

**THE FRAGRANCE OF EGYPT
THROUGH FIVE STORIES**

by George Loukas

email: gloukait@gmail.com

A THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS IN CAIRO

CHEZ RAYMOND

THE SPORTING LIFE

A CASE OF SELF RESPECT

LETTERS TO DR. FATTHI AND OTHER SECRETS

ALF LEILA OU LEILA FI AL-KAHIRA

(A Thousand and One Nights in Cairo)

One cannot shake off one's roots. I keep returning to the country of my birth in my flights of memory. To my life, there, to its people, to its tortured history. I feel a need to express my love and hate and prejudices. To talk about the Good and the Bad. God and the Devil. Adam and Eve. The Sheikhs and the Hypocrites. The Humble and the Arrogant. To talk about a dream I had. Which was, perhaps, not a dream.

This is a love story. Love is all that counts.

Rodolfo Valentino was a dashing Sheikh. In Egypt, even if he is long forgotten, his name still holds good to describe a dashing fellow, a seducer of women. Or since seductions have been on the wane in the wake of the Islamic renaissance of the past two or three decades and the strengthening of religious orthodoxy, one is called, a mite ironically, a Valentino if one gets along well with the opposite sex and is appropriately narcissistic. I imagine the Sheikh that Valentino portrayed, for I did not see the legendary film, was an *emir*, a prince, a leader of a clan and such persons in Islamic history had always a direct connection to the Prophet and hence to God. A political leader was always at the same time a religious leader. Being autocratic and dictatorial, Sheikhs needed divine dispensation, a divine *raison d' être*.

But ordinarily, a Sheikh is a holy man of Islam. He might be a learned religious scholar or an illiterate person who is devoted to religion and lives by its tenets and practices, as well as he knows them and understands them and as honestly and earnestly as he is willing to follow them. Let me come out at once with my prejudices and biases. To be fair to myself, these biases are the accretion of my experiences of the half-century I have been alive on this earth, living and working in a Moslem country. I do not wish to calumniate anyone, much less genuinely holy people. The few, the very, very few that exist. But it has been my experience that, generally, the more a man prays, the more he refers to God, the more he alludes his attachment to his faith, the less his goodness, his decency, honesty and rectitude. The greater his hypocrisy and moral degeneration. This, of course, is not a feature solely of Islam but of all religions where God is thought to be intimately implicated in and to be fine-tuning the lives of the faithful. It is much more obvious in Egypt as both Moslems and Copts, being basically one and the same race, are obsessed by God and sheikhs proliferate. God is the constant reference point of their fortunes and misfortunes, of the homilies and sayings that color their conversations. They are forever grateful to Him for the good and the bad in their lives and He is the sole repository of their hopes.

I have had my ample share of Sheikhs. I have learnt much from them for they are, after all, human beings but with this peculiarity that tends to exaggerate and reveal their failings and, rather less frequently, any positive qualities they might possess. I have witnessed, without fully understanding, their proliferation as a result of a dramatic growth in the strict religious adherence of the populace primarily to Islam. It was already reasonably strong in the sixties; it has become practically an obsession at the turn of the millenium. Apparent in the faithful observance to the duties of a Moslem. Prayer, fasting,

the preoccupation even of the poorer Moslems with the pilgrimage to Mecca and to almsgiving, which is necessarily less apparent and private. Also, the spurning of alcohol by former consumers and especially the covering up of women has fascinated me. More so because it has taken place with the fullest approval of the female population. It is a sort of complacent and masochistic self-classification of their sex to an inferior category to men. All this, quite apart from the growth of fanaticism, extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism.

What is it that manages to distort the human mind and lead it to these extremes of belief and behavior? That keeps it forever obsessed by the concept of God, His requirements, demands and rewards? I believe it is the unholy alliance of ignorance and poverty with an emphasis on poverty as the main cause because ignorance is very much a result of it. I have lived and worked in the midst of poverty. In the midst of ignorance.

When I returned, Egypt was firmly anchored in the thralls of socialism. I had come from another socialist country, England, ruled these last few years by a socialist Labor Government. There should not have been much of a difference. I am not referring to wealth. There could be no comparison. I was thinking of the spirit, the quintessence of socialism. But, alas, it was another world. Egypt seemed to have concentrated in its political and social landscape all of socialism's evils. To start with, it was a dictatorship. Gamal Abdel Nasser was firmly on the saddle. He was not a murderous Stalin but he did have a fearful security network, a fair amount of torture, some '*desaparecidos*' and one was not apt to express one's opinions too freely or too loudly. He did have concentration camps but these were far away from us as we were not involved in any subversive political activities and had no manifest affection either for communism or for Moslem brotherhoods.

We, the governed, just experienced the ordinary everyday miseries, the petty and not so petty corruptions all around us, the unending rumors that a managed press generates, the long queues outside the cooperatives and waiting lists to buy the shoddy products of our nationalized industries. To suffer the arrogance of our rulers and army officers who were far better able to oppress than defend their countrymen, as history has shown. Above all, the progress which was nothing more than a gradual but steady downward slide in the material and moral circumstances of the country and resulted, two decades later, in the government's desperate recourse to capitalism to redress the ills of socialism. But was it not already too late?

It is ridiculous to try to compress the processes of decades in a paragraph and perhaps it is also unfair. It obviously needs many tomes of historical detail and analysis by a dispassionate historian. Can one be dispassionate after fifty years of the 1952 Revolution? Perhaps not. In any case, I make no such claims and I am out just to give some personal impressions and relive and take stock of the early days after my return from England to enter my father's business, which he was no longer able to manage due to illness and old age. It is my life that concerns me, that dominates my memories. And it is my memories that engross me at this stage of my life. Why this contemplation of the past? I do not rightly know for, in truth, I do not count. I do not matter. I have not made the slightest mark, nay, the faintest trace in history. What history? I have not made the slightest mark even in my milieu. I have not been admired or noticed much. I have achieved nothing remarkable. So why am I so anxious to put my life down in writing?

Let the story decide.

Let the reader.

From England to Egypt in the late sixties. Two countries that have in common not much more than the first capital letter of their names. The contrast literally slams you at the airport.

Cairo. Al Kahira. Not of a thousand and one nights but a city of a thousand and one years. With a thousand and one reasons to hate it. With a thousand and one reasons to love it.

The airport. First impressions: noise, movement, confusion, the lack of order, the diversity of the populace, the obsequiousness of the poor to the rich, of the low ranks to the high. The bowing, the military-style saluting, the ingratiating smiles, the body language of mute requests for baksheesh, the perpetual dissatisfaction with the amount offered, the readiness to cheat, the breaking of ranks of the influential to get their passports stamped, their luggage retrieved before everyone else. The flagrant, unhesitating one-upmanship. The arrogance of the police officers who check your passport without a sign of civility, without a smile. The titles Bey and Pasha thrown carelessly around, remnants of a feudal culture that the Socialist Revolution has not eradicated but, oddly, reinforced. The dust, the rubbish strewn around, the smells that assail your nostrils, the ramshackle taxis at the entrance and their cantankerous, dishonest drivers. The enterprising porters that grab your luggage without being asked. The Egyptians, short, swarthy, badly dressed and scruffy. Not a good-looking lot but with operatic vocal chords and an innate need to exercise them to the fullest. You are in a daze. It's all coming back. It is amusing and oppressing.

You are finally out. You have kissed your loved ones. You look at the sky and see the stars in the crystal clear atmosphere. Yes, this is Egypt. You have left the cold, the clouds and the rain and you feel comfortable in the cool night. You do not know if you did the right thing to return. The fatigued countenance of your father tells you, you did well. You are not reassured. You have been away too long. You have left part of your life behind just as you are returning to the part of your life before that.

The car crosses a stretch of desert. You remember your love of the desert. It is because it is so empty. It is a place where you can be alone in a terrible vastness. It reminds you that you are not the center of the universe. Just another grain of sand. It is a place that heals. You remember the Sunday outings, there, with your parents. Many, many years ago. Stopping by the road near a hillock of very fine, very clean, pastel yellow sand. You remember the running and rolling and somersaults. The feel of the sand. Soft and dry and fluid. You remember trying to reach the top of the hillock with the sand sliding continuously preventing you from climbing any further however hard you tried with hands and feet. You remember that grandmother was present in her black Sunday finery. She is long gone. We are all birds of passage. You remember the English army camps and the convoys of trucks passing by and the pink English faces. How strange and out of place they were. The war had ended and they were about to leave. The final days of Empire.

