the undercurrent of sex was getting on my nerves. Because of my docility and my affection for Sam, Sheri was piling, on me, more and more responsibilities for her care. She never left her bed at night if Sam cried. I was expected to get up and see what the matter was. I loved little Samantha but I could not get a decent night's sleep. I had become her foster mother.

The next day I went to the Admissions Office of the university. There was a Student Transfer department and I applied for a transfer to the University of Southern California at Los Angeles. There were many far better colleges I could apply to but I chose a middle-of-the-road institution to be sure I would be accepted with my grades. And sure enough, on the strength of my standing I was admitted, a month later, in that college for the third-year BSc Mathematics. I broke the news that same evening to the couple at dinner. Sheri almost cried and Telly was taken aback but he smiled and said, "I don't blame you Nicky; the atmosphere here was not exactly congenial. And the broads in California are of another class."

Sheri was annoyed and told him to cut out the crap.

"Why are you leaving us, Nicky?" she asked.

"Oh Sheri, please don't be upset. I just hate this Boston weather and I'm dying to see California." I smiled at her. "And the classy broads, as well."

Exams over, I left for Cairo and three months later returned to Boston for a week. I stayed those few days at Telly's, for I did consider it my home, nevertheless. Sam was nearly a year old and was crawling around incessantly, driving Sheri to distraction; standing wherever she found support and putting every single item she could hold in her mouth. She was a lovely blond child with Sheri's blue eyes and I was thrilled with every one of her mischievous smiles at me. I don't know if she remembered her foster mother but we certainly did become friends awfully fast. Sheri was pregnant once again and kept on wondering how she would manage without me. Oh, well, she would have to cope because a few days later I packed my car with my belongings and despite Telly's warning that it was touch and go if I would ever reach Los Angeles with it, I left after an emotional farewell.

The plane was approaching Logan, Boston's airport. I had not slept a wink in the eight-hour flight. My memory was chug-chugging overtime, ferreting minutiae that were long buried under other minutiae of more recent origin: less than twenty years old. The debris of life, some precious and nostalgic, others better left buried and forgotten. I was both excited and apprehensive as the plane touched down. I had become something of a philosopher through my writing. Writing stories and novels forces one to probe the perplexities and paradoxes of life; the complexities of human character and the dynamics of the subconscious urges and impulses. Mainly of one's own life, I must add, because much of what appears on paper is born of one's personal experiences. I knew good times can rarely be recreated; the electrified ambiance, the magic of twenty years ago. It is futile to try. And as usual, too late, one questions the wisdom of seeking the past. But here I was, in any case, striding, early June afternoon, butterflies in my stomach, through a renovated, unremembered Logan, to a phone booth. To hear Sheri's unchanged voice, rise in pitch and thrill, as she recognized mine, asking me why I didn't let her know I was coming, telling me to stay put so she could come and pick me up.

"Hell, I'll take a taxi. I'll be there in half an hour," I told her.

I peered out of the window of the big American taxi driven by a swarthy Persian with barely serviceable English, who had to ask directions in his own language from his car phone. Outside, Boston, much the same, a pleasant, clean city,

the shops well-decorated and luxurious, the man-in-the-street better dressed than in my days, the aura definitely smarter and wealthier despite the proliferating smaller European and Japanese cars. Our suburb, our neighborhood, recognizable, with a few new shops and supermarkets but close enough to its old appearance to bring a pang to my heart. I hoped, with mounting excitement, the same would hold with Sheri. That, within the rationale of time, the ferocity of her passion would not have paled and the firmness of her flesh would not have slackened. The rationale of time! It does take its toll! I, myself, was hardly the super-kid that for a short spell held her marriage together by countering one adultery with another, providing a safety-valve to stave off the disintegration. And now I needed her. Perhaps, that's why I came. My life had been too flat, too long, and her memory fired me because those five days of Telly's absence, those utterly mad five days, were still-glowing embers that would not wane in my psyche with the passage of time.

I rang the bell and fell into the arms and shrieks and delighted laughter of a whirlwind before I quite looked at its face. It had blond hair, a flash of blue eyes and smiling, shiny, lipsticked lips. I held a body slightly thicker than memory allowed and kissed a neck and a familiar perfume and told her,

"Let me look at you, for heaven's sake!"

She laughed.

"Let me look at you, too!"

We brought my bag inside and kissed again and hugged each other tightly for a long time and she pulled me by the hand to the upstairs living room. The furniture had changed just as we had but it was smarter whilst we were older. We sat down, held hands, smiled. I was happy, my hopes were not betrayed. Perhaps, hers weren't either. Well, twenty years had gone by. Twenty not always happy years for me and I was sure not for her either. But we had survived in passable shape. Her forehead, which I kissed, way back, a proxy to her mouth, was lightly lined, her jowls a little chubbier. Her eyes had crow's feet but, just then, were shining, alive with that fabulous blue and a happiness that stirred me. We looked at each other, smiling, silent for a while. How does one start a conversation after twenty years? Twenty years of silence? Well, slightly disjointedly, but we tried.

"How was your trip, Nicky? How's Annie?"

"And you Sheri, you look wonderful. How are your kids, Sam, especially? God, what wouldn't I give to see her?"

"Here, let me show you some pictures."

She got up to fetch an album. She looked fine. I smiled. She had just that little extra flesh to take up the slack. Like me, despite the swimming and the jogging to hold on to my youth. At some point it becomes an obsession. I wonder if she has it. Likely, she goes to a gym. She came back.

"You're in pretty good shape Sheri."

"Well, I've lost some weight with Telly's passing away and I go to a gym three times a week. Here, this is Sam, last summer at the beach house."

"My God! Isn't she beautiful? Simply gorgeous. That's how you must have looked at twenty."

"I was prettier, kiddo. She's got her father's nose."

"No, no, she's just wonderful. I'm a really proud foster mother. And this must be Nicholas. I couldn't mistake him. Another Telly. Well, with a little added beauty from you. Wonderful kids, Sheri. Just wonderful."

"Oh Nicky, why did you have to come so unexpectedly? I'm so upset. You should have warned me."

“Am I intruding on someone?”

“No, silly. Not yet.” She smiled. “It’s just that Sam has met someone in L.A. and the affair is turning serious. The boy is from a wealthy family, just finishing an MBA and they want to get married.”

“Wonderful. I don’t blame the guy. He wants to hook her well and good, our little Sam. A little early, these days, for marriage but if the boy is decent, so much the better.”

“Oh, here’s a picture of them, together.”

“Wow! A lovely couple. Good-looking young man.”

“They have been living together for almost a year and I am supposed to go and meet the parents and assist an official engagement. It’s all set up and Nicholas will be there. If I knew you were coming, I would have put it off. But now everything is fixed and I can’t back out. I’m to leave in four days.”

“Oh well, it doesn’t matter. I wouldn’t have been staying much longer, in any case.”

“Why don’t you come along?”

“Oh no. It wouldn’t do. The mother coming with a man!”

“You’re our relative, for heaven’s sake. They wouldn’t know you’re my lover.”

“Is that what I am?”

“The only one I’ve had since I’ve been married. Believe me. I’m that stoopid. Anyway, while you’re here with me, that’s what you are.”

She caressed my face, put the album on the table and moved closer. I held her head and kissed her on her forehead. She laughed.

“That’s finished,” she said and put her lips to mine.

We kissed for a while, slowly, tenderly, tentatively, smiling now and then, wondering when the fire would ignite. Twenty years, is twenty years.

“Let’s have a drink, she said. We need it.”

We got up and went downstairs to the kitchen. Night had fallen. The kitchen, too, had been renovated and looked snazzy. Scientists were trying to renovate us and had come up with blue sex pills which sometimes brought on heart attacks and sometimes vision in blue. I hoped I would not need them. Not that early in my life. Sheri was Okay. Fantastic for her age. I was out of practice but it would all come back. She brought out a bottle of whisky, two glasses and soda, put them on a tray and we returned upstairs. I lugged my bag and left it by the side.

“Let’s get comfortable,” Sheri suggested. “Have a shower if you want to.”

I opened my bag in my old room, now young Nicky’s, pulled out my pajamas, entered the bathroom, had a shower and put them on. Sheri put on, my God, was it the same nightie? She looked good, her legs still lovely.

She smiled.

“Like old times,” she said.

We sat close together. She poured the drinks.

“To our health,” I said.

“And to our sex,” she answered.

We started drinking, talking, drifting into memories and the stories of our lives. Stories that left us with psychic scars and flaccid flesh. Our fortunes and misfortunes, joys and sorrows; drawing comfort from our proximity, our touching, our warmth, mental and physical, our chaste, compassionate caresses, our sips of drink. My life after California: Egypt, an unhappy, ill-matched marriage, business failure, divorce, my ex-wife’s remarriage, my move to Greece with Annie and a new,

moderately successful career as a novelist. Sheri's drudgery as a housewife for years and years until Nicholas finally went to nursery school and she returned to her old profession to breathe again the air of the city and feel useful. Telly's persistent womanizing; her only comfort being the kids, then, their departure to the West coast for college studies and, finally, Telly's sudden death and the emotional emptiness which was even worse than his adulteries.

She started crying.

I said, "Don't, my sweet," and wiped her tears with my hand. I could not offer her happiness. Only momentary compassion. I kissed her mouth and she pulled my head to hers so violently, our teeth collided accidentally. Her tongue eagerly stretched inside my throat and we stopped to smile because we felt the fire coming, the embers flaring up, the old magic creeping in our souls and our limbs.

"Aren't you warm?" I asked.

"Burning," she answered with a laugh and took off her nightdress. She wore nothing underneath and hurriedly helped me remove my pajamas. "Kiss me, baby," she pleaded. I kissed her on the forehead and she laughed again and opened her body to me and I realized I would not need the blue pills for a few years yet.

Our bodies were clammy and our throats parched from the exertion and the alcohol, when we finished. Sheri poured another shot of whisky with soda water and we took in a good gulp.

"That was so nice," she said. "Almostbetter than back then."

"Well," I said, "let's not exaggerate. Better than expected, perhaps. And, in any case, pretty wonderful. I never cease to marvel. To all appearances, Sheri you are a cool Anglo and give no indication of the fire inside you. But boy, you're a volcano! Didn't Telly see that?"

"That's a silly question coming from a man who has been through marriage, Nicky. Marriage kills passion. Our passion was over even before we were married. He was a funny, old-fashioned man, Telly. He wanted children and a family life but also the male privileges of the nineteenth century where women stayed at home and men were allowed to sow their wild oats. On top of everything, he was very attractive, you must admit, and worked in a milieu abounding with nubile young women brought up in the uninhibited sexual ethics of our times. I have nothing against that. The breaking of the sexual taboos is all for the best and when Sam told me she moved in with Greg I was happy for her. The thing is, with this loosening up of morals, marriage and raising a family have become very difficult propositions to balance.

"Men and women are different biologically and psychologically and I am under the impression that there is an evolution going on, a new social contract working itself out with this new freedom, with the woman earning money, with contraception at her fingertips and the soaring divorce rate. We are in the middle of it. Our social scientists are, perhaps, aware of it. Don't you think? I mean, perhaps Telly was a part of it, a pawn of this experiment, this vast evolution. I was too intolerant of his infidelities and made life difficult for him as well as for me. Instead, I should have had some affairs myself; only with childbearing and the confinement of housework I did not have the opportunity. But again, women are different and this might not have been a viable alternative. Sometimes I philosophize and think that marriages should have an expiry date, at the age of say forty-five or fifty or when the children go off to college. An official termination date written in a marriage contract. All this supposedly idealistic concept of love-for-a-lifetime is mush. It never happens. Much less sex-for-a-lifetime. The sooner we accept the fact, the better we shall adapt our lives."

“My, my, you’re quite a philosopher, my little Sheri.”

“Not so little,” she said smiling. “It’s the wisdom of middle-age and an unhappy life. Well, not totally. I must not be a whiner; it’s just that I have tried to rationalize my difficulties. But let’s forget about them. Some are over, some to come. Another whisky? And may I open the TV? I want to see a film cuddled and naked as we are, two babes in paradise for a few hours.”

We sipped our drinks, comfortably embraced on the couch watching the film. We did not last it out because of some kissing on the screen. Well, yes, it had its effect and we moved to her bedroom, her double bed, her soft mattress, and my hardness merged with her softness and the whisky with our passion and the struggle was long-drawn and pretty wonderful because we nearly died and, after, abruptly fell asleep, both of us. That was the only difference between now and then.

When we woke up in the morning, she said,

“It’s Wednesday, oh my God!”

“What’s wrong Sheri?” I asked.

“Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Just three more days. On Saturday I leave. And what’s even worse is that I have to work. I have appointments I cannot cancel.”

“Never mind. Our evenings are ours. And three days is just so we won’t get bored of one another.”

“Bored? Are you kidding? Come here, baby.”

She kissed me passionately. She had it in surfeit, this fire and I was glad I was able to respond. We made love in a hurry. In any case, it ends quicker in the morning and she showered and left me with a kiss and a smile. Unhurriedly, I followed suit, showered and after watching the CNN news, I dressed and went to BU. Telly’s parents, my aunt and her husband, were dead. The husband died a year or two after I left the States and my aunt almost fifteen years later so I had no social calls to make. Of Laura I had absolutely no news.

I loved the college and the youthful energy it exuded. I loved the students and wanted to shout to them: “You are living the best part of your lives. Enjoy your freedom and irresponsibility, but also your studies and your youth.” I walked about but did not meet a single person I recognized. I stayed there all morning, roaming in the libraries and the lecture halls and then, at four, left and walked to the city to meet Sheri for dinner at a restaurant near the salon where she worked. We returned home at about seven in her car. She had asked if I would like to see a movie or a play at the theatre but I told her we only had three nights left and it would be silly to miss all those lovely, whisky-soaked, comfortable chats and TV programs on the living-room couch. Not to mention their intriguing aftermaths. She laughed, in entire, total agreement and when we returned, we showered, freshened up with colognes and perfumes, put on our formal bedroom attire and sat glued to each other on the couch. We talked and drank, laughed and touched, innocently and suggestively, in a soft light that hid our imperfections and our age and, by and by, switched on the TV and waited, enlaced, for a kiss. It was a fun game to build up our tension, our desire, because after a certain stage of maturity, especially for a man, simplicity is dreary and the brain must give a push to a reduced virility. And when a kiss finally came, we were ready; we caught fire.