You reach home. The suburbs have grown and changed but downtown Cairo is the same. More worn out and shabby but otherwise much the same. Socialism has not been kind to it. It has not been kind to anyone except the élite. The élite of arrogance and mediocrity that are ruling the country. It has not been kind to our apartment building. With the diminution of rents, by law, to ridiculous levels there is no longer any desire or

initiative by the landlords to upkeep their property. Only the very poor bless the Revolution and feel blessed. They do not know how temporary these blessings are. You see familiar faces five years later. You have grown, they have aged. You kiss your servant. He is shorter than you remember, darker and stouter, but as jolly as ever. He does not take life seriously. He has surrendered responsibility to the will of Allah. He has little to lose, little to gain. Perhaps that is the secret for happiness. A difficult formula. You enter your room. It has shrunk a little but it is the home in your home. Your sanctum with your bed and your books. You lie down. You think. So that's that. There's no going back.

A week to rest, to be acclimatized. To fall in line smoothly. To forget your life there. You did not have an overriding reason to stay. You were both lucky and unlucky. Lucky not to have fallen desperately in love, which would involve a wrenching separation. But also unlucky not to have fallen desperately in love. It was your dream to live passionately. Except that you lived in the wrong century. You did not have the time, the wealth, your castle and horses and a ravishing maiden to lose your mind over. Your days were more mundane. It helped that you always considered England to be something temporary. Your life there, your jobs, your friendships, your dallying with girls, your crushes and occasional attachments. You knew they would end sooner rather than later. Now you tried to forget.

You tried to rediscover Egypt. Beyond the obvious, the almost banal. Could the Nile ever be banal? The Nile you loved? The Nile that awed you, that satisfied your aesthetic nature, beautified the city and quenched the thirst of half a continent? Could the pyramids be banal, the Sphinx, the tombs and antiquities? The Islamic past, the mosques, the artistry, the unique surviving buildings and artifacts? And the present which is still in the past? The desert, the peaceful countryside, the fellaheen still tilling and watering the land in the manner of the Pharaohs. The water buffaloes, tiny donkeys pulling the carts, the date palm trees and the clear blue skies? You set out to find the heart that beats in the thick of the city.

You went for long walks outside the 'European' city center. In the poorer fringes of Cairo. Depressing, drab streets and poverty. You stared and were stared at. You were an intruder in the helplessness, in the dirt, in the stench. In the hopelessness of unwashed, barefoot children. A witness to a galloping birth rate. To the improved hospitals and hygiene that kept them alive to have them play ball with a stuffed sock amid rubbish, stagnant, muddy ditches and clouds of flies. On to a sketchy, unmotivated education, a God-fearing fatalistic ignorance, an early emergence in the job market, an early marriage to have them, in their turn, perpetuate the senseless proliferation of human life and the cycle of misery of their lot. No. You did not get much out of those walks. Not much hope. Not much optimism. Just a sense of powerlessness and the realization of the very poor long-term prospects of Egypt.

You did not neglect the amenities of your class. You went to the club to play squash racquets and tennis, to swim in the pool, to meet old friends. They would be useful to make your life bearable. And you wondered about girls and sex. That would be a problem. Egypt was still Victorian. Well, not quite, but pretty close. And you did not feel ready for marriage. You had hardly started to earn your living. You still yearned for the passionate love affair but the climate promised nothing.

You entered the family business. A small industrial concern. You entered at the top and learned from subordinates. Father was there for a time to guide you. Then he left

the country and a little later left this world. You started learning a new alphabet. Absorbing and revolting at the same time. The Revolution had turned socialist and the government had nationalized all the major industries and had grouped them, as was the usual method, into huge agglomerations. It had done the same with the import-export trade. A few giant governmental companies managed the commercial exchanges of the country. We had just managed to slip through the sweep up of nationalization being too small but were delegated to purgatory. We had all the business we could manage but were treated by the government with contempt and a deliberate discrimination that was not only unfair but also logically inexplicable.

Our lifeline was in the hands of the governmental organizations. We had to beg, wheedle and bribe for our raw materials and the tools we needed for our work and put up with the arrogance of petty bureaucrats who had the power to negate and deny our requests with no appeal. Our money had no value without their nod of assent. Socialism had cancelled the laws of supply and demand. Could such perversity have, possibly, had results other than the ones the country experienced? The moral and material bankruptcy of socialism and the desperate recourse to private initiative two decades later.

The other side of the coin was that the governmental organizations were our major clients. The government had prohibited the commissions that were until then freely paid to the persons responsible for cooperating with you and yet bribing flowered to unprecedented levels. There was no contract that could be executed in a trouble-free manner without the indispensable bribe. Ironically, the illegality multiplied the prospective beneficiaries. Whereas, previously, you dealt with the main person responsible, with the new prohibitions responsibilities vanished and all the people that could throw a wrench in the gears had to be mollified with a little something.

I would paraphrase the saying that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, to, socialism corrupts and absolute socialism corrupts absolutely. Systems of government based on idealism, altruism and enforced equality never work for the simple reason that people are neither equal nor selfless. The only reliable principle on which to base a political system is that of self-interest. Oh yes, it can be deformed and perverted but it is, finally, given our human nature, indeed the nature of every species on this earth, the only realistic proposition.

I started the story by talking of Sheiks and I am about to return to them. It is not an irrelevant diversion. I made it clear above, the main subject is myself, and my memories. Sheiks come into it because they were part of the landscape I inhabited in those days and because of one extraordinary man, a truly holy man, who crossed and marked my life. Holy and compassionate in the most unusual, unconventionally generous and selfless way I could have ever imagined. It was a generosity born of a deep love and the desire to be fair to a person who had offered him beauty and happiness in his life. He was not a Sheikh though he would have been a model. Had the full extent of his goodness been known he would have been laughed at, ridiculed. Perhaps, even insulted.

Our workforce was a mixed bag. I sometimes think of them. A few, I liked. For most I felt a contempt born of but also tempered by familiarity. Some I despised. Well, it is normal to have differing views for different individuals. You cannot love or hate wholesale; though many a time, I came pretty close to that. They were a hundred and fifty strong. A dozen white-collar employees, half of the rest skilled technicians and the other half apprentices and a few porters who did the lifting and hauling of heavy work pieces.

Most were Moslem with a few Copts reflecting their ten percent of the national structure. Most were uneducated. A few could read a newspaper, most could just about sign their names and some used their inked fingerprints for signature on documents they could not read. It was quite safe. What could you steal or misappropriate from a person who had nothing? For they did live lives of privation and misery.

Of course, one gets used to the most atrocious conditions but I have had occasion to shudder at the living standards of some of our workers. The deprived of poor countries live in a hellish underworld of narrow, unpaved, muddy lanes, rickety housing, cramped space, lack of privacy and sanitary facilities, proliferation of smells, insects, pests and refuse. They are the perpetrators of the inevitable racket and quarrels that arise in such conditions of packed humanity and glut of children. No wonder most of our employees spent their out-of-work periods in coffee houses. They only went home to sleep after the kids were packed like sardines on a mattress on the floor of the single room the whole family lived in. Even their meals were wolfed down on the go, disorderly, as hunger struck. *Foul* (bean) sandwiches, *koshari* (lentils and rice), sweet potatoes, macaroni packed in the hollow of the local bread with spiced tomato sauce and, on payday, a liver and sausage sandwich or a little kebab (meat on the spit). For dessert, a large sweet Pepsi would be fine. Heaven knows what the wife and children would eat. They had to make do with the weekly sum that the father allotted for the home.

Meat was a luxury. A constant obsession and conversation topic. Well, it was not totally absent from their diet but the extent of the poverty of the country, of the Arab lands in general, was evident in the nature of their feasts. One was for eating meat, another where they gorged on sweets and yet another where they bought new clothes. It was funny and sad to see the whole of the poor population proudly parading on the streets on the day of the feast in brand-new, cheap, ill-fitting clothes, limping in toe-pinching shoes that would have to last them until the next feast.

Sociologists debate as to whether one can assign the concept of national character to a country of a more or less homogeneous population. Whether such a concept can be objective and scientific when so much depends on environmental conditions and innumerable variables.

Can one accuse Egyptians of being inherently dirty without taking into account their living standards and sanitary facilities? Even keeping a city clean presupposes adequate funds. Education can instill awareness, good habits and a conscientious work ethic. Can one accuse Egyptian workers of being lazy when they cannot write their own name, when they can hardly fill their bellies and keep their family clothed? Can one accuse them of thoughtlessness at the rate of which they reproduce when the means for contraception are lacking, when their culture is fatalistic and asserts that everyone is born with his fate preordained and that God forgets no one? When it is acceptable to send away a beggar by telling him, May God ease your situation. Can I call them a nation of liars when they have been throughout most their history under foreign domination and had to cringe and steal and lie to survive? Can I deride them for being fixated on religion when their present is so pathetic and their future so lacking in the slightest hope of improvement that religion provides their only source of solace through the promise of an afterlife of plenty to sate their lurking hunger and sexual obsessions? I am providing excuses for these traits I allege lest I be called a racist.

Ignorance is the pedestal of religious fanaticism. Religion thrives in a climate of ignorance. It is a vicious circle that is a noose around the Moslem nations and can only be broken by education. Other political factors come into play but education is the only effective remedy to the rantings of the mullahs. However, education presupposes better living standards and so the problem looms vast and insoluble. Quite beyond my abilities to write a prescription. I have only my memories to contend with and to help me provide a quaint picture to my reader.