The next two days were much the same. After a lazy morning start, I walked about the city for hours, nearly wearing out the soles of my shoes. Entered coffee bars for a cappuccino, trying to locate Telly’s favorite haunt and, perhaps, the, by now, middle-aged miss Blow-job. What wouldn’t I give to talk to her. To question her about her life. A life, surely, with enough material for three novels. But I did not find

it. It had probably closed down and another shop acquired the premises. Dinner at a restaurant with Sheri and back to the house for inventive sensual exercises. On Saturday, I drove her to the airport in the morning. I told her I would leave in a couple of days. We embraced emotionally and sadly, but, thankfully, without sentimentality and declarations of love and eternal fidelity. Our relationship, I realized at that moment, was exciting and physical with very definite parameters. We promised to meet again soon. A pledge, vague and hopeful and probably improbable.

I drove back to the house and parked her car in the garage. Upstairs I lazed about, took a shower to wash the early-morning lovemaking odors and watched a little TV. I finally focused on Annie who had been hovering at the edges of my consciousness and called her up on the telephone. Both she and mother were well and expected me back soon. I, idly, picked up a well-worn telephone index catalogue which was lying next to the phone with names written in by Sheri. It was her handwriting all right. That haphazard mix of small and capital letters. I turned to the first page, the letter A. I glanced through it. A name struck me. Ashton June (Rubinski). That must be June, I thought. The Madonna. Probably married to someone called Ashton. How funny.

I went down for a walk and strolled in the neighborhood, window shopping for a gift for Annie and mother. I returned home empty handed. Oh well, on Monday I would go to town to book my seat and would look again for some gifts. I opened the TV but couldn't concentrate. June Rubinski was wedged in my brain. There was just one way to get me cured. I looked up the number and dialed it. If a man answers I'll click off, I thought. A woman's voice answered. I had heard her voice utter a few sentences twenty years ago and yet I was sure I recognized it.

"Is Mr. Ashton there?" I asked.

"Mr. Ashton has left this house for over five years. Who is this speaking?"

"June, is that you?"

"Yes. Who is it?"

"A difficult question, because you almost certainly won't remember me."

"Give it a try."

"We met about twenty years ago..."

She laughed.

"Is that all?" she said.

"Yes and ..."

"You asked for my husband but I wasn't married at the time so what or who is it you want?"

"You are an impatient woman and I am surprised because university instructors usually are not."

"Is this a charade, or what?"

"Almost. For both of us. I asked for your husband to see if you were married. Had he answered I would have clicked off."

"The mystery is thickening," she said. "But you may proceed. I am divorced. I laughed.

"I was one of Telly's students and we were introduced by Maria, his mother, at her house. She said you were like the Madonna. As beautiful and as kind."

"Oh my God. Yes. I remember the occasion and the conversation but I don't remember you at all."

"I remember you, though. One does not easily forget a Madonna."

"Please, don't disparage the mother of Christ."

"Not at all. If she was as beautiful as you."

“Stop blaspheming young Nicholas.”

“You remembered my name!”

“Yes. The charade is yielding results.”

“June, do you think I could invite you for a coffee?”

“When?”

“This afternoon?”

“It’s already afternoon.”

“In an hour or two?”

“What’s the hurry?”

“I haven’t got much time.”

“Why? Are you about to commit suicide?”

I laughed.

“Well you *do* sound desperate,” she said.

“I am. Well, . . . sort of.”

“Okay. How about downtown at the Hyatt. And if that’s too highfalutin for you, there’s a cozy little shop nearby. I don’t remember you, though. What will you be wearing?”

“An anxious expression and wild goggle-eyes. And if you miss me, I won’t miss *you*.”

She laughed.

“Okay, then. Round about seven. We might even complete the charade.”

I put the receiver down and I felt a shudder down my spine. What was the matter with me? Getting involved with older women? Widows and divorcees. And not only that, this excitement mixed with apprehension, what was it supposed to mean? The fact was, that I wanted desperately to see June again not only because of her beauty but because she seemed so far and above Sheri’s and Telly’s league. Telly was a mathematical brain, full stop. June was an intellectual. I imagined. I had no doubt about it.

At a quarter to seven I was already posted at the Hyatt’s main entrance. A little further inside I found an armchair, turned it to face the doorway and sat down. I kept a lookout for beautiful women coming in. They did not tax me because there were not that many. Well dressed and chic, yes, accompanied usually, but none to make my heart skip a beat and my heart was so ready and so edgy. I kept looking at my watch. Seven. Five past. Ten past. A woman with white hair entered. Not the white of old age. More like on the indistinct border of extreme blond and white. June was a brunette, twenty years ago. I was not sure it was her. But she was exquisite and I jumped up. It caught her eye, this abrupt movement, and she came up to me directly, smiled and held out her hand.

“Hello Nicholas,” she said, “nice to see you again.”

“Hello June. How did you know it was me?”

“By the coordinates you gave me. An anxious, goggle-eyed look.”

She laughed.

“But it seems to me, despite your certainty that you would recognize me, you didn’t,” she added.

“Not straightaway. You have changed. The hair. And you are thinner than I remember. But it couldn’t have been anyone else. I had this impulse to get on my knees and pray.”

“Oh please, stop this Madonna business.”

“Yes, no need to harp on the obvious.”

She smiled again with mock irritation.

“Is it all right here, for a coffee?” she asked.

“Yes. For our formal reunion. Later, when we get more familiar we can go for a second coffee in the cozy shop nearby.”

“Have you the time? I thought you were pressed.”

“Oh, plenty of time.”

“All of a sudden?”

“No. I have a few days with plenty of time and then I must leave for good.”

“The charade continues,” she said evenly.

We walked towards the Hyatt coffee shop. I couldn't take my eyes off her and bumped on people and chairs. She had become an ethereal figure. I wondered if she was suffering from some illness. Her thinness and the elegance of her clothes gave her an aura of height though she was normal. Her neck was long and delicate and it was the only part of her that gave some indication of her age. The skin was slightly loose under her chin and along her throat. Her complexion was unlined and unblemished and I wondered again if she had a facelift. Two large, blue, hazel eyes on an oval face with a high forehead. Eyebrows plucked to perfection. A thin perfect nose leading to a serious yet sensual mouth whose smile was sweet, worldly, serious and wise. And a chin completing flawlessly the ovality of the face. Her somewhat off-white, shiny, brilliant hair was less than shoulder length but not short. It undulated perfectly, covering her ears and one side of her face more than the other. It left the forehead exposed and on the right side a wisp nearly reached her eyebrow. On the other, it was swept away as if the wind ruffled it on divine instructions.

We sat down and she looked at me for a moment.

“So, Nicholas,” she said, “what brings us here today?”

“Memories. My memory of you.”

She smiled.

“A mathematician and a dreamer? Is it possible?”

“Mathematics is the past and, of necessity, I dream a lot in my new profession.”

“Which is?”

“A second-rate novelist.”

She laughed delightedly.

“Fantastic!” she said.

“Why?”

“Tell you later. Please, do go on.”

“Go on where?”

“Tell me about yourself. About how a mathematician becomes a writer.”

“It's a long story.”

“I love long stories.”

“Yes, only I don't know the ending.”

She smiled.

“No one ever does.”

“I mean, I don't know if it's going to be a happy ending or an unhappy one.”

“It's all part of the charade. Do go on.”

“Well, you know some of it. Telly was a second cousin, Maria being my father's first. I had this mania for mathematics like some people have for crossword puzzles and I came here, against my father's wishes needless to say, to study under the supervision of our departed genius. I was really dazzled by him. I felt an instant mutual warmth between us from the start and not just because we were cousins. At college he was a star, a personality, and he really was a fine mathematician. I

absolutely hero-worshipped him. I quickly became aware of his womanizing because we often went out together with other women while he was going steady with Sheri. No need to tell you, at the beginning, this imparted added glamour to Telly in my naïve, almost provincial outlook. Meanwhile, during my second semester I met a girl in one of these Greek get-togethers and we had a liaison.”

June smiled.

“Nice word, this *liaison*. A bit vague, though. Was it close?”

“The closest.”

“Sorry, please go on.”

“Then, at the end of the school year, Telly announced his forthcoming, rather hasty marriage to Sheri, due to an unforeseen pregnancy, and proposed that the following semester I should live with them instead of the boarding house and I accepted willingly. When I returned to Boston in the fall, Laura, the girl I was in love with, well, ... almost in love, broke up with me.”

“What do you mean, *almost*? You either were in love or not. Do you write about people being almost in love in your novels? Or are you so clear headed as to be able to delineate exact gradations of feeling.”

“Do you always split hairs Miss Rubinski? Okay, I was in love and I was very miserable when she showed me the door. Anyway, to get on with the story, Sheri gave birth to Sam and everything went awry in the happy family I was hoping to live in. Laura, a few months later, called to say she was pregnant and would I help her with an abortion, which I did, deducing at the same time that the culprit was Telly. Sam, in those early days, drove us literally crazy and drove Telly out of his bedroom and the couple’s relationship went on hold in permanent silence, speechlessness, not a word from either side, forever. Perhaps there were other reasons for this I was unaware of.”

“So how did it end?”

“Well, it blew away eventually.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes.”

She laughed.

“Perhaps you lent a helping hand?”

I looked at her. Did she know?

“Are you friends with Sheri?” I asked.

“Yes. For years we have been going to the same gym together.”

“And are women as bad as men in recounting their intimacies to their friends?”

“I should say, quite a bit worse.”

“Well, I have nothing else to add.”

“You are principled and discreet. I am starting to like you. Please go on.”

“I couldn’t stay in their house any longer. Everything was finished between me and Telly. I made a transfer to a college in L.A. and for the next two years I attended school there. With Sheri we kept up a sporadic correspondence for a few years but then it died away until, miraculously, a letter of hers reached me in Greece, through Cairo, to announce Telly’s death.”

Two cappuccinos came and were slowly consumed. It was time for a move to a cozier place. But I still had to finish my story which seemed to absorb June.

“The two years in California were very pleasant. I had a reasonable time and though I studied conscientiously, I met many girls but was never seriously attached. When I graduated, I considered graduate school but my family wished me to return to

take over my father's import-export business and, perhaps stupidly, decided to be a good son."

"These old-world family ties are sometimes so strong as to be enslaving," said June. "Thankfully, they do not exist in the US any more. Everyone looks selfishly to his own needs and families are conditioned to it. It is the best attitude."

"I returned to Egypt and tried to make a life for myself. It was the start of socialism in that country and besides the nationalizations of large private enterprises, a host of new laws put commerce in the hands of huge government agglomerations. Small operations such as ours were unable to function normally and we acted as consultants to our former business clients and ran around the government bureaucracies trying to secure orders to earn small commissions. The business was moribund, on its last legs.

"In the seven years I spent there, I used to go to a club to play tennis, jog and swim and generally work out my tensions and disappointment at the dead-end situation I found myself in. At the swimming pool, I met a sexy, Greek girl, became friendly with her, and after spreading suntan oil on her luscious body many a time, I was curious to find out what was beneath her swimsuit."

"Male concern number one," June said laughing.

"Well, there wasn't much to fascinate me in the cephalic regions. Unfortunately, shortly after she fell pregnant because the Chinese condoms available at the time in Egypt were of very poor quality and tended to shred. We married in a hurry to avoid scandal and little Annie was born but the marriage was a disaster. We were totally different characters and the only thing that united us was sex. But is sex, alone, ever enough? Perhaps, but not in our case."

"Not in anyone's case, I should think," said June. "The trouble with sex is that when you don't have it you get desperate and when you have it regularly you get bored. Do you agree?"

"Yes."

"I imagined you would. This is, of course, the male point of view, in case you did not know."

"And the female?"

"A trifle more complicated. But let's not go into it. We have an interesting narrative to finish. So you divorced?"

"Yes. I am not assigning blame on anyone for the divorce that followed about a year or so after Annie's birth. I left the house and moved back to my parents' apartment but I visited the baby every single day. Four years later, Nana, my ex, remarried, had a second child on the double and was happy to let Annie come home to us. My mother took care of Annie and it was a great solace to have her with us because, meanwhile, my father died. Two years later my business collapsed completely and we sold our apartment and moved to Athens. We had a little money saved up by my father, a flat of ours in Athens and a house in the Aegean island called Io, which my mother inherited from her side of the family. I had already started writing short memoirs and stories in Cairo and decided to give writing a try before looking for a job."

"That's what intrigues me," June said. "A mathematician turned author."

"I have an acquaintance in Io, an intelligent and erudite person who believes that all writers are, to some extent, psychotic. Normal, well-adjusted people do not need to write. They have absolutely no urge to do so. No fire in their belly, so to speak. They are quite content as they are. Perhaps that's true. In my case, the urge was

there from early on. I enjoyed English literature and essay writing at school and always read a lot.”

“Well,” said June, “you’re an exception because scientists and mathematicians tend to be both uninterested and inept in the literary field. Their fields of study absorb all their interest and intellect. Literature is a luxury they can do without. Try getting a successful businessman who is making loads of money to read a novel. He will laugh at you. And yet literature is a subtle art. And as with all art its *raison d’être* is to create beauty in language, to inspire emotions and to elevate us above our humdrum everyday existence. It is the occupation of dreamers. And it does need brain and skill, knowledge and hard work. But please go on. Forgive these interjections of the obvious.”

“As I said, I always had this urge to write. In L.A., during my final year at college, I tried writing a novel but it was hopeless junk. I realized that from the very start and was sorely disappointed. In Egypt I started again and wrote little pieces as a hobby. It helped me pass the time and deflected the constant preoccupation with my personal difficulties and failures. And with time and practice I discerned a definite and steady improvement in my writing skills. It sort of balanced my professional deterioration and boosted my crumbling self-esteem.

“In Greece, my mother, who was weighed down with guilt about the family’s insistence that I return to Cairo to a job that was suddenly confronted with insurmountable problems, encouraged me to try my hand at writing. She did not stint covering our expenses single-handedly for a number of years until I finally started to participate with my own meager earnings. I, first, wrote a novel in English I could not publish in Greece and then turned to writing in Greek. My Greek was not all that good to start with but it has improved to the point that I am selling short stories and longer novellas. Three years ago I moved permanently with Annie to Io. I am happy there. I have all the peace and quiet I need to think, dream and write. I am sure Annie is not exactly thrilled but is getting used to it. In any case, when she finishes the local high school in three years’ time, and if she has good grades she will go to university in Athens and will live with my mother who declined to settle with us in Io.

“Just as I was finishing my first Greek novel, I received Sheri’s peregrinating letter announcing Telly’s demise and decided to visit her. She left today, of course, for L.A. to meet Sam’s future in-laws and attend an engagement ceremony. I drove her to the airport early in the morning and back home I carelessly picked up her telephone directory and saw your name. As I was flying into Boston a few days ago and was ruminating my past in this country, I thought of you. I remembered how beautiful you were. I remembered Maria’s words. I remembered Telly telling me you were lovers. I remembered thinking what a lucky, stupid guy he was. When I read Ashton June (Rubinski) in that catalogue, I was electrified. That’s why we are here. In a hurry. Because I shall be leaving for Greece in a few days.”

I stopped and looked at her.

“End of charade,” she said with a smile.

“No, June. Don’t you think my interest, my almost juvenile infatuation, deserves your side of the story? A few facts about your life?”

“Fair enough,” she said.

I motioned to the waiter for the bill, paid it and we got up.

“To the cozy shop?” she asked.

“Of course. You lead the way.”

As we left the Hyatt, I put my arm around hers and she looked up at me and smiled. I could love this woman, I thought. I must be raving mad.

We walked in the cool, still lucid late afternoon of June, entered a small coffee shop and ordered another two cappuccinos.

"I'll never sleep tonight, June said. I'm a little high-strung and coffee keeps me awake forever."

"So much the better," I said. "I'm pressed for time."

"Make up your mind. Are you or aren't you?"

"A bit of both depending on the point of view."

She smiled.

"But, tell me Nicholas, how do you find me? Did I fulfill your expectations?"

"Oh my God, what a question! You are a woman after all. Flesh and blood."

"Of course I am."

"Listen, I won't use the name Madonna because you forbade it. All I can say is that if Leonardo saw you he would have painted the perfect icon."

"No, no, no. That's not what I want. When you saw me that first time, twenty years ago, you thought Telly was a lucky guy to have made love to me. Would you think the same today?"

"That is a very provocative question, June. I think you know the answer. How out of character for you to be forward and coquettish."

She laughed.

"You have flattered me with a reprimand," she said. "Thank you."

"Let me see your hands," I said.

She put them up on the table. I lifted them up and held them.

"Absolutely delicate and sensuous," I said.

She smiled and pulled them away. We were getting closer.

"Now it's your turn, June."

"Well, again," she said, "some of the things you know. We fell in love with Telly while he was at MIT and I was at Radcliffe. We became lovers and then he left for his military service in Alaska. Two long years where I remained faithful and wrote to him regularly once a week."

"Yes, and he did not answer once," I said.

"Correct."

"I remember scolding him about it."

"He had a nonchalant attitude that, at times, I found hard to understand. I was, however, sure he loved me and that's why I kept up the effort. When he returned and he had me at his beck and call he started eyeing other women and I am sure he had short-lived affairs even when he was with me. I thought things out rationally and broke up our relationship. He took it quite casually and perhaps because of this, we remained friends. I kept in touch with Maria who was a darling and adored me and even made friends with Sheri, who understood she had nothing to fear from me because it was I that no longer wanted Telly and not the other way round. I was, of course, teaching at Radcliffe at the time and, well, got on socially well enough and had a few affairs as well. And then, I met Jeremy Ashton, an economist and stock broker, and got married. He was earning lots of money and we lived well but I couldn't have children. It did not seem to bother him and I was grateful for that. He traveled a lot for the firm he was working for but I did not mind.

"My job kept me very busy and in my field, even in one's spare time, one is always reading essays, poetry, articles on literary criticism and the worthwhile novels that are coming out all the time. I thought, perhaps, one day I would have the chance to write one myself. I had this urge, as well, you see. And," she laughed, "coming to think of it, I definitely am a little psychotic. Oh yes, I forgot to tell you, I have been

going to a gym and exercising regularly ever since I entered Radcliffe as an undergraduate and at a certain period, years ago, I met Sheri there. We both happened to be members without knowing it and when we finally met by chance we started coordinating our sessions so we would exercise together. Little by little we became very close.”

“And started sharing secrets,” I interjected.

She laughed.

“Yes. Sheri was having a rough time with Telly. It never stopped this wild skirt-chase of his, you know. Not till the end. She started coming to the gym after Nicky, the son, went to school and she returned to her old job as a beautician. She said if she had to endure another year of imprisonment at home she would either have gone mad or killed herself.

“About five years ago, I felt a lump in my right breast. I went to hospital for a mammography and was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had to have an operation. Jeremy was in one of his very busy business cycles. When I fixed the date with my surgeon for the mastectomy, I told Jeremy and asked him to be there during the operation because I needed his support. He promised he would be present. A week before the operation he flew to Canada for business, returned for a day and off he went to California promising to be back just before I went to hospital. The morning of the operation he phoned me apologizing, saying there was no way he could come that day. He would try to be there tomorrow. I called Sheri who literally came running. She asked Maria to go and take care of the children and she stayed with me all through that day of the mastectomy and the next and on the third drove me home. She stayed another two days helping me at home and then Jeremy arrived and she left.

“My life seemed to have collapsed about me. I had this traumatic notion that I was finished as a woman. As if I was not a female any more but a neuter, a hermaphrodite. As if my sex life was over at forty-five and no man would deign to look at me. And even if he did, I would not want to show myself with one breast.”

She saw me glancing at her breasts and laughed.

“A little patience Nicholas,” she said. “The story is not finished. Well, to continue, what devastated me even more than my severed breast was Jeremy’s absence during those nightmarish days of the operation. I kept thinking: this man is more interested in the buck than he is in me. More interested in his car, his clothes, his business, his bank account than he is in me. He could not spare a few days from the well-being of his firm for the well-being of his wife. His solicitude, after that, seemed pure hypocrisy. I was unable to abide him. Our rapport disintegrated progressively. He never asked to see my chest without the breast and of course I never volunteered to show it myself. I could hardly bear to share our bed with him and when one night a month or so later, in the darkness, he stretched his hand to touch me sexually, I could hold it no longer. I pushed his hand away and told him I wanted a divorce. There was total silence for a while and then he turned his back to me and went to sleep.”

“Unbelievable,” I muttered.

“And yet true, my dear Nicholas. Maybe, even, banal. I knew it, just then, it was the right decision. He left the apartment, which was mine, a week later, and we divorced without complications.”

“I am sorry,” I said. “You have been through a painful ordeal.”

“Each one has a cross to bear,” she said with a smile.

“Listen, June, I can see your eyes are wide open. Not a sign of drowsiness.”

“What do you expect? Two cappuccinos, one on top of the other.”

“That’s wonderful. Let’s go to the bar at the Hyatt for a drink.”

“And talk, talk, talk?”

“Of course. We have left so many things unsaid.”

“We have?”

“Oh, yes. The charade has not ended.”

As we got up, I kissed the side of her head, her beautiful ruffled, white hair. She just smiled at me and said nothing. It was dark outside, almost ten o'clock. The weather was just that little bit chilly for the month of June. “Brrr... I'm cold,” I said and pulled her to me. She laughed and held my arm with both her hands.

At the bar we sat at a small table and I went and brought vodka for her and a whisky for me.

“Cheers,” she said lifting her glass.

“To us,” I replied with a smile.

“Do you have the time?” she teased.

“When there's a will there's a way,” I said.

“Perhaps.”

“You still have quite a lot to tell me.”

“Yes. As a matter of fact I do. I don't know why, but I do. You are a good listener and your sympathy overwhelms me. I have been too uptight these last few years. Too cloistered in my work and my books. I feel good talking to you.”

“So fire away.”

“This mastectomy brought a radical change in my life. My divorce, of course. But also it underscored the fragility of life. How could I be sure there had been no metastasis? How could I be sure my other breast would not develop cancer or even strike another vital organ? I had to hasten to do the one or two things I dreamt about but kept putting off. I resigned from my post at Radcliffe though I was about to be promoted to a professorship. I went out on an early pension scheme with reduced benefits and refashioned my life. Well, not all that much but I started traveling around the world quite extensively and I started writing. And that's why I laughed when you told me you were a second-rate novelist. I am a second-rate novelist myself. I have already published two novels with moderate success. But I am being noticed and quoted.”

“My God. That's fantastic! What are the titles? You have a new reader facing you, an admirer for this other facet of your talents.”

“Take it easy, Nicholas. All in good time. And we don't want enthusiastic judgments of my books before they are even read. Talent in writing is to some extent inborn but it does develop with practice. That's why I think my second novel is superior to my first and the one I am writing now will be better than both. I have written many short stories as well. I can give you a few on loose sheets to have a look at. To gauge my abilities and talent, assuming there is any.”

“Wonderful.”

“I went at it with a vengeance when I left Radcliffe. I was secluded in my shell with one breast and all, with my inhibitions and fear of cancer recurring and hardly went out of the house. I lived my life in my short stories and novels. I fell in love several times with my protagonists and sometimes cried with real tears at my heroes' misfortunes.”

“Oh my God, you are almost describing me!”

“My one and only true friend and contact with the outside world was Sheri. What would I have done without her? Her salon, you know, is not far from my house, which is not far from here and not far from our gymnasium. We comforted each other's anxieties and miseries and tried to promote an optimistic outlook on our

ongoing problems. The gym sessions helped us a lot and of course the friendship and mutual tenderness most of all.”

Our glasses emptied rapidly and I went for refills.

Her, *thank you*, her smile, were perhaps sweetened by the alcohol we consumed but they were heavenly.

“June, what countries did you travel to?”

“Western Europe mainly, but also south-east Asia. India is a country that fascinates me.”

“I hope not because of the Khajuraho Temples.”

She smiled.

“Oh yes. Much because of that.”

“And the tantric practices and philosophy? Lovely maidens these devadasis. Languorous and sensuous. Full bodied, opulent hips and voluptuous breasts.”

“Yes,” she smiled. “Too bad you were not born in the India of that period when sensuality and sexual liberalism was almost a religion.”

“Don’t joke about it. Wouldn’t it have been fascinating to study the mentality of the time and how and why they have reverted to the present prudishness? It was a remarkable and strange experiment of one bit of humanity, which ultimately failed.”

“Yes, in effect, it was a quite extraordinary fragment of their history, this tantric period. And talking of breasts and history, shall I tell you the story of mine? I think you are interested. You have been staring at them long enough.”

“Yes, my dear, I am interested in the smallest detail about you.”

“Okay, but first give me your hand.”

She took it and placed it on her right breast.

“Feel it, squeeze it,” she said. “Don’t be afraid. She did the same on the left breast.”

“Feel any difference?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “Now give me *your* hand.”

She extended her hand and I placed it on my heart.

“Feel the beat?” I said. “It is quite abnormal.”

She laughed and for the first time squeezed my hand. Perhaps it was the alcohol. We were in our third shot.

“Two years they monitored me at the hospital, at regular intervals, for the recurrence of cancer and when they were sure I was clean, they suggested breast reconstruction surgery. There are two basic methods used in breast reconstruction after a mastectomy. The simpler one, which is the one I did, is skin expansion with the subsequent insertion of an implant. The surgeon inserted a balloon expander beneath the skin and breast muscle. Through a tiny valve mechanism buried beneath the skin, a salt water solution is periodically injected to gradually fill the expander over several months. After the skin over the breast has stretched enough, a more permanent implant was inserted. The nipple and the dark skin surrounding it, the areola, were reconstructed in subsequent operations. These procedures took place over a period of time as they are discrete steps in the process of fashioning the whole, completed breast.

“There is the more complicated technique called flap reconstruction which involves the creation of a skin flap using tissue taken from other parts of the body. Some of these techniques are quite fantastic. I got interested in them, obviously because I was a sufferer. In one type of flap surgery, the tissue remains attached to its original site, retaining its blood supply. And this flap, consisting of the skin, fat, and muscle with its blood supply, usually from the back, is tunneled beneath the skin to

the chest, creating a pocket for an implant. Reconstruction does not restore normal sensation to the breast but this, as you may imagine, is the least of my worries.”

“Didn’t this operation help? I mean, to restore your confidence? I cannot imagine a woman like you lacking it. When I saw you enter the Hyatt today it was like a Goddess coming in. And it wasn’t just me. Everybody was looking.”

“Will you please stop? What are you? A second Maria?”

“And a third, and a fourth.”

“Things are never that simple. To start a relationship I must find a person that attracts me. After my divorce I am very cautious. I am past the one-night stands. I need something meaningful and fulfilling. Of the right age too.”

“What might that be?” I asked smiling. “I mean, what is the range? I am vitally interested.”

“Oh get off it, Nicholas. We are talking seriously,” she said but she squeezed my hand again. It literally set my heart pounding. Was she starting to like me or was it the vodkas?

“I started my travels after my breast reconstruction was finished, she continued. I traveled a lot, met many people. I also started going to seminars for creative writing not because I needed the instruction but to meet people in the same line of occupation and interests. Perhaps it was bad luck, perhaps I am too fussy, but I did not find someone I could go for. Oh well, I keep on hoping that perhaps it will eventually happen.”

I suggested a fourth round but she declined.

“Let’s leave the place respectably,” she said. “In a straight line.”

Outside, she said her house was not far off and she would walk. “I’ll accompany you,” I volunteered. So we walked arm in arm, slowly, comfortably, happily for a quarter of an hour and at her apartment block she asked me to go up for the fourth round that she deprived me at the Hyatt.

“And, anyway,” she added, “the charade is not finished. Is it?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then, why didn’t you say so? You should be more assertive.”

“Do you think so?”

“I wouldn’t tell you if I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s just that I am in awe of you.”

“Why? I am neither an apparition nor an angel. I’m flesh and blood.”

“Difficult to believe.”

She laughed and led the way.

In the elevator I couldn’t miss the opportunity of her close proximity. I kissed her lightly on the lips.

“What was that for?” she smiled.

“Did you like it?”

“Insofar as I am starting to like you, yes.”

“Surely you write better lines for your novels,” I said smiling.

“I try.”