From Sheikh Ali I learnt patience. A Moslem prays five times a day, three of which were scheduled during working hours. Before every single prayer the faithful must wash their face, ears and neck, rinse their mouths and blow their noses, wash their arms up to their elbow and their feet up to the knee. Sheikh Ali was a young man of twenty-five, short and thin with the traditional beard of the Sheikh without a mustache. He was not unpleasant to look at and had a piercing gaze though usually, in conversation, he did not look at you in the eye. Every time I entered the factory, Sheikh Ali seemed either to be going to the bathroom for pre-prayer ablutions or coming out of it with his towel, heading for the spot where his mat was placed facing Mecca for his prayers. I often wondered at this ability of Moslems to know instinctively, like a human compass, the direction of Mecca. Well, the prayer lasts around ten minutes and I suspected, in his earnestness, he would repeat more than once the eight distinct acts required. I often told him he made a mockery of the saying, time is money, and he used to smile shyly and tell me, '*Ya Khawaga, khalli aal Allah,*' leave it to God. That was all I could do! I could hardly pick up a fight with God. Sheikh Ali often spent his nights at the mosque praying and sleeping there. He fully gave God his due. I cannot say the same about his work.

From Sheikh Ahmadani I learnt of strange and fascinating things. He was constantly telling me what God said and whether God approves of one thing and disapproves of another. I often asked him, how, for Heaven's sake, did he know? I kept forgetting that the Prophet Mohammed ascended to the seventh Heaven and talked with God and that his teachings are straight from the Horse's mouth. One piece of information that unsettled me was that on our left and right shoulders sit two angels. One records the good deeds of our life and the other the bad. I could not help feeling that for most Sheiks the angel responsible for the bad references must have been overworked to exhaustion. When a man dies the angels in Heaven balance the good deeds with the bad to determine how much purification the believer must undergo before entering Heaven. It is believed that no Moslem can go permanently to hell, which is apparently reserved for apostates and unbelievers. I told Sheikh Ahmadani that it was all very well for men to go to Paradise to enjoy the mountains of succulent food and the shapely *houris* but what about the women? Have they no Paradise of their own with virile, well-endowed studs to supply them with never-ending orgasms? He was shocked and outraged. The thought of it! May God forgive you *ya Messiou*, he told me. Please stop blaspheming. Women have no souls!

From Sheikh Ahmad I learnt tolerance. I learnt to adapt and work with the most unsavory characters. Even to grow fond of them. He was my only office employee who wore a *galabeya*, the traditional cotton robe and a white cotton skullcap. He was a cripple with one leg shorter than the other, with deformation and ankylosis. He was clever and sly and a shameless liar. Clever enough to know the limits beyond which you would no longer tolerate his fibs and he kept within them. He banked on the fact that one would

rather swallow an inconsequential lie than enter into an unpleasant confrontation. He talked always in a loud voice as if to an audience. If there were people nearby, his loud voice and manner automatically included them in any conversation he had with you. God was constantly on his lips and he wanted people to witness his devotion to Allah. He had all the qualities that made me despise holier-than-thou persons. I do not understand the psycho synthesis of such warped minds. I do not understand why God is such an irresistible focus of their lives.

From Sheikh Abdel Raouf I learnt to listen, to absorb and to enjoy the mixture of popular wisdom and considerable doses of ignorance. From his conversations, for we did have long conversations, I tried to imagine what life was like at the far edges of poverty and want. I tried to understand a culture and its customs and practices that was so close to us, Egyptian-born Europeans, and yet so unfamiliar and strange. We were two worlds apart. There is a unique gentleness and approachability to the Egyptian poor. I do not think they bear the grudge towards the rich that the European poor do. Marx and Lenin would not have found fertile ground for their teachings and revolutions in Egypt. Perhaps it has to do with the fatalism and submission that the Moslem religion requires of the faithful. The belief in the supreme majesty of the one and only Deity in the universe, Allah. Allah is Power and Mercy. 'Allah is not to be inquired as to what he does.' and 'It shall be as Allah pleases.' Are typical phrases. The first duty of a Moslem is unquestioning obedience and submission. He is the '*abd*' or slave of Allah, not a child of God. Hence the centuries-old tradition and tolerance of authoritarian governments in Arab lands right up to our day. Hence the lack of resentment of the poor for their lot and acceptance that the rich have a right to their riches, which they should not try to appropriate.

Sheikh Abdel Raouf was a large thickset man with a large face, a ludicrous nose and a missing eye. He was an oversize Quasimodo without the hump and with a huge belly built on bread and '*mish*', a sort of viscous, super-salty cheese, which had the double virtue of being cheap and due to its saltiness one could only consume tiny doses of it with each mouthful of bread. The advantage was that a small amount went a long way. Abdel Raouf was the night watchman of our plant. The attendance to his duties was casual and when he was not present we just locked up and it was just as well. I could have fired him legally because of his innumerable absences but this was inconceivable. I would have lost my after-hours entertainment. His other part-time occupation was reciting prayers at his neighborhood cemetery. Before setting off to work he would pass by the cemetery, to see if there was any bread to be earned at a funeral or memorial prayers. If there were, he would forget his night watch. And who can blame him. He probably earned several times over the wage we paid. He could neither read nor write. He knew large tracts of the Koran by heart. I often had him recite his psalms and chants to me and enjoyed the rhythms, rhymes and alliterations and the deep-throated guttural sounds of formal Arabic. Needless to say, I understood hardly a word.

Abdel Raouf had a son and a daughter. His wife was a small, worn out, scruffy woman with all the hardships of life lining her face. I never saw the daughter but the son was a bright, good-looking young man. I never cease to marvel at nature when the offspring are so much superior to the parents. Conversing with Sheikh Abdel Raouf was mostly for laughs but I did learn about the lives of the poor. Lives we tend to dismiss. Lives, which do not interest us. Lives less precious than our own and of our class. Yet

lives with the same pains and passions and hopes even if their feelings are numbed and blunted by the oppression of poverty and sense of powerlessness, vulnerability and the belief that everything is fated.

The following paragraph is probably in bad taste but I cannot resist relating it. I often liked to question the pious about sin. Their attitudes and the way it was rejected were always revealing. Abdel Raouf had a casual and somewhat tolerant attitude towards it, though his heart was mostly in the right place. He was honest in the sense that he never stole but was not averse to a little harmless lying. I asked him if he was ever unfaithful. He said he had sinned with married women before his marriage; with women who asked for it, but that there is nothing better than '*hallal*' or blessed, legitimate sex. There is nothing better than taking your wife, stripping her naked and playing with her to your heart's content. I could not help smiling at the thought of the sex-deprived (depraved/kinky?) married women who felt so great a passion for our Sheikh Casanova as to transgress the very strict Islamic laws on adultery. I could not help smiling at the thought of the love-play between the huge, thickset, thick-jointed Sheikh with outsize extremities and the tiny, harassed woman, his wife. I could not help wondering if she derived any pleasure from his attentions and how she could accommodate the genitals of a donkey.

From Sheikh Ebeid I learnt compassion. Not from anything he did but from the sense of desperation he conveyed to me on his last day at work. He was a thin, high-strung person who was very quiet and self-effacing but often exploded in fits of temper when annoyed. His thin voice, the incongruity of an uncontrollable temper in such a gentle person and his spastic movements often caused me to laugh as I tried to calm him down so we could quietly solve the problem that had aroused his irk. He was working in a section of our factory, which had very little work and I planned to close it down as soon as Sheikh Ebeid retired.

Finally, the time of his retirement arrived and we arranged our habitual ceremony at our offices to give him a small memento and wish him good luck. We had brought cakes and soft drinks and everyone was in good spirits. Everyone, that is, except Sheikh Ebeid. He was shattered and seemed to be lost. He was unable to form a smile on his lips and heard out the speeches we made praising his long years of work at our Company with a look of incomprehension, as if we were talking a foreign language. He constantly looked at me, silently imploring me to keep him on, even on a part-time basis. His pension would be a fraction of his salary and overtime earnings. He could hardly manage as it was. How would he ever cope with less? I could not help understanding and feeling sorry. But I was not running a welfare institution. I could not afford to keep him on. I felt a dreadful hypocrite when I said good-bye to him at the end of the gathering mouthing the words, 'God be with you. God does not forget anyone.'

I beg my readers' indulgence for the long introduction to our tale of love. I understand their impatience. For although *l'argent fait la guerre*, and people are in a constant, mad rush to acquire it, it is love that makes the world go round. So while we bid good bye to the Sheiks we talked about and the many more who are at least as undeserving and as interesting, we must return to our office to pick up the thread of our tale from its start.