“Then try a little harder with me, too, my beautiful June.”

She kissed me lightly on my lips just like I did.

“I love you,” she told me.

“That wasn’t very convincing,” I said.

“Well, I *am* trying.”

We entered her flat with smiles on our faces. A large comfortable living room with a parquet floor, two large couches and two comfortable armchairs, a long, low

table with empty ashtrays, a mobile bar with bottles and gleaming crystal glasses, a fireplace, a few striking modern paintings awash with vivid reds and contrasting somber blacks, and tasteful curtains concealing perhaps a balcony.

“Make yourself comfortable,” she said.

“No TV?” I asked.

“I have one inside my study for moon landings and tsunamis. Otherwise I hardly open it. What will you have? The same?”

She took off her light-green summer jacket and I did the same. Her dress, a darker green of silk-like material fitted her nicely, accentuating a thin waist and normal breasts. Sitting on the low couch I looked at dainty knees, beautifully shaped calves and slender ankles. At a gorgeous, brainy woman who couldn't have a child, had been through breast cancer, mastectomy, divorce, and was, almost certainly, unattached. Unbelievable! She passed me my drink, took hers, and sat next to me.

We said cheers and sipped our first gulps. She looked at me and smiled.

“A penny for your charade,” she said.

“I was thinking,” I replied, “of your advice. Wondering, should I be assertive or should I let things work out naturally? But do I have the time?”

“What things?”

“Come closer, June. I'll show you.”

She was no simpleton. She moved with a hesitant smile right close to me and I caressed that lovely, mature, immaculate face with the white hair and kissed her serious lips. Once, ...twice,...three times, ...each time with a little more insistence, drawing her out, dragging out her soul, hauling her vulnerable psyche to me, gently, almost without passion because that was the only way, the only remedy for her sickness, her frailty. To let her remember the sweetness of the kiss, to let her seek it, to let her respond. She was aroused and her tongue tackled mine. I told her I loved her. At that, she stopped and looked at me aggrieved.

“Oh Nicholas,” she said, “I don't need another Telly in my life and cavalier declarations of love. Let what is bound to happen, happen without false sentimentality. I feel sexy tonight. I am ready for a one-night stand.”

“But June, I love you. I am in love with you. Perhaps I've been in love with you for twenty years. The name Rubinski in that catalogue was a stab at my heart. I could think of nothing else.”

“And Sheri? Forgotten?”

“Yes, forgotten.”

She smiled calmly.

“So soon? That doesn't do you credit. I bet you made love to her this morning.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Well, at least you're honest.”

“Honest in some things, dishonest in others?”

She looked at my eyes a few seconds searching for a clue, an indication of sincerity or dishonesty.

“It's time we ended the charade,” she said. “It will clear things up. I told you Sheri was my friend. Perhaps you did not understand that she is the closest person I have in this world. I told you she was at my operation and was my close companion in those two traumatic, horrible years when I was a woman with one breast. She encouraged me to get rid of Jeremy. You might wonder why she did not do the same with Telly. It was a different situation. There were children involved and the children loved that lovable, charming but disgustingly faithless man and it was not an easy

decision. We exercised together three times a week at the gym, supported and encouraged each other but we also had our moments of despondency. We called them our crying sessions. They unfailingly surfaced every few months. I was confined at home, those first two years, writing, yes, but at times going through week-long depressions. Sheri never stopped being affected by Telly's affairs. She had good friends; good, be it understood, in inverted commas, who kept her well informed. I kept on telling her to shut them out of her life because what she didn't know would, at least, not hurt her. But, no, she had to know every detail and of course there were quarrels and recriminations at home and it is a wonder Telly, himself, did not leave the house. The truth is he loved his kids, damn him. Would you believe it, I was relieved he died? Not because I hated him but because it was Sheri's salvation.

"On one such occasion, Sheri came home with another sleazy story. Oh heavens, I forget what. They were endless. She started telling me details, sobbing her heart out. I was in a terrible mood myself. I could bear it no longer. I shouted at her. 'Cut it out you silly bitch. If you don't like that prick, let him go. Leave him. At least you've got your tits. You'll find another man. Look at me.'

"I undressed in front of her. I was paper thin with one breast missing and the other forlorn. She stopped sobbing at once. She looked at me and I shall never forget that look of compassion and despair. As if it was her breast involved. She came up to me, started kissing me and caressing me. I am sorry my darling, she told me over and over again. I am sorry my darling. I have been so insensitive. I love you so much. Forgive me."

June looked at me intensely. I looked back at that beautiful, intelligent, intriguing face, wondering why she spewed out this tale.

"Why did you tell me all this?" I asked her.

"I don't rightly know. Except I wanted you to know what you were dealing with and how close I am with Sheri."

"Okay, you made that clear enough."

"So good. I am ready now, we can fuck."

"June, my darling, I am in love with you. I do not want a one-night stand. I am not desperate for sex. I am anxious for your love."

"I cannot offer love at a moment's notice, Nicholas. I can only offer sex."

"Isn't it a strange situation where a man begs for love and the woman only offers sex? Quite a reversal of roles."

She laughed.

"Yes, but I have an allegiance to Sheri. I simply cannot love you."

"Is love something one can decide to fall into, or not, with logic and considerations of loyalty to others?"

"I don't know but I try. It's the way I feel. Sorry, Nicholas, love is not for us."

"Offering sex to her lover does not count?"

"No. I think when I shall tell her about it she will laugh."

"Exactly! At no time was I in love with Sheri and, I believe, at no time was she in love with me. We enjoyed our lovemaking, our tenderness and our friendship, our long, long friendship and I hope it will be a start for her to seek new lovers and opportunities since she told me I was the only lover she ever had since being married. Neither she, nor you, nor I have very much time to spare. We must seize the day, so to speak."

"So go ahead, seize the day, Nicholas."

I looked at that exquisite face in wonder and she smiled. She would soon be mine this charade spinner, this peculiar introverted woman I managed to approach. She would be mine. At least, temporarily.

“I loved it when you said you felt sexy. Does it still hold?” I said.

“Oh yes. It was a lovely afternoon and now I think we must seize not the day but the night.”

I pulled her to me and kissed her mouth tenderly. I wanted to give her time; to have her take the initiative. I felt it was important. She had to set the pace. She slipped her tongue in my mouth and we exchanged love. Of that I was sure.

“You kiss so perfectly, Nicholas.”

“It is because before my passion I offer my love.”

“But I also want your passion.”

“And I want yours.”

Her kisses turned breathless and fiery and she bit my lips and my ears. She unbuttoned my shirt, removed her dress and we went to her bedroom where our passion did not let us down. The alcohol we had consumed delayed my orgasm to an alarming extent and when it came we almost fainted. Sometime quite late at night, she switched on the light and her mouth was on mine; her frisky tongue played delicious little games. Her hair was disheveled, those superb blue eyes looked at me and that lovely, delicate face, a little worn by the effort, smiled and kissed me again and again.

“That was lovely, Nicholas,” she said.

She kept kissing me, trying to arouse me. I thought the time was ripe for my anxious question.

“Do you love me, my darling?” I asked.

She held my face in her hands, like I used to hold Sheri and like Sheri used to hold me and I thought I was going to get a kiss on the forehead but it came square on my mouth. And after many, long, passionate, liquid kisses, it came out,

“Yes, I love you, Nicholas,” she said. “It’s crazy but I think I do. The question is do we have the time?”

“When there’s a will, there’s a way,” I answered.

Athens 27th December 2006

RHEA AND COUSIN HARRY

I saw Rhea recently at the funeral of an old acquaintance from Cairo. I saw her come in the church with a strange, labored gait. She saw me and smiled sadly as one smiles on such occasions. I went up to her and kissed her in the jostling crowd. I had not seen her for nearly five years. Time never leaves us alone but through the few new creases and wrinkles on her face, evidence of beauty and sexiness were still apparent. Her body well kept, her clothes, as always, tasteful and expensive.

“I came by taxi,” she said. I could not drive. “My legs are giving me trouble.”

“Those beautiful legs?”

She smiled.

“And the nest between them?” I asked. “Is it all right?”

She hugged me and pushed her head in my neck to conceal her laughter in that mournful ambiance. Then she moved off in the crowd to offer her condolences to the widow and I did not see her again in the jam.

Some persons you see on and off throughout your life. You are not close but you are aware of them through rumors and gossip in your entourage and your paths cross now and then, mostly casually but sometimes with surprising occurrences. Rhea was my age but when I first met her after I returned to Cairo from studies abroad she was a woman and I was still a boy. Age, sometimes, is an irrelevant factor to maturity, or, in any case, to one’s self-appraisal of it. She had just been engaged to be married to an elder cousin and when she came to our home for the traditional dinner invitation of welcome to our family, I expected to see a very beautiful woman because that was the way she was portrayed by my family. She was good-looking and attractive and had a sexy build but she was not the classic beauty I expected. She was lively, loud and had the mannerisms of an almost contrived sexiness and flippancy. It is this air of looseness and availability that electrifies the male sex and sets the testosterone coursing.

Rhea laughed a lot in contrast to her fiancé who was unattractive, silent and dull and people usually used the word, constipated, to describe him. And yet he was not stupid, my Cousin Harry. He was at least fifteen years older than me and was on much more intimate terms with my father, his uncle, than he was with me. In fact, we had very little to say to each other whereas a conversation could go on for hours between the two of them. Usually on business, which was strange because my father was a self-made businessman who was in the thick of it while Cousin Harry was idly sitting on a fortune, unwilling or unable to expand and multiply it. It was not for lack of brains. Perhaps it was a reluctance to risk or gamble on a new venture. Perhaps it was an innate laziness. The same that kept him from a university education, from an active social life, from the participation in any kind of sport or physical activity.

It did not seem to me a good match but I did not give it much thought. My cousin was wealthy and arranged marriages were much the rule in those days especially between wealthy families. Her family was wealthy, too, but not in the same league as Cousin Harry.

As I settled to my new life in Cairo, I started frequenting the same exclusive club in which both Cousin Harry’s and Rhea’s families were members long before my own parents were in a position to afford the yearly membership fees. I went there mainly for exercise and sport but as time passed I got to know many of the Greek members and met a number of old Egyptian school friends. After a game of tennis, a

jog around the track or a swim in the pool, I usually gravitated to one or another small group of friends to relax with a cool lemonade, an iced beer, a few laughs and usually quite a bit of good-natured gossip. They were a mixture of young men and women of various nationalities and a peculiar feature of their conversation was the easy, effortless and lax switchover from English to French to Arabic in assorted combinations. It is, of course, a lack of discipline and indolence of mind to substitute a word in French or Arabic when you are talking in English. But that was the way they communicated, it was quaint and charming and the habit dies hard. I still do it sometimes.

It was at the club that, little by little, Rhea's past unfolded in bits and pieces and I tracked her present with ever growing interest. She was the eldest daughter of a lower class family that, like my own, attained a measure of wealth through the industriousness and good fortune of the father. Her mother was handsome and scatterbrained and endured her husband's infidelities with the mind-set of tit for tat. Rhea had two younger sisters that shared the same upbringing of their mother's slipshod morality and undue respect for Mammon. I had a sister as well who befriended the two younger girls of the family. Sometimes, not very often, I accompanied her to visits to the family's home, which was a luxurious flat in an exclusive neighborhood of Cairo. By that time, Rhea had married Cousin Harry and moved to another equally opulent flat nearby and I did not have occasion to rub shoulders with her there. I only met her occasionally at the club and when she visited us at home with her husband.

Fanny, the youngest girl was petite. A not especially pretty brunette who was, at the time of Rhea's marriage, in her final year of secondary school. She had an extroverted, wild temperament similar to Rhea's but her lack both of height and Rhea's flamboyant sensuality and good looks failed to provoke the kind of instant attention that Rhea enjoyed. Lisa, a couple of years older, was the prettiest of the three sisters and the most sober. She had finished school and was at that age when families, in our tight Greek community, activated their radars to scour the field for a suitable husband. It was the conservative culture of the late sixties, which burdened both families and progeny, male and female, with this agonizing need to settle their children. As a young man I was not exempt to similar pressures from my own family. Apart of that, life did not change much perhaps since the Stone Age. Adulteries, infidelities, clandestine love affairs, the keeping of mistresses went on just as before, just as they shall continue in the future except that they were concealed. The façade had to be respectable and the hypocrisy of our society always surfaced in amusing and often malicious gossip.

It is so patently stupid to pressure a young man to get married. After five years of studies in Europe, after tasting a measure of independence, a measure of sentimental and sexual experimentation, my family's exhortations that I should start thinking of marriage, infuriated me and all they managed to do was put me off the one or two young women that attracted me. Lisa was one of them. There was an initial mutual attraction and because of that she started visiting us, ostensibly to see my sister but in reality to be close to me. I enjoyed her company and we laughed and joked a lot mostly at home and mostly in the presence of my sister. Taking her out on a date would have formalized the relationship and the radars of her family and the Greek community would focus on us. Eventually, my father asked me if I was interested in Lisa. I said I found her pleasant enough. He told me he heard that another eligible young man was about to propose to her and if I were interested he would go talk to her father to forestall the other suitor. My answer, that I was not interested in

marriage at the moment, visibly disappointed him. I kept away from Lisa after that and she subsequently married the young man.

At the club I updated, discreetly, my information on Rhea. Two school friends of hers, from the Greek school for girls she attended, happened to be in our group. I posed my questions, not more than one or two every time we met, with seeming indifference and usually not only were they answered but extra bonuses of information were included. Apparently Rhea was an unattractive little girl. Not only unattractive, but cheeky and none too bright. The fact was that she rarely bothered to open a book or do any homework. Cheeky, noisy, rude and yet her teachers tolerated her. Even liked her and not just because rich little girls are often the recipients of preferential treatment than the poorer wretches.

In the last two school years there was a physical transformation. Rhea grew taller and filled out beautifully. She came to school well dressed and radiated a new aura of sensuality. The ugly duckling had become a swan. She was still quite hopeless in her studies but that did not seem to matter much. Her sparkling disposition and giggles disarmed potential critics. Everybody, teachers and students admired her. She started going to the club alone, with the chauffeur, without her parents, and was very popular with groups her age, especially boys. She spoke perfect colloquial Arabic and looked at least two years older than she was.