Sherif effendi was my one-man public relations department. He was a good-looking man of about fifty-five. He showed me faded, brownish, cardboard pictures of his youth wearing a *tarbush*, the red Turkish fez-like headgear with a black tassel hanging on

the side, and he was at least as handsome as the better-looking crop of our current movie heartthrobs. He boasted of many conquests and in particular that an Englishwoman in the days of Empire was madly in love with him. Madly in love, deeply in love. Words that make you dream. Anyway, Sherif effendi's duties were to keep in touch with the public sector companies, keep track of tenders and run after the supplies of raw materials and tools we needed to function but were sold with great reluctance due to the government shortages of foreign currencies required to purchase them from abroad, in the first place. He had an easy if somewhat ingratiating manner and was good at cultivating friendships with the employees in those companies and this of course eased his task.

In one of the larger public sector trading companies he developed a close rapport with one of the directors and was able through him to keep our Company supplied with grinding wheels and the carbide tipped tools used in our machinery. He often talked to me about this man, his unusual politeness, his refusal to be bribed or corrupted which set him apart from the generally shady environment of these companies. As a matter of routine courtesy Sherif effendi usually extended to Talaat bey my regards and my thanks for the many services he offered us and always delivered Talaat's courteous response. He also asked me to go and thank him in person at his office, as personal contacts with highly placed bureaucrats are always beneficial.

"In any case," he said, "I have told Talaat bey so many good things about you that he is eager to meet you."

I met Talaat bey soon after that at his office in the headquarters of the huge government trading company. He was a gray-haired man of fifty or so, tall and well built with a pleasant face and a kindly smile. He was dressed in an impeccably tailored suit and when I entered, he hurried around his office desk to greet me and Sherif effendi who accompanied me. He had all the graciousness of the old Egyptian moneyed classes that was so utterly lacking in the new people, which the Revolution placed at the head of these conglomerates. The new managers were usually brash army officers who thought they could run commercial enterprises like an army battalion and treat their subordinates and private sector clients like army recruits.

Talaat bey was independently wealthy and though the government sequestered much of his family's land, he, nevertheless, retained the hundred-acre limit and a farm. He had entered the company, Tractor Engineering, which originally sold agricultural implements as soon as he finished his university studies and was one of the top managers until the company was nationalized after Nasser's revolution and integrated into the present huge organization. In the shuffle he was ignored as all the top managerial positions were allotted to army officers but Talaat bey chose to remain in a less important post rather than leave the company, as he was never sure that the remainder of his land would not eventually be taken away as well. However, he did not thrive in the new circumstances. He was not one of the boys. The other managers were contemptuous of his patrician ways and wary of his refusal to get involved in dubious deals.

In the half hour we stayed in his office for the traditional coffee I felt we planted the seeds of friendship and of a mutual affinity. He seemed hearty and pleased to make my acquaintance. He inquired how well I had adapted to life in Egypt after five years in England and asked me if I was happy. I said I was keeping busy with work and sports and the few friends I had. I also had a passion for modern literature and this helped me not to feel lonely when I was alone. On the whole, I told him, I could not describe myself as

totally satisfied with my life but I was not unhappy either. In any case, I had no other options. He invited Sherif effendi and me to visit him at his farm where he spent his weekends.

“I want you to meet my wife,” he said, addressing me. “She, also, has had an English education and reads a lot. She will be so happy to meet a young person. You see,” he added, “I married late in life and we do have some years' difference in age.” He smiled. “It has not been so bad until now but as I grow older she seems more and more like a daughter to me than a wife. We do not have any children and I suspect she gets terribly bored with my family and my friends who are of my age.”

A week or so later, Sherif effendi reminded me of the invitation and suggested we take it up. The farm was not far. About an hour's drive from Cairo. I told him I would rather go to the club to put in a little exercise than try to entertain Talaat bey's wife. Was that part of the price I had to pay to buy my grinding wheels? What a strange request that was. Totally out of character in Egypt. An Egyptian man would hardly ever mention his wife, let alone express the wish that I meet her. Sherif effendi asked me if I had any objections if he went on his own and I said that, of course, I did not.

Monday is a difficult day. It is the start of the week, of a thousand things to do, a thousand more to think about. At one point Sherif effendi came into my office and sat down.

“They were both very disappointed you did not come,” he said.

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“Talaat Bey and his wife.”

“Oh? So you did go after all.”

“Yes.”

“Did you have a good time?”

“Yes, of course. Talaat bey is an extraordinary man. He insisted I stay for lunch. He even offered me whisky. There were a few other guests as well. I left late in the afternoon. Just before sundown.”

“What about the wife?”

“She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life.”

“Oh, come on! Surely you exaggerate. For a Valentino of your calibre this is no mean statement.”

“I assure you.”

“How old is she?”

“Thirty six.”

“Very precise information, I see.”

“Well, yes. You see, after the guests left and Leila went into the house for a nap, I sat with Talaat bey in the garden for a cup of tea and we exchanged confidences. Doesn't it ever happen with you that sometimes you feel well with another person and all of a sudden you have an urge to unburden yourself? I felt exactly that way. I felt I was with a friend although obviously I am not in his class. He is rich and educated and I am neither but he is a gentle human being and his friendliness and amiable smile makes you trust him and open your heart to him. It is I who started to talk.”

“Leila is the wife?”

“Yes.”

“Go on.”

“I told him that after my wife died, my life went awry. I lost control over my two boys. The elder one, at least, works in the police. He is very good looking, just like I was in my youth, and he married a rich elder woman but Osama, the younger one left the house and I don't know where he is. I don't even want to find out because of some rumors I heard. They say he is living with some rich Arabs. It would cause me unbearable pain to find out this was true. Also, my house was a mess. I needed someone to take care of things. I could hardly afford a servant and so I decided to marry again. Some family friends proposed a match with a woman recently widowed without children and I agreed to marry her even before I saw her. I was that desperate. Well, I married her and she is a good woman and takes good care of me and of the house but I am not a man with her. I don't know if it is my age or the way she looks but I have not the slightest desire to touch her. We have been sleeping on the same bed for three years now, like brother and sister. I know it is *'haram'*, it is a sin, and may God forgive me but it is beyond my strength. Of course, you know all this, ya Messiou. I am just telling you what I told Talaat bey.”

“Yes, go on.”

“Talaat bey's face expressed sympathy and sadness. He told me we were roughly the same age and had the same problem for different reasons. He made me swear not to tell anyone what he was about to confess, except you.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. I did not want to pry and ask him for the reason. Perhaps, because he liked you and felt you would sympathize. He has taken an extraordinary liking to you. He kept on mentioning your name and asking me questions about you.”

“What sort of questions?”

“Whether you were good and kind. Whether you were married or had a relationship with a woman. Whether you planned to spend the rest of your life in Egypt. Many questions about your life in general.”

“And what did you answer?”

“I said you were a Sheikh. Too good to be involved with all that scum at work. That I hoped you would one day leave this crummy country.”

“Oh, you shameless flatterer. No wonder people like you.”

“It's true, ya Messiou.”

“You're not even close to the truth. Anyway, what did Talaat bey confess?”

“He said, about a year or so ago, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer and had an operation, radical prostatectomy I think he called it. It was very painful but the worst of it was that it left him impotent. Such operations usually have that result. He told me that he doesn't care much for himself. He is simply disconsolate when he thinks that Leila, who is still so young, will have to forego sexual pleasure. He blames himself for his selfishness, for having married so young a person. She was eighteen when he fell in love with her. He was thirty-five. Now, she is thirty-six and in some ways at her sexual peak. He thought it was so sad that at this particular moment she has to get on without sex. He did not know how to solve the problem. He was not strong enough to divorce her so that she might find another man of her age. They did not have children and with her beauty it would not have been difficult to make a good marriage. But he could not even start to think of it. He loved her too much. Or perhaps not enough to prevail over his

selfish need of her. Sometimes, he even contemplated suicide. It was the only way he could give her up.”

“So, my friend,” I told Sherif effendi making light of his tale, “I see now why you are so spry. You and Talaat bey had your catharsis crying on each other's shoulder. You are now feeling much more cheerful and relieved.”

“How can we feel cheerful and relieved,” he said. “We have solved nothing.”

What a sad world of pain we inhabit. Show me a truly happy man and I'll pay you a million pounds. I haven't the money, of course, but I'm not worried. There's not the slightest chance I'll have to pay it out. How can one ever believe in a benevolent God, when the whole of his creation is warped? When the whole of nature is perverse in every possible way. Starting from the food we consume to stay alive. The concept, the survival of the fittest, tells it all. I recently saw a documentary about a certain species of monkeys. The strongest monkey was the leader of the bunch and he walked about with his penis in constant erection. Lest anyone forget it, lest anyone get any funny ideas about mating with a female. They were all his!