When she graduated with a minimal knowledge of grammar, mathematics and other useless subjects such as geography and history, and at the precise moment her parents activated their radars, she befriended a tall, handsome young Egyptian called Hassan. The romance endured for over a year and the family's radars were twirling ever more desperately in view of this unexpected and odious development. Anyone could see that this relationship was doomed. Well, not exactly. Doomed is not the right word. Just that it could never end in marriage. Though Hassan was the scion of a rich family and being rich was a very weighty qualification for a prospective husband, Hassan was, unfortunately, a Moslem. A one-hundred percent irrevocable taboo. Had he been a Copt things would have been different. To the racist Greeks, a Copt though indisputably inferior, is at least Christian and the word, rich, would have played its mitigating role.

The future husband was eventually located with the main qualification manifestly present. He was Rich. He was fifteen years older than Rhea. No matter. He was dull, ordinary and unpopular. No matter. He was supercilious. No matter. He was reputedly tight-fisted. No matter. His crusty, overassertive mother was alive. No matter. He was very rich, thus, a very good match. I do not know, and the two friends were unable to enlighten me as to what pressures Rhea went through and how she reacted. At that dinner in our house nothing seemed amiss.

The marriage took place quite soon after and everything seemed fine. It was a sumptuous marriage and the church was overflowing with Rhea's family, relatives and friends. The ridiculous, boring ceremony with chanting priests, sing-song allusions to Abraham and Sarah, of two being joined in one flesh, of obedience and love, the tinkling of swinging myrrh receptacles was hardly audible above the noisy, muttering crowd. There were tears and laughter and excitement and everybody's eyes were focused on the beautiful bride in white. She was loved. She was adored. And she was pitied. They could not understand the match. Well, they could, but it was too blatant a mismatch.

At that time there were no videos and busybody cameramen to ruin a marriage ceremony. Just a lone photographer to take a few formal pictures of the couple. One classic and indispensable picture of any self-respecting marriage ceremony of that era

was a snapshot of the couple inside the car just as they are leaving the church grounds. Both husband and wife are asked to turn around and look out the rear window while the photographer snaps the shot. I have it somewhere, this picture. I really do. There is a small, round bouquet of flowers on the rear ledge of the car window. Cousin Harry, hair freshly cut, half turned, looks at the camera with bulging eyes and a bothered expression, without a smile, and Rhea in a white wedding gown and a small veil looks back as well. She is fresh and beautiful. Her expression is one of despair. It shouts at you, "Help! Please help me. I'm being kidnapped."

Very soon, strange new details came out into the open. Rhea and Harry returned from a month's honeymoon in Greece and Rhea's belly was noticeably swollen. Five months later a healthy and certainly not premature baby boy was born. On the day of its birth, Hassan, in ecstasy, was offering drinks at the club's bar to all comers celebrating the birth of his son. I could not figure it out. Was it true? Would Cousin Harry marry Rhea knowing she was pregnant with Hassan's child? True or false, was Hassan as low as all that? To ruin the reputation of his former girlfriend in such a public fashion however hurt he might have been by her ditching him? And the final intriguing question, did Rhea have sexual relations with Harry as early as three or four months before her marriage while she was still reputedly fooling around with Hassan? A few years later, certainly with many details of the pre-marital romance missing, it was clear to me that the boy was Harry's son. He was his father's spitting image. Both his facial characteristics and his body cast left no doubt.

Lisa gave birth to a baby girl a year after her marriage and Fanny, on graduation, came out to titillate, in her turn, the Greek circles we moved in. She did not capture the same notice as Rhea for she lacked her glamour but kept the gossipy club crowd's tongues wagging. I am not a moralist. In a way, I admired the contempt they displayed with regard to convention. They had the strength and sense of independence to pursue their pleasure and love affairs. I was in the same situation but much more inhibited. Being unmarried I felt I was continuously monitored in our small Greek circle. Every move towards a girl was assumed a step towards marriage whereas I just needed female companionship and sexual release. My family was pestering me to get married and my continuous refusals would not put them off. A loose girl could at most be called a bitch. It was her choice and responsibility. A male who plays the field might hurt the woman he befriends for sex by ruining her reputation. It seemed to me that it was a handicap to be considerate. I started contemplating leaving Egypt.

My sister continued her friendship with Fanny. I was glad and I hoped some of her reserve would dissipate through that friendship. Times were changing while Cairo's Greek society was immobile in its inhibitions and its furtive hypocrisy. One afternoon I drove her to Fanny's house and told her if I finished my own chores early enough I would return to pick her up. When I returned, she had already left. Fanny was alone and asked me in. I demurred but she insisted. She offered me a drink and we started chatting. Like Rhea, she was high spirited and gay and never at a loss for words. We had many laughs talking of our mutual acquaintances, her sisters and their husbands. She told me Lisa was not happy with her husband. He was rich but stingy. I told her Harry had the same reputation. She let out a peal of laughter.

"Yes", she said, "but Lisa is daft. She's a goodie-goodie. Rhea knows how to manipulate her husband and she leads the life she wants."

"Meaning?"

"She's back with Hassan."

"My God! Do you mean they are divorcing?"

“Don’t be silly. One doesn’t divorce a gold mine.”

After the first whisky she got up to refill the glasses, sat on my lap and we started kissing. I enjoyed it without taking it seriously. I did not get aroused. I was about ten years older than her and I considered it a sort of game that could not result in sex. In any case, I was jittery that her parents might pop in any minute. After a while she asked,

“Why are you so aloof?”

I really don’t know why I answered as I did. I half meant it as a joke.

“Because I’m no pedophile,” I said.

She jumped up, offended.

“Go to hell,” she said and went to her room slamming the door.

I got up and left the flat.

The next time my sister went to her house I asked her to tell Fanny that I was sorry.

“Sorry for what?” she asked.

“Just tell her I’m sorry. That’s all.”

When she returned she told me Fanny accepted my apology.

“What’s with you two?” she asked.

“Nothing to do with you.”

So now I knew. It was not evident. Rhea came often to our home and we had become familiar and friendly. She was giggly and gay and I enjoyed being with her. While Cousin Harry delved in deep conversation with my father I usually slinked inside the house to sit with my mother, sister and Rhea. It was always a merry time and after having learned of her clandestine affair with Hassan I started making jocular insinuations asking her,

“How’s your love life these days?”

To which she would answer with resonant laughter.

Meanwhile Hassan ingratiated himself into Rhea’s group of friends at the club. It was not my group and, in any case, I neither wished to rub shoulders with Cousin Harry nor our handsome Casanova. I liked Rhea. I found her very attractive and superbly sexy and would have loved to have an affair with her but conditions were not propitious. I could not pretend to be Harry’s buddy which Hassan little by little managed to do. I would not deign to be Hassan’s rival either. I felt too much contempt for the way he reacted to Rhea’s marriage and the birth of her child. Perhaps, also, I had too little money to interest her and I did not have a *garçonnière* to accommodate a tryst. I just let her understand in an underhand manner and copious compliments that I liked her looks, her body and her undoubtedly fervid temperament and I think she understood and enjoyed my attentions.

Cousin Harry was no fool. I often wondered if he was really unaware of the relationship that reignited between Rhea and Hassan or whether he had no choice but to let it continue. One never knows what goes on behind the closed doors of a household. Perhaps they had fights with Rhea and she was adamant where her affair was concerned. That it was either that or divorce. Perhaps she denied it and called his suspicions ridiculous. What was more than evident was that after a certain time Cousin Harry was considered by most of the Greek gossipmongers as a shameless cuckold. Hassan was presented to Rhea’s extended family as Harry’s best friend and Harry’s mother, a cunning old lady who obviously saw through the whole conspiracy, abetted and perpetrated the myth. Not much love was lost between her and Rhea but it was either that or conceding that her son was a cuckold pure and simple. I think the

conspiracy extended throughout the totality of Rhea's clan, aunts, uncles, the cousins and cousins of cousins.

Without a doubt, Rhea was adored. She not only had high spirits and a gay disposition that enlivened the atmosphere around her but possessed the demagoguery of a politician who makes you believe you are an extremely valued friend and after you give him your vote he simply ignores you. Yes, Rhea was loved and brazenly protected and the condescending, unemotional, unloved Harry was tolerated as long as he kept Rhea happy and well provided with jewelry and expensive clothes. Sadly, it also goes to show that despite his arrogance and show of superiority, Harry was deeply in love with Rhea. Profoundly dependent on her. Totally unable to part with her to save his self-respect.

Four years after the birth of her son, Rhea fell pregnant again. Hassan had by that time consolidated his position as the ubiquitous friend of the family. Wherever the couple went, he was there. The club, family festivities, dinner invitations and even summer vacations in Greece. The only place Hassan was not allowed to come to was our home. My father, a stern and tough old cookie who was exceptionally fond of his nephew, would not have tolerated Hassan's insipid familiarities and jokes with the couple. I don't know how much he knew of the goings on. I am sure my mother knew but she, too, was playing the unsuspecting, loving aunt. Still, she might have intimated a thing or two to my father. And, I suppose, the scandalmongers were once again speculating on the perpetrator of the second fecundation. Quite truthfully, I was more than a little puzzled myself.

In those days I flirted discreetly with a married woman at the club. She seemed to like me and I tried to convince her to become my lover. Her answer was that she was disposed to break with her husband if I were serious about her but, if not, she could not possibly have an affair with me. "I would never be able to sleep with two men at the same time," she told me. "I would go mad." I assumed that was the mainstream female psychology as opposed to the male one. Did Rhea complacently accommodate two men?

A baby girl was born and I visited Rhea at the hospital on the second day after the birth. I went in early to avoid the hordes of well-wishers that would parade later to pay their respects. It was ten in the morning and Rhea was surprised and happy to see me. We were by that time familiar and whenever we met exchanged jocular and teasing comments. She was in bed in an upright position looking well and rested. Her thick black hair was well combed and she wore a lacy, white nightgown. Her breasts, full of milk, were visibly distended. I kissed her and told her she looked wonderful. Virginal and sexy.

She laughed.

"Hardly virginal," she said. "And my tits are so full of milk they hurt. The baby cannot consume all of it. They draw some out with a pump. I feel like a human cow."

A cot was in the room and I went to see the baby. It was so shriveled and ugly I could not bring myself to say something nice about it. I just said, "She's so tiny!"

"Good thing, too. She nearly killed me coming out," she said laughing.

We talked a little and then she arched and spread her legs beneath the sheets and flapped the bed covers over them a few times.

"My genitals are on fire," she said. "I have a good mind to call a male nurse and have him blow on them." And she let out a peal of laughter.

I stayed a half hour and left. Some things stick to one's mind.

I remember an invitation that was made some time later at the club restaurant. Some time later, could have been six months or two years. Just as I do not remember the occasion for the invitation I cannot place the exact date. Twenty people around a long rectangular table with food and drink and a festive mood. The three sisters were there. The married twosome with husbands and the little one with two or three of her current, alternating beaux. The self-appointed master of ceremonies was Hassan although it was neither his invitation nor was he part of the reason for the celebration. What remains in my mind of this event was the high spirits of the three sisters, of most of the guests and most of all of Hassan. Cousin Harry was aloof, uncommunicative and placid. Lisa's husband was silent but visibly seething. His marriage was not going well and he was annoyed by Lisa's unaccustomed antics and fawning conduct towards Hassan. Rhea, of course, was having a great good time with lots of giggling and joking and noisy laughing and little Fanny was enjoying herself much in the same vein. Perhaps because I resented Hassan, I found that noisy and merry evening unbearable and left with a lame excuse as soon as was decently possible. If it is at all feasible to desire a woman sexually and hate her at the same time, these conflicting emotions were churning in my soul.

Lisa separated from her husband soon after that evening and the husband let it be known that he was not disposed to be the second cuckold in the family. One was quite enough. Lisa returned to her paternal home with the pretty baby girl that was born in the meantime.

Coming out of the cinema one evening I fell upon Fanny. She was there with two other girls and I offered to drive them home. We first accompanied the two girls and then I drove Fanny towards her house. On the way she asked me to take her for a coffee. I said, "Sure, but why?"

"Will you stop being so rude?"

"Sorry Fanny. I didn't mean to be."

"Scared I shall ruin your reputation?"

I laughed.

"My reputation can only be enhanced if I am seen with you."

"That was a very snide compliment."

"Nothing I say seems to suit you."

"Anyway, I hope you are over your pedophobia."

"Oh definitely. As far as you are concerned, in any case. And you do kiss very nicely. I did not have the chance to tell you that day."

She smiled.

"I have improved a lot since then."

"I have not the slightest doubt."

"I hate you."

"Hate, love...it's two sides of the same coin."

She laughed shaking her head.

"You really are presumptuous."

"Perhaps. But hate, little Fanny, is better than indifference."

"Which is what you have been bestowing me all this time."

I took her hand and kissed it. She smiled and we drove a few minutes in silence to the Night and Day cafeteria of the Semiramis Hotel on the Nile. Her smile troubled me. She had a strange, lurid smile. At times there was a touch of vulgarity to it. I cannot define it or describe this peculiarity. It was pleasant enough but it gave you a hint of sluttishness, of an obscure and sinister erudition of carnality, of an

unquenchable thirst for it. Sometimes it put you off but if you were in the right mood it excited you. I did not stop the car at the Night and Day. I drove on.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Wherever you want.”

She smiled. She got the message.

“Okay.”

I took the road to Heliopolis. In those days, the government was building a new suburb called Medinet Nasr in the desert. The roads were carved and paved with construction sites of unfinished buildings left and right. At night they were deserted.

“How’s your sexy sister?” I asked her.

“Just as you know her. Having a ball. Not a thought in the world. If she’s got an itch, there’s always someone there to scratch it. Why don’t you give it a try? I think she fancies you.”

“Oh I couldn’t. My father loves Harry. He would kill me with his bare hands if he found out.”

“Hassan’s getting married, by the way.”

“I don’t believe it! Rhea must be heartbroken.”

“Are you kidding? She’s laughing her head off. Telling everyone about it. Making them doubt that there was ever anything between her and Hassan.”

“But how come?”

“It seems his family got wind of his affair with Rhea and is forcing him to break it up and settle down.”

“So it’s all over?”

“I doubt it. He shall always be there to scratch her itch. Unless she finds someone else. She is so lucky this girl. She has a wonderful husband. I really mean it. Harry, despite his obnoxious bearing, is really a good person and he’s nutty-mad about Rhea. He once told me she’s way too good for him. ‘All I have is money,’ he told me. ‘Rhea is alive and dazzling.’ He also loves his children. I am sure he knows what’s going on but has no option but to endure it. He just tries to limit the damage; to curtail the excesses.”

Half an hour later we penetrated into an empty garage of a half-built apartment building. I shut off the car’s engine. I moved close to her. She embraced me right off and we started kissing. I caressed her body and lifted her skirt. Her legs were thin and exciting. She fumbled with the zip of my fly but couldn’t slide it open. “Take them off,” she whispered. We were very quiet as if we might be heard. She removed her panties as I pulled my trousers half way down. She straddled me and I slipped into her. It was warm and slimy and I hoped she felt as complete and as liberated as I did. She started moving slowly and sensuously.

“I’m not wearing a condom,” I whispered.

“It’s all right.”

She worked at it intimating her desire, her need, her contentment with gentle moans, with a flailing tongue, with noisy breathing and I felt happy I was aroused and erect and inside her and was providing this agony of pleasure. It is a time when all one’s hang-ups are overthrown. When society’s conventional Judeo-Christian-Islamic inhibitions seem so trite and hypocritical. Here was this bitch, this slut, this whore enjoying sex. By God, she ought to be stoned, killed, annihilated.

As we were driving back she said she was leaving for Greece the next day.

“I’m pregnant. I’m going for an abortion.”

“Why Greece? Why not here?”

“Here it will be out the same day. My reputation is bad enough.”

“And who’s the culprit?”

“Dimitri.”

“Yes, I heard you were going out with him recently. A playboy and a big spender.”

“He’s good fun.”

“But he got you into trouble.”

“I should have been more careful.”

“Won’t he marry you?”

“Who wants to marry him? He’s twenty years older than me and anyway he’s engaged to be married to an old flame.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“I try to be broadminded but sometimes I am stumped.”

She laughed.

“It was lovely tonight Tony. It was a craving to make it with you. Perhaps we can do it again when I am back.”

In the sixties, seventies and eighties there was a steady exodus of Greeks from Egypt. It was a self-propagating phenomenon. As the trickle increased, more and more felt the need to leave. The poor would be in much the same situation here as there. A hand-to-mouth existence but with the hope that their children would have a better future in the motherland. The wealthy and well-off, without exception, made provision for a rainy day. They had seen Nasser’s nationalizations and did not feel too secure with Sadat’s back-pedaling and Mubarak’s enthronement. The new Islamic renaissance and fundamentalism was an added worry. They sent every available piaster abroad. Most of Harry’s fortune was already there. So was the three sisters’ family fortune. My father, a little late, was desperately trying to build up a reserve that would give us a breathing space if we were suddenly forced to leave. He bought and furnished a flat just like most of the well-off families did. Going back and forth from Cairo to Athens had become almost routine. One moved from one home to another.

On one such occasion in Greece, I was invited for lunch at one of our very wealthy relatives. The lady, Antonia, was my father’s cousin and was married to a man who prospered in the manufacture of ready-made clothing. I was flattered when they sent car and chauffeur to escort me to their beautiful villa with uniformed maids and a kitchen chef. I did not immediately grasp the reason for this sudden interest in me. After lunch we moved to a cozy sitting room. Not the principal salon. A smaller, more intimate one for discreet and confidential disclosures. After coffee Antonia told me that a couple of months ago, in summer, Rhea and Cousin Harry were vacationing in Greece with an Egyptian couple, Hassan and Farida, as house guests.

A little more than a year had passed since I met Fanny on that memorable evening when she told me that Hassan was about to get married. I mentally gave myself a double minus on social awareness for this negligence in failing to keep up with events that, in the last analysis, vastly interested me.

“Is there something,” she asked me, “going on between Rhea and this man Hassan?”

I pretended ignorance and asked her what made her think so.

“Well,” she said, “I invited them, as I usually do, to a formal dinner with some friends and Harry arrived with Farida. He said Rhea was feeling unwell and could not come and this Hassan stayed with her to keep her company! Wouldn’t it have been more natural for Farida to stay with her? It really was most irregular.”

“Yes, but surely the children were there.”

“No. The children were away at summer camp.”

“My God. The girl cannot be more than four or five.”

“Exactly.”

“I am afraid you caught me totally unaware. I don’t move around in their circles in Cairo and have never been to Rhea’s family reunions. I don’t even know this fellow Hassan.”

“Well, I have seen him a couple of times and I don’t like him.”

I was incensed because I suddenly realized the purpose of my invitation. You fat bitch Antonia, I thought, I don’t suppose you like Rhea much either but Rhea has an itch between her legs and the guts, youth and devil-may-care attitude to do something about it. You have grown fat and frustrated and the only pleasure you get in your luxurious surroundings is gossiping and calumniating people.

I thanked her for the delightful lunch and left her, sadly none the wiser. Outside her house I burst out laughing. You bitch-goddess Rhea, will my turn never come? I despise you too and admire you and, sometimes, you hold me in awe for the lust and turmoil you arouse in me.

At the club a few months later I met Farida. Her belly was swollen. Hassan was undoubtedly a virile young man. She was a beautiful girl. Tall, milky-white skin, long black hair, a nice body, terribly sweet and unsexy. The perfect wife. She was walking with her best friend Rhea and I was introduced to her. Just a few smiles and a few words. Did she like Greece? Yes. How did I know she was there?

“Aunt Antonia.”

Rhea laughed.

“Silly bitch,” she said. “All that money and no children.”

Money, money, money. Always the burning issue. I wondered where Cousin Harry stood in the line of succession to the fortune. I said good bye and left them. Poor Farida, she didn’t have a chance. Rhea was a killer. Once in your blood, always in your blood. Unless she, herself, dropped Hassan. But for the moment they were a close-knit foursome. I suspected love for two in the afternoon, companionable outings for four in the evenings. I could not have been much off target because at an informal lunch invitation at our home, Cousin Harry arrived on time and Rhea supposedly at the club was very late. No mobile phones in those days. Finally the bell rings and I left the sitting room to open the door. Rhea was not totally steady on her feet and her hair was disheveled. She kissed me with a giggle and her breath reeked of alcohol. She asked to go to the bathroom before entering the sitting room. I gave her a clean towel and fetched a brush and a comb. I told her to gargle with the mouthwash on the shelf and she smiled and said, “Thanks.” She stayed a while and came out neatly combed, refreshed and steady on her legs. Everyone fussed over her and she excused herself for being late. Her car’s battery conked out and somebody called an electrician to get the motor going. I really do envy the female sex its facility for lying.

A few years went by and the Greek community continued to thin out. Rhea’s father died and her mother with Lisa and Lisa’s daughter moved to Greece. Fanny also settled there and visited Cairo now and then but we did not get together again. She eventually married a young Athenian and for a few years the marriage seemed to be working. I did not have too many details but when she started reappearing in Cairo, now and then, with different companions I surmised that the old order had reasserted itself. I had my own sporadic love affairs which amounted to nothing and I wondered if I was destined to die without tasting the passion that drives a person to distraction. I knew it was a dangerous thing but I believed that deep love and passion are uniquely human qualities and should be tasted at least once in a lifetime.

Farida had a second child and a year or so later divorced Hassan. When she finally woke up, she was totally devastated by the deception of her husband, the sham of her marriage and treachery of Rhea's false friendship. I used to see her bring her children to play at the club. A forlorn, sad figure and decent enough to be unable to understand the dynamics of her misfortune; the convoluted workings of our society that landed her there. One day I went up to her to say hello. She hardly spoke to me. She looked at me as if I was contaminated with the degeneracy of Rhea's entourage. Perhaps I was. I had seen too much not to have acquired at least some of the amorality of my Greek relatives. Where I differed with them was that I saw clearly and was sometimes revolted by the decadence. Not the sexual laxity but the moral putrefaction, selfishness and disregard for the pain they caused to undeserving bystanders. In the survival of the fittest, are the fittest always the most ruthless?

Was there ever a doubt?

After Rhea's mother and sisters moved to Greece, Cousin Harry bought a magnificent flat for Rhea in a fashionable Athens suburb. He already had his parents' flat downtown but it was not to her liking. In any case, his mother died and his fortune quadrupled. With the purchase, Rhea started spending most of her time in Athens. At first to furnish the house, which she did, tastefully and sparing no expense and then supposedly to take care of her husband's business affairs. I surmised that her affair with Hassan had cooled off because, after all, that's life. Everything in this world is born, flourishes for a while and then dies.

Everything, that is, except vice and greed.

My little group at the club, always, had amusing little stories the veracity of which I cannot vouch. It was said that Hassan made two or three trips to Athens to try and revive the affair but with little success. Not true! Instead I should have said, 'a little success', because once there and spurned, he stayed at Lisa's home. Lisa was living alone as her daughter was in boarding school in Switzerland. Some nasty tongues relate that Lisa went a long way to console the inconsolable lover. Fanny too, it seems, put in a helping hand because by that time she was separated from her husband as well. Moreover, unlike Lisa she did not suffer from any sort of qualms and inhibitions. And, then, let us be fair, why should the same kind of persistent longing I had for Rhea, not have troubled the two sisters regarding their elder sister's longtime lover? He was after all, tall, handsome, extroverted and certainly oversexed. All I can say is that some people have all the luck.

Rhea kept returning to Cairo every month or so for a couple of weeks to see Harry. They did not come to our house because my father was no longer alive but I saw her at the club and at the two or three Greek social centers where our countrymen congregated. It always amused me to hear Rhea, on announcing her imminent departure to Athens, expressing her concern about Harry. Would he be all right? Would he be faithful? After all, a man on his own, lonely and all that, one is never sure that he will not start looking around. She was very worried! The children had grown and had left Egypt for studies abroad and Harry was completely alone.

Eventually he sold his unnecessary business, which in reality was just his pastime and moved to Greece, maybe to Rhea's consternation. But she could not very well forbid it. They kept their lovely flat on the Nile and returned to it now and then because Rhea had an extended family from her mother's side and the fact that they were wealthy was one more reason for keeping in close touch.

Many years later, perhaps five or so, perhaps even more, Rhea's cousin married off her daughter. It was a marriage in grand style with the reception at the newest five-star Hotel in Cairo and people flying in from the four points of the globe

for it. Of course Cousin Harry, Rhea and their children were there. Lisa and Fanny, too. I had not seen them for quite a few years. Truly they all looked well on that happy occasion. Well dressed, well coiffed, well made up. Even Cousin Harry who was getting on in years. I expected to see Hassan in the hullabaloo but he was nowhere in sight. Rhea was looking gorgeous despite a hint of pudginess and a few new lines on her face. The rumor was that she enjoyed her drink. She knew just about everyone at the reception, had just come in from a yearlong absence in Greece and people were stepping all over each other to say hello, to give her a kiss and hear her voice and easy, lighthearted laughter. Cousin Harry, cool and collected, shook hands with a less than hearty, condescending half-smile. I was stuck at a table with some people I knew but for whom I felt not the slightest bonding or interest. I was bored to death and tried to alleviate my unhappiness with one whisky after another. Every now and then I got up and roamed the vast ballroom to try and unearth an acquaintance to exchange a few pleasantries. There was music, of course, and young people were dancing both slows and the fast, beat-thumping, anything-goes style of dancing.

The three sisters, Harry and their children sat together at a large table with other members of that solidary clan. I went up to them and tried to initiate a little conversation but the music and the noise and the milling crowds defeated my attempts at sociability. I am not much of a dancer but decided to give it a try. Rhea was my target but I disguised my intentions by asking first Lisa and then Fanny to dance. I had not seen them for some years and the conversation with both, while dancing, was stereotyped. A barely interesting exchange of news, a little banter and a few laughs. I kept the flirting to a minimum. I was not really interested. When I asked Rhea for a spin, she smiled and said, "In a while." I returned to my table annoyed, muttering to myself, 'Bloody bitch. Damned if I ask her again.' I sat down and continued the steady sipping of whisky. I was emptying the bottle single-handedly. The hors d'oeuvres were being served when she came to our table and said,

"Okay, get up young man."

I was not too steady on my legs but neither was she. We leaned on each other rather than embraced for dancing. Her breath was as alcoholic as mine. It mingled with her heady perfume and aroused me. It suggested sexual improprieties.

I held her tightly and we started shuffling trying to keep moving with the beat. After a few moments I looked at her. We smiled at each other.

"In my life I have yet to meet a sexier person than you," I told her.

She giggled.

"So where were you all these years?"

"One step behind, salivating whenever I saw you."

"You poor kid. But don't blame me."

"There was a tall, handsome fellow, who's missing tonight, making you happy."

She made a grimace. We were dancing slowly, tightly, to fast music with a terrific beat. We kept time in slow motion. It was heavenly to feel her breasts, her belly and her legs. Her tight clasp. Her hair in my face.

"Ancient history," she said.

"What?"

"Hassan."

"Oh? Anything going in our contemporary world?"

She giggled again.

"Now and then."

I had the feeling she had given up pretence with me.

“I would have preferred the now and then, was then and now,” I said.

“Come to Athens.”

“Are you serious or are you just drunk?”

We swayed so nicely. A move every third beat. A look every third move. A smile with every look.

“Both. A little drunk, yes, but my mind is clear. Think about it. I like the way you hold me tight.”

“So do I. The way I hold you and the way you hold me.”

We danced for a while silently, concentrating on sensations. Then I started feeling anxious. I had an erection.

“Talk to me. Distract me because I shall not be able to return to my seat,” I said.

“I can feel it. It’s nice. Makes me feel desirable.”

“Oh stop fishing for compliments.”

“I still have what it takes?”

“You bowl me over. Always have.”

The music stopped for a moment. It was time for dinner. The waiters were swarming with trays and plates and wine bottles. The dance floor emptied and a quieter, calmer music was on to induce a serene mastication of food and assist the digestion. I lingered with Rhea for a moment to let my arousal subside.

“Your children are very nice,” I told her.

“They are studying in Switzerland.”

“Terrific.”

“You should get married,” she said. “What are you waiting for?”

“To fall in love.”

“You little idiot. Marriage is not for love. It’s a bit like a business arrangement. It is to anchor your life and to have children.”

“Not everyone sees it this way.”