Admittedly humans are a little better and have the potential to improve though they often show a savagery and cruelty that trounces the worst of the animal kingdom. God, it is said, created us in his image. Oh, what vanity! What universal fairy tales. What a horrendous Devil this God would have been! We are all of us little walking egos, funny and ridiculous. Sad, also, because we do have a brain and we did achieve astounding, unbelievable progress in every field of science. We did not manage, however, to accomplish something infinitely more important: Happiness. Instead, we are trying like mad to concoct an artificial substitute. Happiness through psychotherapy and medicines, drugs and narcotics, materialism and perversions, pedophilia and child pornography, prostitution and the blatant enslavement of women by despicable, modern-day, male slave traders. And the madness is spreading.

It was Talaat bey's and Sherif effendi's unhappiness that brought forth this outburst and I had better stop before I sound holier-than-thou, myself. In any case, I have not got the answers. Probably not even God does. So, I dismissed the problem and my life absorbed me in the usual flat, repetitive routine, which was not altogether unpleasant. A few weeks later, I received a phone call, at work, from Talaat bey. He told me that both he and his wife were very disappointed that I did not visit them at the farm and would I honor them with a visit the coming weekend. A vision flashed for a second in my mind: I was sitting in the garden with Talaat bey and he was recounting his woes. No thanks! I excused myself saying I reserved my weekends for sports and I had permanent appointments with friends, which I could not cancel. I would have loved to come but I could not possibly manage it. He said there was no hurry and perhaps I could arrange it for a later date. I said I would try and I would give him a call. I thanked him and forgot all about it.

Again after another few weeks he called me at work. He did not mention the invitation but it was obvious he wanted to remind me of it. We engaged in a social chat of this and that and ended with the mutual hopes that we would meet soon. I felt sorry for him. He was obviously an extremely nice person with exquisite manners and old-style courtesies and flourishes that one only finds in the Middle East. And he seemed to really like me. He often called me, my son, which in any case, I could have been but on the other hand I had no desire to lend my shoulder as a repository of his tears.

Our main plant in Cairo is smack in the middle of the city. It is a part of town where the price of land has reached astronomical heights. It is, however, a slum of the kind I have already described above. Narrow lanes with rickety housing, tiny shops, soggy pathways where barefoot, filthy children play amid pools of scummy water, stray chickens, ducks and mangy dogs; where small donkeys pull miniature carts with huge bronze containers of foul medames, the staple food of the area; where the cries of the children and their mothers mingle with those of the sellers vociferously promoting their wares; where the atmosphere is a nauseating succession of smells; where glancing into the entrances and narrow stairways of the fusty, moldy, humid houses you think that the people living there, almost certainly, do not fear hell for they were living in it and surviving.

Just beyond the slum, separated by a single street is the Nile with its luxury apartments and five-star hotels. One of the great paradoxes of Egypt is that until the recent Islamic fundamentalist terrorism there has been no violent crime. Not all character traits of Egyptians are laudable but there is no doubt that they are generally of a gentle disposition, friendly and fatalistic. They accept their misery as their destiny. There is another world waiting to reward them, if they are good. That they sometimes forget to be good is another matter. It is usually not their fault. They have an amusing way to justify their mistakes. 'Satan fooled me'. 'Satan entered my mind and made me do it'. And why not? The forces of Good and Evil have been battling it out since the beginning of time. Luckily, to use a term of tennis, it is Advantage to Good. Game and set still to be decided. But wait a minute. Can we be sure even of that? Can we always distinguish clearly between Good and Evil?

It was in the less than luxurious offices of our plant, in the narrow, dirty street where it was situated that I met Leila. Talaat bey phoned me one day, having lost hope that I would ever decide to pay them a visit, and told me that he would be passing by. I did not expect her to come along. I was shocked when I saw both of them coming up the stairs to my office. I was even more shocked at Talaat bey's introductions.

"I want you to meet Leila, my beloved daughter," he said. "Leila, this is Alex, the young man who has been consistently avoiding us. Perhaps, now that he has seen you he will change his attitude."

She smiled, dismissing with a playful grimace and a gesture of mock vexation her husband's compliment. I shook their hands and told Talaat bey that it was never my intention to avoid them and that they did me great honor to visit me in my lowly office.

"You should have given me notice," I told him, "to clean the street and sprinkle it with sand."

He smiled.

"I see you are learning the courtesies of Egyptians," he said.

"There is a politeness in them and a turn of expression that I find appealing."

"If Egyptians instilled a little more substance to them, we would have been a better people."

"Still, is it not better to have them, empty as they are, than not?"

"I suppose so," he answered. "Politeness is essential for the harmonious coexistence of a society."

"So, please sit down and let me offer you a coffee. I am very happy and honored you are here and I am saying this not just through politeness but from the heart."

They sat down on my uncomfortable, dusty chairs and I had a chance to look at Leila. Leila means night but she was as luminous as the day. Perhaps, she was not the most beautiful woman in the world, as Sherif had told me, but she was very beautiful. Tall, elegant, well-built, she filled the room with her presence. She was not typically Egyptian. I do not disparage the beauty of Egyptian women. Some have an eastern allure with the exotic touch that makes you dream of a thousand and one nights. In any case a beautiful woman be she black, yellow or red is a gift of nature equally fascinating, with the same power to enslave, to make you lose your mind and think of nothing else. Leila had the kind of beauty that comes from a mixture of races and I surmised a little European blood was flowing in her gorgeous body. She had brown hair just straining to become blond but not quite. Egyptian women have skins of different hues. She was white with a perfect facial complexion and regular features that crafted an ode to beauty. Her eyes, brown and large, alert and inquisitive fitted in harmoniously and completed the work of art that nature sometimes achieves. Talaat bey was impeccably dressed with suit and tie and made me feel scruffy with the pair of jeans and well-worn pullover I was wearing. Besides being elegant, he had an aristocratic and distinguished bearing but the age difference between them was less than forgiving.

Over coffee we exchanged courtesies and talked about the political situation. It was a time when one looked over one's shoulder before uttering the slightest disapproval of the government. So I was shocked again when he asked me point blank what I thought of Abdel Nasser. I hawed and hummed and tried to formulate a harmless statement in the style of,

“Well, he did a lot of good things for Egypt's poor and has given the country a new prestige and, well, the nationalizations ruined a lot of people but he is trying to bring a measure of social justice to the country.”

Talaat Bey smiled at me a trifle ironically.

“Relax Alex,” he said. “I have not got a tape recorder hidden on me. I was the first to rejoice with Abdel Nasser's revolution. I hoped he would cleanse the country of the corrupt politicians and he did decimate them but he shackled us with an equally corrupt junta of famished, greedy, power-hungry army officers. For every thief he eliminated, he installed ten. The semblance of democracy we had he replaced with a brazen dictatorship. Gone is the rule of law, freedom of expression and justice. He installed a socialism that is ruining the country, is spreading corruption and is undermining the work ethic by preaching an irresponsible equality, which prevents the managers from getting any work out of their employees. He has of course ruined the rich but even worse than that is that he has chased all the worthwhile people out of the country. We had a vibrant Jewish community that kept the commerce of the country flourishing and now they are gone. I know this, first hand. My own company, Tractor Engineering, which was owned by the Mosseri family, was earning millions. Now, it has been lumped with another ten companies and they are losing millions.”

“Talaat, Talaat, please let's not delve into this again.” Leila smiled at me. “It is his favorite subject and of course he has all the right to be frustrated. He was hard hit in every way by the revolution but I have heard his complaints so many times. I cannot take it any more. I keep on telling him that getting worked up in this way is bad for his health and, after all, it is our health that counts.”

“Yes, my daughter, you are right.” Talaat smiled at her and the adoration in his eyes was palpable. “We must change the subject.” He turned and looked at me, the smile still lingering on his lips. “Alex, what are the sports you play when you cannot take time off to visit us?”

“Well, the main two sports are swimming and squash and I also do some jogging to keep up my form. Now and then I play some tennis but it is a difficult game and I am not much good at it. It needs a lot of practice and to learn the correct technique one needs coaching by a professional. Whereas squash does not require as much skill but is very vigorous and provides plenty of exercise.”

“Yes, I used to play tennis until a few years ago,” said Talaat bey, “and I know what you mean. But why all this frenzy of activity?”

“Well, I have very few friends and practically no social life. I am a bit of a loner and sport helps relieve my tensions.”

“Ah yes, that is what I wanted to hear. My daughter Leila is a little irritable these days. I am no longer as active as I once was and we stay at home more than is healthy for a young woman. Do you think, Alex, you could let her join you once or twice a week at the club for a game of squash or tennis or even a little jogging? She will not be a drag on you. You will find she is quite a sportswoman. And she has a mind of her own. You will find that out too, soon enough.”

“Talaat, leave Alex in peace,” Leila interjected. “We cannot impose on him in this way.”

“I am not imposing. I have a sincere liking for him and I shall just give him our phone number. He is, of course, absolutely free to call or not. If he feels like it, he can call you up and invite you to a game. Alex, this is my card with our home number. I consider you a friend and there will be no hard feelings if other engagements prevent you from calling. On the other hand, you do owe us a visit at the farm. I shall not insist on a date. You can come whenever you want.”

They lingered after the coffee for another half hour and Talaat bey was doing most of the talking. He was in high spirits. He talked a lot about his ‘daughter’ and she feigned exasperation when his compliments were too effusive.

“Talaat, please stop,” she kept on telling him. And addressing me with a smile, “After politics, I am second on his list of favorite subjects.”

“One can only blame him for not putting you on top of the list,” I said and they were both pleased with the less than subtle insinuation.

Leila was the luminous presence of our little impromptu gathering in my dusty office. She was reserved and polite but her eyes kept turning on me, examining me minutely, which made me uncomfortable. I gave all my attention to Talaat bey feeling awkward under Leila's gaze but when our eyes met we smiled. I learnt that my hunch was correct. She had an English grandmother. She had gone to St Clare's, an English girls' school in Heliopolis and had enrolled at the American University to study literature when she met an up-and-coming, rich and handsome young man who fell madly in love with her and asked her to marry him. She dropped the university to become his wife because she, too, was dazzled by the mature, successful, exquisitely mannered Talaat. They lived happily despite the repeated blows the revolution heaped upon them. The only disappointment was that they did not have any children. In a sense even this seemed to have its compensations. It bound them more closely together.

I thought it was unfortunate that she had now ceased being his wife and had become his daughter. But what was I to do about it? I did not really understand what role I was supposed to assume. Because obviously something was being asked of me. Was I to be her new sports coach? Her new playmate? How far would this relationship be allowed to go? But hell, Leila would have no use for a young man ten years younger than herself. Women were, if anything, practical minded and would weigh the odds carefully. They tended to fall in love with persons who would offer them security. Sex to them was rarely an end in itself. It was usually a means to an end. Whereas, I was much more vulnerable. I was sure if I saw too much of her, I would fall in love. It was unavoidable for she was much too beautiful. I assumed Talaat bey would be keeping a close eye on us. Would a false step on my part stop the flow of grinding wheels and carbide-tipped tools for our factory? Talaat bey did not seem to be that kind of a person but one never knew.

I did not call her up. I tried to convince myself that I was using delaying tactics but, in reality, I was rather apprehensive about setting this whole process in motion. I also felt uncomfortable about making an appointment with another man's wife even if it was just for a game of squash, even if he, himself, requested it. Two weeks later she called me at the office and after a few routine civilities told me that Talaat bey wanted me to send Sherif effendi to his office because a new batch of grinding wheels of good quality had arrived from Czechoslovakia and we should hurry to get our quota before they were all sold. Not a word was exchanged about our planned sporting activities.

“Goodbye Alex,” she said when we ended our short exchange.

“Goodbye Mrs. Leila, please send my regards and thanks to Talaat bey.”

“Leila,” she corrected me.

“Okay, Leila, then,” I said. “Goodbye, Leila.”

She called again a few weeks later. She sounded very gay and said she was tired of waiting to hear from me and decided to call me herself.

“Aren't you going to ask me for a game,” she asked? “I am ready.”

“Ready?”

“Yes,” she answered. “I have been training every day at the squash courts and have even been jogging. You won't find me a pushover. I shall give you good value for your money or, to put it more appropriately, a good game for your time.”

I laughed and a date was fixed.

I went a little early at our afternoon appointment in front of the squash courts and just stood there, waiting. I saw her drive past in a small Fiat heading for the parking lot and my heart skipped a beat. What, already, you silly boy? I thought to myself. But she looked so lovely! Ten minutes later she emerged from the women's changing rooms. She was wearing a blue tracksuit and held her racquet and seemed a little shorter than she did in my office, perhaps due to the flat gym shoes. She smiled and broke into a run when she saw me and said,

“Sorry if I'm late.”

We shook hands. I was tongue-tied. I did not know how to behave. She sensed it and as we were walking to the courts she put out her hand and held my arm lightly above the elbow. Such a small a gesture, yet familiar and friendly. It put me at ease and set the tone to a more relaxed interaction. We entered the court, closed the door and started banging the small black rubber ball on the wall to warm up. I could see she was an athlete. There was none of the awkwardness of an untrained female. Her swings were

powerful and well placed. After a while she suggested we play a game and told me with a smile, "I want you to be fair with me."

I was startled.

"Do I look like a bad sport?" I asked.

"No, I mean, I don't want you to make allowances for me or to let me deliberately win a game."

She took off her tracksuit and stacked it compactly in the front wall corner where it would not obstruct the game. She was wearing short blue shorts underneath and a white t-shirt and her body was delicious, slim, shapely and well trained.

"Although many people would disagree," I said to her, "I subscribe to the view that it is the game that matters and not who wins. In any case, you are none too fair yourself."

"Why?" She was puzzled.

"I shall have a problem looking at the ball with a pair of legs like yours in my range of vision."

She laughed and said,

"Young man cut the bullshit and start playing."

She said it in English. It was the first sentence we exchanged in that language and it marked our abrupt and almost total switch from colloquial Arabic to English.

The game was fast and good and fair in the sense that Leila desired. I was not an exceptional player but I had been playing regularly for some months and I had reached a respectable standard. I did not give it my best effort but neither did I give the game away. We played for nearly an hour. I won all three games of the set but not without some difficulty. As we were leaving the court she smiled and said,

"Young Alex, don't rejoice, you have not had my last word yet."

"Little Lulu," I replied, "don't be sad. You played very well."

She pretended to be annoyed.

"Don't try to appease me with half-hearted praises and comic book pet names. I shall not rest until I soundly thrash you." Then she ruffled my hair and said, "No, really, thank you Alex for a lovely game and for taking me seriously."

"I did not have a choice," I replied, "you were truly very good."

We rested for a while and then went round the club's three-mile horseracing track in a slow jog. Before going to our respective changing rooms, I asked her if she would join me for a drink or a cup of tea and she said, no. There were too many acquaintances in this club and it would not do to be seen with a handsome young man, without Talaat.

"So," she said, "that's it until we meet again. Will you call me up or do I despair and call you?"

"I shall call you before you despair," I said. "You know, you look quite lovely with your disheveled hair and flushed, exhausted look."

She smiled and extended her hand.

"Good-bye young Alex."

"Good-bye Little Lulu."

So that's how I fell in love. That's all it took. One game of squash and a three-mile slow jog. In addition, of course, to a gorgeous female. There is an aberrant gene in my brain cells whose only function seems to be to throw me in a state of agitation every time I see a beautiful woman. I could not take my mind off her. I called her up next morning

from the office. I knew Talaat bey would be away at work. I could not possibly call knowing he was at home. Leila answered the phone directly.

“Good morning. This is Alex,” I said and my heart was dancing the wildest of shakes.

“Young Alex!” She sounded surprised and pleased. “That was fast! You have not accustomed me to such promptness. I cannot play today. I am stiff and need a rest. You really made me run around, yesterday.”

“It's all right. I just wanted to tell you good morning.”

“Oh, isn't that nice! Our unsociable little introvert is mellowing! How come?”

“There is a key to everything.”

“Have you found it?”

“I see it but I don't know if I can reach it.”

“Success is for the daring, the audacious. The quick snatchers of opportunities. Are you audacious, young Alex?”

“Frankly, I do not think so. I am a little cautious. A little uncertain of myself.”

“Perhaps, you will find the key to that too.”

“Perhaps.”

“Talaat was pleased when I told him we had a nice game yesterday. He has started calling you Young Alex, too.”

“Please give him my regards. He is a real Prince but I suspect he is much more complicated a personality than his polished manners and aristocratic veneer disclose.”

“You can say that again!”

“Is he religious?”

“In a funny and very personal sort of way. Not in the five-a-day praying routine. And he does drink.”

“Well, now that we are becoming friends we shall get to know one another. Sorry, am I presuming too much?”

“No. I hope we do become friends. But life is funny. When Talaat was offering you friendship you played hard-to-get.”

“No, Leila. Not hard-to-get. Playing hard-to-get is insincere. I was just a little selfish. I preferred my sports at the club to an inactive day at the farm. Anyway, I promise to come and see you, there, soon. May I phone you tomorrow?”

“Of course, if you wish. Good-bye young Alex.”

“Good-bye Leila.”

“I quite liked it when you called me Little Lulu. Made me feel young again.”

“Good-bye Little Lulu. Have a nice day.”

We started playing squash regularly. At least twice a week and usually we jogged around the racetrack after the game. It was late autumn and the weather was perfect for sports. Cool but not uncomfortably cold. We both looked forward to and enjoyed our games. Leila was improving rapidly and I told her I suspected she did extra training on the days we were not playing together.