“I suppose not.” She looked at my fly. “Can you now return to your table?”

“Yes. I enjoyed the fusing of our bodies even if it was over clothes.”

She laughed.

“So did I.”

I sat again at our table for the interminable three-course dinner, followed by the cutting of a huge five-storey wedding cake by the newlyweds, the silly feeding it to each other and the drinking of champagne with looping arms. A tasteless, worn out display of love and happiness. As the waiters were cutting and distributing the wedding cake I got up to go to the toilet. I asked a waiter the way, walked down a corridor and opened a door to enter a vestibule with the two toilet doors opposite; one emblazoned with a small outline of a man and the other of a woman.

The women’s door opened at that moment and Rhea came out. I think a shock wave, a jolt hit us both. We were alone. Not a sound to be heard. I went to her without thinking, in the haze of whisky, as if drawn by an invisible force. She was not surprised. She embraced me as soon as I put my arms around her and her tongue entered my mouth directly our lips touched. We kissed furiously, passionately, madly and then after a moment we stopped. It could not go on. Someone might come in. She looked at me. Her face was flushed, her eyes wild and shining.

“There’s no one inside,” she said.

She took my hand and pulled me hastily to the women’s toilet. We ran to the farthest cubicle, went inside and locked the door. It was spacious and clean. We burst out laughing, silently, choking our mirth as best we could. We started kissing again

with the desperation of long-lost lovers. Oh the fire in that woman! She was trembling, vibrating, messing my hair, licking my ear, biting my nose, giggling, undoing my fly, pulling out my penis, deep-throating me with her mouth. Tittering, whispering,

“What a way to meet. Like two queers in a toilet.”

“Yes. Boy what a hot, bitch-goddess you are. Quick. We haven’t got much time.”

I pulled off my shoes, threw my jacket on the floor, undid my belt and slipped off my trousers and slip. I sat on the toilet seat. She pulled up her dress and I saw her lovely, shapely legs and brief panties. I pulled them down. I caressed her behind, she opened her legs and I felt her sopping vulva. She came to me holding up her dress and sat on my penis with a loud intake of breath and her mouth stuck on mine like a leech. I thought she would uproot my tongue. She started moving violently. On and on. So violently I slipped out of her now and then.

“You’re hard as a rock, cousin. It’s so nice.”

“I’ve wanted to make love to you for so long, Rhea.”

“So have I. Oh God, it’s coming again. Another orgasm.”

It took some time, with all that whisky in me, to ejaculate and by the time we finished we were practically dead. Two ladies came in, separately, while we were in action and we were motionless and silent until they left. Rhea wiped herself with toilet paper, pulled on her panties as soon as we finished. She was sweating and dabbed as much of her perspiration as she could from her face with paper tissue, careful not to mess up her makeup and left in a hurry. She could not risk dragging it any longer.

“Call me on the phone,” she whispered. “I’m staying a few more days in Cairo. Maybe we can meet.”

I lingered a while longer and dressed slowly. I exited from the cubicle when it was quiet and was fixing my disheveled hair, with my hands, at the mirror, when a woman came in. She was shocked to find me there. Luckily, we were not acquainted.

“This is the women’s toilet,” she said with a vexed voice.

“I’m sorry,” I answered. “I am a little dizzy and I didn’t realize it.”

I left the toilet and went directly to the main hotel entrance. I took my car from the parking lot and drove straight home. It was rude to leave without saying goodbye to my hosts but the party had ended for me and I was sure they would not miss me. I did not want to be seen in this state of dishevelment, exhaustion and utter, radiant happiness. I tried calling Rhea, twice a day, for the next three days but Cousin Harry kept answering the phone and I clicked off every time. He must have been used to this sort of thing. And when, on the following days, there was no answer at all, I assumed they had left for Athens. I was disappointed but one very big craving of my life had been fulfilled. Oh yes, it whetted my appetite for more but life is stingy sometimes with its hand-outs. It gives more to some than to others. And one tends to think that the lucky ones are more undeserving than oneself. That is why since ancient times our artists have depicted luck as a lovely lady bearing the *cornu copiae*, horn of plenty, with her eyes covered.

A year later, I followed the tide of Greek exodus and left Egypt for good. In Athens, when I first arrived I thought of Rhea often. I tried calling her a few times but Cousin Harry seemed to be doing guard duty at the phone. After a while, I gave up and though, since the wedding, she was obsessively established in a permanent niche in my brain and lusty thoughts, the anxieties of a new life in Greece and the new range of sexual opportunities it offered, kept me from pursuing what I have come to

think as an almost inescapable fate. It is ironical that a funeral should revive a longing that was nearly moribund. That if our fellow Cairene had not died then, we would perhaps have died later with one experience less. With an obsession ungratified. And if in our miserable lives we do not indulge our obsessions, why are we alive?

I remembered her words. "Come to Athens," she had said. Well, five years had gone by but perhaps the implied connotation still held. Would Cousin Harry keep answering the phone? I vacillated a few days about calling again but in the end, I thought, what the hell, give it a try. Sure enough, he answered the phone and I told him I saw Rhea at the funeral and how we had lost touch with each other and that I would like to see them. He seemed pleased to hear from me and told me he frequently heard from my mother who kept in touch and both he and Rhea wondered when I would finally call them.

"You must come and see us," he added. "Here, Rhea wants to talk to you."

A short pause. I heard the television playing and her muffled voice, "Turn it down, Harry." The sound was subdued and then her voice came loud and clear.

"Hello stranger," she said.

"Hello beautiful," I said.

She giggled.

"Funerals and marriages seem to bring us together once in a blue moon."

"Yes. Funerals are sad reminders that life is short. Marriages are much nicer."

"Much, much nicer," she said laughing.

"However, there are lessons to be drawn from both."

"Oh, absolutely. Anyway, don't preach to me. You are the laggard."

"Yes I am. I shall try to make it up."

"Good."

I was happy. I felt a message had been sent and a favorable reply received. We made small talk about our families, her children and the tribe she left behind in Cairo. She still returned there twice a year to see them. We were coming to the end of our conversation and I wondered how to formulate an opening when she came to the rescue.

"By the way, Tony, I shall be in town after tomorrow. Would you like to meet me for a coffee?"

"Of course. I'd love to."

"Syndagma at 12? At the metro station?"

"Fine. Are your lovely legs in good shape?"

She laughed.

"Oh yes. They open and close as required."

"You really are a killer, Rhea. See you Thursday."

Thursday, I took the day off from work. I worked in a multinational pharmaceuticals company as an economic analyst-statistician. I lived nearby which was very convenient since I did not own a car. I lived alone ever since I got the job a year after moving to Greece. I was rather isolated in my life and liked it that way. My sister was married by now and my mother lived alone. Mother kept in touch with the many friends and acquaintances from Egypt and she paid and received visits from friends. Sometimes I joined her at her home to see some of the friends I liked but mostly I claimed I was busy. I had a few affairs which never lasted too long because the girls were usually eager to get married and I did not meet one which I felt I could face the rest of my life. I had an off-and-on steady girlfriend. Anita. A childless divorcee who did not push me to make an honest woman of her since the dreaded Greek stigma of remaining on the shelf was no longer valid. She was petite, a few

years younger than me, with dyed blond hair and a terribly sweet smile. I grew very fond of her because of that smile and because she was a wonderful, uninhibited lover. An enthusiastic partner who was willing to try any sexual innovation I suggested. Any sexual perversion for that matter and, well, I sort of was half in love with her. It must have been love, though perhaps not the kind of soul wrenching madness I dreamed of. And it sometimes switched off and then after a short absence, switched on again. It was the placid, good-natured way she accepted our separations that kept me returning to her. She would tell me, 'Yes, quite honestly, I need a rest from you, too.' But I knew she was there, available, waiting for me while I was fooling around in bars and disreputable nightclubs looking for a change, for a fast one-night stand. It was a great comfort.

I tidied up my flat and changed the sheets just in case. I dressed well that day. As well as I could with my neglected wardrobe. I knew Rhea was a smart dresser and I did not want to feel deficient. She was late, of course. I did not expect punctuality. But when I saw her, almost an hour after the appointed time, my exasperation evaporated. I felt the adrenaline pumping. A forty-something woman you would not exchange for the sexiest twenty-year-old. To me she was the eternal female who embodied all the failings and strengths of her sex. Faithlessness, fickleness, sensuality, flirtatiousness, stylishness, motherhood, gaiety and good humor. She was, of course, a *femme fatale*, mature by now, emanating worldly sophistication, exceptionally well preserved for her age and her still voluptuous body sent shivers down my spine. Despite my own experience and bluster, I still felt awed in her presence.

She called me in the crowd, kissed me with a smile, asked if she was late. I ignored the question. It was irrelevant. She took my arm and we moved slowly down the square.

"You look smashing," I said. "And the limp is gone."

"Cortisone."

"How's Cousin Harry?"

"Stagnating. He never wants to go out of the house. I cannot stagnate with him. So I have to invent little chores to get out."

"Like today?"

"And yesterday and tomorrow. Yes."

"Life is never perfect, is it?"

"No. We have to make adjustments."

"Today, is it another adjustment?"

She turned and smiled.

"Perhaps," she said.

We crossed to Stadiou Street and slowly walked towards Omonia. Arm in arm with an easy flow of small talk and a fair amount of shop window perusal. Mostly she was dismissive of the merchandise displayed. "Rags," she kept on saying with a laugh, "Simply rags." They seemed fine to me.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Wherever you want. For a coffee?"

On the way she pulled me by the arm and we entered a shop. She started rummaging the shelves and the innumerable dresses hanging in long rows of stands, left and right, forming an alley. She kept it up for a while and I followed her, a step behind. After a while I was bored and asked her, "And these are not rags?"

She laughed.

"Mostly yes, but now and then I find something I like."

We entered another two shops and spent some time there and to relieve my boredom I started kissing her neck from behind when no one was around. Lifting her hair and kissing her. Putting my hands on her waist and feeling her lovely, fleshy haunches. She turned round and smiled.

“Just a minute longer,” she told me. “Forgive me. It’s a mania of mine this treasure hunt.”

Finally we left empty handed. She did not find any treasures buried in the rags. We walked on towards Omonia Square arm in arm, the hectic, hurrying hordes jostling us. It was past two and I suggested we have lunch instead of a coffee. There are innumerable eating places around Omonia but I figured they were not up to her standards. Something comparable to the rags she rummaged.

“Shall we take a taxi to the GB Corner?” I asked her.

“No need. Let’s find a place around here.”

Good, I thought. My flat was within walking distance. We entered a decent looking restaurant and ordered *condosouvli*, salads and wine. There was very little in common between us apart from that undercurrent of sex that kept me inflamed. Perhaps it kept her inflamed too. Or, at least, interested. I was not totally sure about that, about how far she intended to go. And yet the conversation flowed easily. Cairo, our acquaintances, her family, marriages, divorces, births, deaths, scandals. Money, too, of course. She was not on speaking terms with her sisters because of inheritance differences.

“But you have so much of it, Rhea. Do you need to quarrel for a little more?”

“And deprive my children of their rights?”

Always the children. Forever disguising greed as altruism.

We drank a lot of wine. She could put it away! It brought on the giggles and the peals of laughter, insinuations and merriment. The meat was tender and tasty. I kept on thinking of Rhea. Perhaps not so tender any longer but undoubtedly tasty. She was right in front of me and I daydreamed about her. The eyes, the mouth, the dreamy look. Those lovely breasts. Would they be revealed?

We took ages over our meal, had coffee, and eventually got up. A little unsteadily, at that. She kissed me on the cheek.

“Thank you Tony, I really had a lot of fun. Let’s do it again soon.”

I was flabbergasted. I just looked at her.

“Will you walk me to the station? I left my car at the Aghios Demetrios metro terminal to save myself the hassle of traffic and finding parking space.”

“I was hoping you would come round to my flat to see my stamp collection,” I told her and caressed her behind.

She laughed.

“Some other time, Tony baby. It’s already past four and I have another hour till I reach home. Harry will start getting worried.”

“Mea culpa. We should have gone for just a coffee.”

“But we had a wonderful time, didn’t we? Call me up next week.”

I walked her to Omonia and we took the underground to Syndaghma where she changed trains for Aghios Demetrios. When the train clanged into the station she kissed me on the cheek and said,

“Call me next week.”

You bloody bitch, I thought. You can bloody well wait.

I did not call her again. About a month later I received a phone call from Cousin Harry. He was unusually warm and told me that I had not kept my promise to go and see them. He invited me for lunch the following Sunday.

“We shall be alone,” he said. “Rhea is looking forward to seeing you.”

His unaccustomed warmth caught me unawares and I was unable to concoct a plausible excuse on the spur of the moment to avoid his invitation. On Sunday, I bought some pastries and took a cab to their suburb which was some way off with no viable public transport. Their home was a truly palatial flat with huge, beautifully furnished living rooms and verandas with a view to the sea. I was received with hearty kisses and reprimands for the pastries I brought with me.

“Thank you Tony,” Cousin Harry told me, “but at our age sweets are to be avoided. Still, we shall make an exception for today.”

He looked old and worn-out in a casual suit, a neck scarf in debonair style tucked inside his shirt and a trendy pair of eyeglasses obviously chosen by Rhea. She was nicely and simply dressed in a pair of tight-fitting trousers, a colorful silk shirt, a small red scarf around the neck and a beige sleeveless cardigan. With a little imagination she could have been his daughter.

She was gay and chirpy and giggly, as usual, and sexy, oh yes, as usual and she looked at me inquiringly. A question hovering unspoken, “Why didn’t you call?” I smiled and looked and thought about how money distorted the world. That this old man had access and possession of this lovely woman and how I, and many others like me, were furtively lusting for her. Yet it was Rhea, it seemed, who was the only one who had her options open. And what circumlocutions her mind went through was too complex for me to decipher.

We sat in the veranda with the heavenly view of the sea. Luxury that provides the luxury and beauty of nature. Rhea brought a silver platter of whisky and soda. In style: whisky in a crystal container and crystal-cut glasses. Whisky neat, because soda water ruins it, I was told.

“It’s our maid’s day off,” she said with a giggle. “I’m the Philippino today.”

“You’re our princess,” said Cousin Harry with a smile. “She’s done the cooking too, Tony.”