“You are getting ever closer to keeping your vow of thrashing me,” I told her. But the truth is that I was improving as well. I was constantly one step ahead of her. Talaat bey called me up to thank me for taking our sporting activities with Leila so seriously. She had become a new person, he said. She was no longer as nervous and irritable as she had been lately. Physical exertion had done her a world of good. I told him that for my

part, I was very lucky to have such a keen and enthusiastic partner. I could not say, such a beautiful partner. I could not tell him I was in love with her. That I could not wait for our squash appointments. That I called her up every morning. That I dreamt of her all day. That I caressed her hair every time she put in a good shot. That she seemed to enjoy our increasing intimacies. That she used to smile when I looked at her and could not take my eyes away. That, Young Alex, sounded to me like, my love. That by Little Lulu I meant, my beloved.

One day, a couple of months after we had started our regular squash sessions, she asked me about swimming. I told her I usually did that very early in the morning on the days we did not have a squash appointment.

“What? You actually have been swimming all this time?”

“Yes. But it is far too early for you.”

“You little double-crosser! Why didn't you tell me?”

“I just did not think you would be able to join me. I wake up at five. I am on the street by five thirty. I do half an hour of jogging in the dark, deserted streets and by six, I am at the swimming pool. By that time daylight is just beginning to break. I have a freezing cold shower to get rid of my sweat and usually stay under the cold water as long as I can bear it. Then, I jump in the heated pool. The sensation of that dive in the warm water is unimaginable. It is almost as good as a sexual orgasm.”

“Aha, now I understand why you haven't got a girlfriend.”

“Oh, stop teasing me. I swim for nearly an hour in a very slow, very easy style after which I have a proper shower in the changing rooms and go home for breakfast before going to work. Let me tell you, the well being I feel after that swim is indescribable. On no other occasion have I ever felt quite that way.”

“But does the club open so early?”

“Yes. You'd be surprised at the amount of activities that are going on so early in the morning. Bunches of old people striding away at their daily heart-enhancing exercise, young people jogging and lots of people at the swimming pool. There are the regulars like myself and there are the young athletes who are training for competitions. There are some children between ten and fifteen who astound you with their energy and endurance. Their trainers are pitiless with them. They drive them to the very edge. Sometimes, you see them crying from the punishing effort and the verbal pressure and abuse of the trainers and yet they persist. Is that sane? I do not know but I suppose that is how champions are made.”

“Five-thirty you said? I shall be under your house.”

“Are you serious?”

“Wait and see.”

With the swimming a new page opened in our lives. In a sense we were working up to it. It was unavoidable but there were constraints every inch of the way. The frequent meetings and games and common exertions inevitably bound us in an intimacy and sense of comradeship. But more than that, I felt that a mutual physical attraction was palpable. And that was not necessarily inevitable. On my part, perhaps, it was. She was a beautiful, spirited, intelligent woman. I had not yet found my bearings in my new life in Egypt. I had not met any girls or women that moved me, that made me feel the need to attach myself to them. Leila seemed an ideal. Apart of her beauty she had many qualities I admired. A sense of humor, an independence that was unexpected in a married Egyptian

woman, an unpredictability and youthfulness in her way of thinking and outlook on life. How could I ever fail to fall in love with her? But what about her? How did a married woman feel about a man ten years younger than herself? Would she let herself go? Even given the predicament of Talaat's impotence? Did she like me? Yes, that much I was sure of. But did she love me? She gave no overt indication. Sometimes, I caught her out staring at me and she would look away and smile.

We were both playing a waiting game. Both wary of a false move that would ruin everything. And then was not what we had better than nothing? Seeing each other almost daily, expending our energies in friendly competition, in companionable exercising, laughing, joking, exchanging thoughts and ideas, opinions on books? Yes, certainly, even in its semi-secrecy and prudent discretion this relationship was better than nothing but could it possibly remain there? I still had not worked out Talaat's obscure motives in encouraging our sporting partnership. If he had any beyond the letting off steam through physical exercise for his frustrated wife.

She was as good as her word. I had rented a flat in a building right next to the club, on the banks of the Nile and for my jogging I usually just descended on the street and started to run. At five-thirty sharp, I went down. She was parked a little further on and she saw me approaching in the mirror of her car and got out. Like me, she was wearing her tracksuit over a bathing costume, shorts and a t-shirt and we were both feeling the chill of the early morning before dawn. It was mid December and the weather was turning bitter. I hugged her and kissed her on the cheek. She was startled and after hesitating, kissed me back. It was the first time we ever exchanged a kiss. Even a social kiss on the cheek. I held her and caressed her hair but she said, "No, not here," even though there was not a soul in sight. We started on a slow jog parallel to the Nile up to the square off Kasr-El-Nil Bridge and then turned right in a street where the Opera house is situated on one side and the rear wall of one or two sporting clubs on the other. The street was totally deserted and dark and suddenly Leila stopped. I stopped as well and looked at her. I wondered if she was tired. She looked fit as a fiddle. She looked at her watch.

"It's twenty to six in the morning," she said with a smile. "It is still pitch black. I don't know what this street is called. Probably, Shara'a El Opera, and though it is draughty and cold, fortunately, it is empty and badly lit. We are out of breath and sweaty and there are a couple of stray dogs eyeing us suspiciously. But, young Alex, you must snap up your opportunities as you find them."

I looked at her. I did not understand what she was getting at. She was smiling. Her hair was disheveled. She seemed so utterly beautiful. Was Sherif effendi right, after all? Was she the most beautiful woman we had ever seen?

"Don't you see, you silly boy, that Shara'a El Opera is offering just now the only privacy we have available? And not much of it at that."

She moved slowly into my arms. A ship entering the harbor after a long voyage. A two-month journey of longing. Silent and unexpressed. I kissed the lips that were offered and my tongue felt both the passion and desolation of life. Of a vital young woman in a trap. Of despair and liberation. The gasp for air of a drowning woman and the elation of survival. I kissed her again and again. I held her body with my hands and touched her soul with my tongue. I felt her strong arms straining to fuse our bodies. I could not let her go.

“Is it possible, Leila? Is my dream coming true?”

She looked at me tenderly and wiped the sweat from my forehead with her hand. She searched my face with her eyes and touched my cheek. She was silent for a while. I thought she was not going to answer.

“Yes,” she said after some hesitation.

“Are you not sure?”

She nodded looking at the emblem my tracksuit had on the chest.

“I am,” she said. “It is just so difficult to acknowledge it.”

“Because of Talaat?”

“Yes. Even though things are quite clear-cut. He was a wonderful husband. I married him at eighteen and I was in love with him, actually in love, for many, many years. Now, he calls me his daughter. He has become an equally wonderful father to me and because his love is so vast and so selfless, I cannot help feeling I am betraying him. Of course, you know our story. He asked Sherif to tell you.”

“Little Lulu, forgive me. I cannot feel sad. I have grown wings, I think I can fly. I cannot get bogged down on dilemmas and analyses just now. It is enough I kissed your lips. It is enough I felt your passion and your love.”

“My little Alex,” she said smiling, caressing my face, “I suggest we don't get bogged down on love either, nor that you fly too high. Things will, inevitably, take their course. They are a little more complicated emotionally on my side of the fence so let's resume our jogging.”

“Trust a woman first to incite you, then to restrain you.”

“Trust a man to take two months for a first kiss and then expect an instant flight to Paradise.”

“Oh, how unfair that was.”

“Not much more than your statement.”

“I adore you Leila.”

“I have become attached to you, too, Alex. A little guiltily, perhaps, but I do love you.”

We started running again, our hearts thumping from the exertion, the vast happiness of our confession and the immense, tender, secret contentment that we now belonged to one another and reached the club in another twenty minutes. We went directly to the swimming pool, took off our clothes and in our bathing costumes ran to the poolside showers where the icy water froze our bodies and seemed to shrink our heads. After a minute of unbearable torture, I grabbed her hand and pulled her to the pool and we dived into the steaming water. Only superlatives can do justice to the first few seconds in the water. Leila surfaced with a smile.

“Wow,” she said, “you were right Alex; it is almost as overwhelming a sensation as an orgasm.”

I swam up to her and held her by her waist. I tried to kiss her and she said,

“Are you mad? Let's swim.”

We started on our laps in an easy, unhurried style. We had a lane to ourselves and ignored the frantic activity around us. A lane for a single swimmer that just barely fitted the two of us, where we could touch and smile and feel each other's ripples. Now and then she would advance and we would swim one behind the other, then I would pull on her leg and bring her alongside me. She would do the same with me and we had many

gay giggles and hoped no one was watching. We swam for an hour and stopped now and then to sit at the side of the pool to cool off when the heat of the water and the exercise warmed us up too much. I devoured Leila with my eyes when we were out of the water. I wanted to hold and caress her arms and legs and breasts. She was simply perfect.

Later, we had a shower in the changing rooms and met outside. Leila was glowing. Her short hair had been washed and received a vigorous toweling but it was still slightly humid. Despite that it was curly and shining. She said she felt she was treading on air. Never felt that way before. I told her that, at least with me, it didn't last very long. As soon as I was back at work I forgot all these lovely sensations and got immersed in the humdrum responsibilities and annoyances of life. Why, oh why did Eve have to give the apple to Adam and push us into this struggle for survival?