“Don’t scare him away, Harry. We had trouble enough bringing him here.”

All the while we were talking Rhea was in and out of the house. Setting the table at the veranda, taking a sip of whisky from her glass, rushing into the kitchen to rescue the roast from carbonization and in between her sips and rushing about, showing me pictures of her children, now living abroad, grown and good looking, ugly ducklings turned into swans like their mother. And Cousin Harry in a surprisingly garrulous mood reminiscing about my father and the Cairo of his youth. The strange turn of religious flare-up in that country, the spread of fanaticism, the intransigent, catastrophic overpopulation not only of Egypt but of the world.

“Do you think there’s a way out?” I asked.

“I really don’t know. I cannot see one. The trouble is, the slide to disaster is inexorable but slow. Slow enough to lull us into inaction. Lull our leaders, that is. Their only preoccupation being retaining power and lining their pockets. And then there are so many factors contributing to this inertia. Religion, for one. Islam with its powerful, all-encompassing hold on the masses and its fatal fatalism. A little aid from the US, a little oil discovered to tide the country over temporarily, the revolution of genetic modification of crops increasing crop output are all stopgaps because other commodities are becoming scarce. Water for one. Even in Egypt with the Nile.”

“Hey Harry, will you stop worrying about something you can do nothing about? When disaster strikes we shall be in our graves.”

“True, quite true. So, isn’t our lunch ready yet my darling Philippino?”

“Yes. Take a seat at the table.”

“And do bring us the bottle of Chablis, my love.”

We moved to the table and I was still trying to recover from my surprise of a Harry I had not envisaged before. Talkative, tender with his wife and extremely friendly with me. Rhea brought a roast and potatoes and salad. Cousin Harry opened the Chablis. We clinked glasses.

“To our happy reunion,” said Harry.

Slowly, ceremoniously we started eating.

“How’s the meat?” asked Rhea.

“Wonderful. Almost melts in one’s mouth,” I said.

“Flatterer,” she said with a giggle.

“So you see, that’s exactly it,” Cousin Harry was in a talkative mood.

“Because I cannot influence the present I tend to delve into the past. I read a good deal of History. It’s the only reading I do.”

“He’s quite a historian you know, Tony. I’m sure not many university professors know as much history as he does,” said Rhea.

“Let’s not exaggerate,” said Harry. “I simply read for pleasure.”

“He’s mad about Napoleon,” said Rhea.

“Oh yes. An extraordinary man. That short, ungainly little man was a package of extreme brilliance and stupendous energy. He was just unlucky that he was surrounded by worthless profiteers. At every turn someone betrayed him. Even his own family and relatives. Why? I cannot imagine. I would have been as faithful as a dog to such a brilliant, luminous personality.”

“Hardly luminous, Harry. Had he been that he would not have been cuckolded systematically by his darling Josephine. And he must have known it. A man like him would not be easily fooled. And then, from what you told me, Josephine did not take pains to hide her affairs. It was the talk of the town, or rather, the empire.”

“A man in love is a strange being. Love is a malady. You cannot judge him in conventional human terms.”

He looked at me for a couple of seconds. I wondered if he was trying to tell me something with that look.

Rhea giggled.

“He was a pervert,” she said. “When he was returning from a campaign he sent messages to Josephine asking her to refrain from bathing. Can you imagine? He wanted her to stink of piss and shit and perhaps the smell of sweat and sperm of the other men she slept with. Can you imagine a horseman galloping for days and days to bring home such an important message?”

“It was important to the Emperor, my dear,” Harry said, “and sex and its privation can drive one mad. Anyway, perversion is a human trait. Perhaps more widespread than we imagine. It is a product of circumstances and emotions. Please, my darling Rhea, will you open another bottle of Chablis? We made short shrift of this one and I have a story to tell Tony.”

Rhea made a face and smiled. “Yes master,” she said.

I looked at that beautiful woman get up and enter the house in the tight trousers showing a perfect behind and shapely legs. The wine had gone to my head and I was afraid my lascivious stare would be noticed. I wondered what Cousin Harry wanted to tell me. And why? When the wine arrived, was opened and served, Harry went on with the story.

“I had a close school friend at the Lycée, of a wealthy family who, at a moment of extreme fraternal intimacy, recounted the following story. His father was much older than his mother who was a harsh domineering woman. She maltreated her

husband mercilessly especially as they grew older and the man grew ill and weak. At some point he was bedridden and could not leave his bed. At the age of fourteen or fifteen, my friend was a boy scout. One afternoon he felt unwell and left the habitual weekly scout reunion and returned earlier than expected at home. He entered the house and heard noise in his mother's bedroom. He opened the door slightly, silently and saw his mother in bed with their young Arab chauffeur. He was shocked but also fascinated and excited by the spectacle and watched until the swarthy young man reached his orgasm. As they were dressing, his mother noticed that he was peeping and after the chauffeur left she took my friend to his room, screamed at him that he was brazen and shameless, slapped his face a few times and made him strip. She put him on his bed and beat him with a thin bamboo rod she kept for his punishment. She beat him on his behind pitilessly and my friend said that the beating together with the spectacle of his mother's coupling aroused him so much it caused him to ejaculate. Because of that beating my friend had a problem throughout his life. He could not be completely sexually satisfied unless he was beaten by his partner on his bare behind with a bamboo rod. So you see, my dear Tony, a perversion was created by this strange and unfortunate circumstance. Who knows how many thousands of similar cases exist in seemingly normal households?"

I did not know what to make of this story. Why was I told? Perversions did exist and I had some quirks of my own which I practiced with Anita. So did she, by the way. Nothing serious. Little things to spice one's sex life. Indeed the modern philosophy is that everything is allowed between consenting adults short of practices that impair one's life or health.

"Well," I said to Cousin Harry, "in our days that's almost normal. I suppose the chap's problem is finding a partner willing to perform the beating. Otherwise, my goodness, I have heard of sado-masochistic practices that make your hair stand on end."

"Such as?" piped in Rhea.

"Never mind. I could not possibly start relating these things just now."

"Oh come on." Rhea was interested.

"We've had a lovely lunch and a wonderful Chablis. Do you want to vomit it all out?"

"It's as bad as that?"

"It's so bad that you wonder that there are people who practice it and people who submit to it."

Rhea let out a peal of laughter.

"You make me feel like an innocent little virgin."

"Please be serious, my darling. This is going a bit too far," said Harry.

I was startled by this reprimand.

Rhea started collecting the plates and remaining food. We continued drinking the Chablis and talked about the Greek politics which were corrupt, hopeless and depressing. Going round and round in vicious circles of lies and scandals. Rhea before every trip to the kitchen took a hefty sip of wine and by the time she brought out the pastries the second bottle was empty. After we finished our sweet, Cousin Harry got up.

"You will have to excuse me, Tony. I take a nap after lunch. It is both doctor's orders and my own need for a midday rest. I am, after all, getting on in age. Thank you for coming and keeping us company and I hope we shall not have to wait as long for your next visit."

“It is I who has to thank you very much for a lovely lunch and such a pleasant time. I have to be going as well.”

“No, no, please stay a while to keep Rhea company. I am afraid she gets awfully bored when we are all alone. We have a maid that sleeps in but it’s her day off. So if you can, do stay a while longer.”

“Yes, do stay a while longer, Anthony,” Rhea said.

I looked at her. She never called me Anthony before. She giggled.

“I’ll get some of Harry’s five-star Courvoisier to finish our lunch in style.”

“I’m already half drunk.”

“The Courvoisier is a digestive.”

I laughed.

“Hardly,” I said.

“So what? We’ll get soused drunk together.”

Cousin Harry smiled and with a small wave retired into the house.

“Come let’s go inside,” Rhea said. “We’ll be more comfortable in the den.”

I got up and followed her. We entered the house passed by the entrance hall, past the main salon of period furniture, paintings, bibelots, chandeliers and shining white marble floors and further inside into a smaller room with comfortable leather armchairs and couches, a large TV set and HiFi equipment as well as a computer with the monitor and a small camera on top of its stand. As we were walking she stopped until I came abreast, put her arm around my waist and moved with me inside the den. I felt like turning, grabbing her and kissing her roughly, overpoweringly but didn’t dare. Not in Cousin Harry’s house.

“You’re such a tease,” I told her.

“You should know! You’re such a tease yourself. Having me wait in vain for your phone call.”

There was a bookcase with books and magazines in a corner. I disengaged myself and went to have a look.

“Harry’s history books and magazines,” she explained. “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll go get the Courvoisier and then we can have a look at them.”

She smiled at me, teasing me again. I sat on the wide leather couch and she went inside and returned with a crystal container and two large, spherical cognac glasses. She poured the cognac and handed me the glass. She took the other and sat next to me.

“Cheers,” she said.

“Cheers.”

We sipped the cognac. It was excellent. I felt it seep down my throat to my belly, burning, spreading its warmth. We were silent for a moment sipping, looking at each other. I felt relaxed and dizzy and leaned my head back on the couch. She finished her drink in one gulp and I did the same.

“What shall we do now?” she asked.

“I dunno.”

“Shall I open the TV?”

“Good idea.”

“Or would you rather have a look at the history books?”

“That’s not a bad idea either.”

She placed her glass on the table, leaned on me and kissed me on the lips.

“You’re such a tease,” she told me again.

“So are you, getting me worked up when you know we can do nothing.”

“Says who?” she said and kissed me again.

I could not resist her. I held her and our lips and tongues joined in frisky and increasingly passionate kisses. We kissed for a while and I felt my head spinning and my saliva dribbling from my mouth into hers and hers into mine. It was tender and moist and exciting and I felt her arousal in her quickening breath and fitful movements. I caressed and squeezed her wonderful breasts. She put her hand on my fly and felt the hardness. She pulled off my jacket, threw it on the armchair next to the couch and started unbuttoning my shirt. I held her hands.

“Are you crazy?” I asked her.

“Chickening out, Anthony?”

“No...but Harry?”

“Let me worry about that.”

“I wish I could.”

“Oh baby, where’s that devil-may-care spirit of the wedding?”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“It is. It is. Hurry, will you?”

She bent and took off her shoes. Got up and took off her trousers. Those ripe, still-shapely legs, those wide haunches choked me. I was a hair’s breadth from a stroke. She took off her panties and I felt my heartbeat throbbing like a fast-paced metronome. I jumped up as well and removed my shoes, trousers and boxer shorts. I sat on the couch and she straddled me burying me in her. Her warm, slippery insides were mind turning. We kissed violently and she started moving in all directions, in an expert search of voluptuous pleasure, kissing me, moaning. Her eyes closed, concentrating on this arcane and esoteric appetite. A call of nature, now sterile and purposeless because of age but the memory, the sensuality, the feeling, the abandon, the need and the lust of the exercise surviving triumphantly. On and on because of the inordinate alcohol flowing in my blood. Fast, slow, up, down, forwards, backwards, a circular contortion that made me smile in my agony. Until the final explosion left us dead and sweating.

My first impulse when we recovered:

“Rhea, let’s get dressed.”

She laughed.

“Let’s get undressed is more like it. Or are you finished, kaput?”

“But.....Harry?”

She did not answer. We had both fallen sideways on the couch, exhausted. She got up and started unbuttoning my shirt and then yanked off my flannel. She rose and took off her cardigan, shirt and undid her bra. She stood for a moment to let me look at her.

“Lovely tits,” I said. “First time I see them.”

“A little droopy but what do you expect at my age.”

She laughed.

“They need a dose of silicone,” she said.

“Don’t you dare. Don’t spoil them. They’re lovely as they are.”

She came and lay alongside of me. The couch was long but not very wide and we were stuck to one another. We started kissing again and touching and playing and arousing each other and by and by we made love in the humdrum missionary position and it was anything but humdrum. It was long winded, energetic, merry and noisy and we quite forgot that Cousin Harry might just walk in on us. Again when we finished we lay a while to rest. Rhea got up and asked to be excused for a minute and went inside the apartment. I assumed she wanted to use the toilet but a few minutes later I heard her shouting at Harry. My God, I thought, that was pretty thoughtless going into

the inner rooms naked. Harry must have seen her. I was worried and tiptoed to the door that separated the salons from the bedrooms. It was shut but I could still hear her voice coming through. She was shouting, almost hysterical.

“How dare you peep inside my bedroom? You are shameless and perverted. I didn’t know I had a Peeping-Tom for a son. I’ll give you a thrashing you’ll never forget. You depraved little pervert. You disgusting boy.”

I did not understand. I was totally confused. Barefoot and silent I opened the door and went down a wide corridor towards the room from which the row emanated. The door was ajar. I approached and cautiously peered inside. Harry was on his bed lying face downward. His pajama trousers were pulled down and a plump, white, hairy backside was uncovered. Rhea, naked as she was, held a thin bamboo stick and was whipping his backside for all she was worth. Harry was whimpering turning his head now one side, now the other. Opposite the bed was a TV monitor showing the empty couch in the den where we had sexual intercourse. I stood looking mesmerized while the whipping continued. After about a minute, Harry shouted, “That’s enough. For pity’s sake, that’s enough.” Rhea stopped. She was panting. She went up to Harry, sat on the side of the bed and caressed his hair. He turned his face towards her and she kissed him on the lips.

“Happy, now, my darling?” she asked, her voice soft and tender.

I tiptoed back to the den closing the door behind me. I sat on the couch. Cousin Harry could now see me, naked as I was, on his screen. Suddenly, it came to me that I was the porno star of Harry’s fantasy. The scenario was the story of his friend. Only it was not his friend’s but his own real life story that had left him maimed. The little camera on the computer took everything in. And another thing I had not realized was that Rhea did truly love her husband however convoluted and selfish her life may have been.

The next day I put in a phone call.

“Anita?”

“Tony?”

“How are you?”

“Well enough. And you?”

“Well enough. Did you miss me?”

I envisaged a smile.

“Now and then,” she said. “And you?”

“Yes.”

“It took you pretty long to call though.”

“That is irrelevant.”

She laughed.

“You’ve always had a contrived and sly sense of logic.”

“That too is irrelevant. Have you been faithful?”

“Mind your own business. Have you?”

“Mind your own business.”

“Well what do you want, Casanova?”

“Will you come over this evening?”

“Okay.”

“Bring some clothes so you can stay a few days.”

“Okay.”

Athens 27th February 2007