She laughed.

“Eve was not so stupid, little Alex. The snake had whispered to her that there were some pretty wonderful things outside the gates of Paradise as well. Oh, most of the things were not so good but there was something called Falling-in-Love and Sex, which made biting the apple worthwhile. Did you find the apple I gave you today at five-forty a.m. at Shara'a El Opera to be very bitter?”

“I have never tasted anything so sweet in my life.”

“I enjoyed feeding it to your mouth.” She looked at me in the eyes.

“I think, more than anything else, you enjoy driving me mad.”

I walked her to her car, we shook hands and she left. Next day we played squash in the afternoon. My heart was beating hard as I was waiting for her to appear. When I saw her, I felt she was mine, my lover, my mistress, my wife. As if Talaat never existed. I had put him out of my mind. I had this affinity for peculiar self-delusions. This ability to erase the setting, the reality. And the day after that it was again pre-dawn jogging, kissing and swimming. We were now seeing each other practically every day except for Fridays when she would go to the farm with Talaat.

We kissed more and more passionately and hungrily, with increasing intimacy, in the cold and draughty darkness of Shara'a El Opera. Keeping an open eye for stray dogs that might startle us and stray humans that would embarrass us. I was becoming familiar with her perfect body, with her perfect curves, her perfect kisses and perfect moans. I was losing my mind. I was becoming voracious. I could not get enough of her. Jogging and swimming with her did not appease my passion. Struggling to subdue her in the squash court hardly amounted to tender courtship. Hurried lovewords on the go were no substitute for sensual lovemaking. Not long after we started our early morning sporting forays, I asked her if she would join me for a drive at night.

“I thought you would never ask,” she said.

“My God, Leila, you really are a confusing mixture of reticence and boldness. Why didn't you ask me?”

“Am I, forever, to be doing the asking? Can you not spare me the role of a seductress of young men?”

“My, my, I said smiling, you really don't give that impression but now that you mentioned it, I cannot pretend I am not shaken.”

“Oh cut it out, you silly boy.”

“Seriously, Leila, you know I worship you but you must understand my problem. I don't know where I stand. There's always Talaat bey looming in the background and I

don't know how far I can go. How was I supposed to know that you would be able to leave the house at night to go out with me?"

"All you had to do was ask. Just like you did. Without taking an eternity over it. As for Talaat, he is my problem, not yours. He is no longer my husband. He is my father and we have an understanding."

"Which is?"

"Which is... well, in any case, that's not for now. You shall know soon enough."

We met in the evening at nine-thirty. Just like our pre-dawn rendezvous, she parked further down the road of my house and slipped into my car when I drew alongside. I looked at her and drove off in a daze. Her perfume filled the car. Years and years later, it would break my heart every time I smelled it on another woman. She was so beautiful I wondered what it was that could possibly attract her to me. She was lightly made up and her short hair seemed not to have been combed. It seemed to know its place on that perfect head. It seemed to know where to part and where to curl and where to fall out of place to induce a charming flick of her hand. She was wearing a dress and an overcoat. She was not holding a bag. Was the dress meant to convey a message?

"Why are you so silent, young Alex?"

"Because I am overwhelmed. You are so beautiful."

"Shouldn't that make you happy?"

"I am losing my mind. I can think of nothing else. You have Talaat to anchor you to reality. I have nothing to distract me from your beauty."

"Even the greatest love eventually wears out."

"Yes? After, what, twenty years?"

"Oh, cheer up, Alex. Forget love. Think passion. They are the same and they are different. One is noble but morbid and enslaving. The other is a thirst that can be slaked. At least temporarily. But it provides relief and fulfillment. It helps to make love cheerful. Just like our morning swim soothes the arousal of our kisses."

"Your startling audacity really shocks at times. You really are the eternal Eve. Have you been talking to the snake?"

"Yes. In my dreams."

"And what does it say?"

"I have had a recurring dream lately. I am Eve in Paradise, naked and shameless. Adam is busy picking flowers and I go searching for the only other interesting, insidious being that God had created, apart from me. The snake. I find him up his favorite tree and I call to him. He already possesses some of the wiles of our world. He pretends not to hear, not to be interested, just like you did, some time ago, dear boy."

I smiled.

"Cut out the commentary, Little Lulu," I told her.

She saw my smile and caressed my cheek.

"I called Ophis again," she said.

"Ophis! I don't believe it! You really are a culture vulture. How many non-Greeks in Cairo would know the formal Greek name for a snake?"

"Oh, do let me go on. So I call again in a sugary tone, 'My dear, sweet viper do come down, I am bored and lonely.' This time he slithers down the tree and when he reaches the ground, he stands up. In Paradise, before the Fall, before dim-witted Adam was tricked by snake-loving Eve and bit the bullet, I mean the apple, snakes could stand

up. 'If you are bored and lonely, the snake tells me in his thick male voice, give me a kiss.' I did not quite remember how this was done although he had previously explained it to me. As I approached my face to his undulating head and unblinking eyes, suddenly the snake was you. You were naked and aroused. We kissed and made love and I experienced a terrible sexual excitement every time I dreamt that dream."

I burst out laughing. The dream was so transparently Freudian, it was funny.

"Perhaps, I really am a snake after all," I told Leila.

The mood had changed. We both knew where we were heading. The dress was obviously more functional than a pair of trousers.

We crossed under the railway bridge at Giza and were on the road to the pyramids. We talked gaily of our lives and work, of Egypt and its people, of religion and morality. I kept forgetting that Leila was primarily a housewife. Her wide reading and interests, her considerable general knowledge and sophisticated opinions on most subjects kept me thinking of her as a college student or something similar, still living in her parent's house. So I kept on getting repeated shocks with her stories of household chores, grocer's bills, servants' problems and generally keeping house for Talaat. It would not penetrate my thick skull that she had been doing that for nearly two decades.

Before reaching the pyramids, I turned to the right on the Alexandria desert road. It was late and there was very little traffic on it. Leila caressed my hair. I turned and smiled at her and she gave me a kiss on the mouth. I felt so utterly happy because I felt her love. It was almost like a magnetic field.

"I love you too, Leila," I told her.

"Too? Who's talking about love? Passion is the mantra for tonight. Love will only make us suffer. Passion will liberate us. Passion is the word. Passion...passion...passion passion."

"Don't delude yourself, Little Lulu. Love is the addiction, passion is the drug."

"Oh, Alex, you do go on! You give me no respite. Love me if you wish. I have more love than I can cope with in my life and very little passion."

"My darling Eve, please be patient. We shall try to make your dream of Ophis come true."

She smiled at me tenderly. She caressed the back of my head and fondled my ear.

"So where are you taking me, Alex," she asked. "To Paradise or just outside the gates?"

"To an abandoned limestone quarry. It is as close to Paradise as we can get. The rest depends on us. Sartre claimed: *L'enfer c'est les autres*. I am sure, in our case, *Le Paradis c'est nous mêmes*. Sometimes, I think for hours about our incredible story. What twists and turns life took to throw us together. What is wonderful is that our love is going strong and blossoming. That it was based on Talaat's misfortune is unfortunate and where it will end I do not know. All I know is that the journey will be passionate."

She looked at me, smiled and fondled my ear.

"Yes. Oh yes," she said. "Paradise outside the gates."

After a fast drive of about ten minutes on the main road, I turned left on a dirt track. It had once been paved but was now mostly covered with sand and had potholes that jarred our bones. It took another five minutes' driving at a crawl for us to reach our Paradise, which was a sort of paved parking area and further on a luminous, white mini canyon plunging like a deep lake without water, with a path for trucks leading

somewhere below. There was a full moon and the landscape was lunar and eerie. I parked at the edge of the clearing, stopped the engine and smiled at Leila.

“How did you ever find this place,” she asked.

“My father did, many, many years ago. Oh, look at that full moon! Does it not fill you with longing? It is supposed to affect women in strange and wondrous ways.”

She smiled at me.

“I don't need the moon,” she said, “when you are near me.”

“Neither do I, my love. But it lights up your face. It shall show me your passion. The expressions on your face.”

I moved closer to her. As close as I could in our cramped space. I kissed her softly. I closed my eyes. I started the dialogue of tongues. Did it really talk to me, her tongue? Or was it just imagination? Not a word was uttered. She told me she loved me. Oh, what tenderness that kiss contained. She told me she was sad and confused and her kiss became lax and thoughtful. There was always Talaat lurking in her thoughts. She told me she had not made love for so long. Her longing expressed deeply in my throat. She was young, at her peak and was burning with desire. Her tongue became alive and spirited. Demanding, is a better word. She wanted me now. She could not wait. Not a word was uttered.

“Leila, my darling, take off your coat. I'll take off my jacket. We'll be more comfortable.”

“I love the way you kiss, little Alex. It is as if we are dancing but I am leading the dance, not you. It is as if you are listening, reacting to my moods. You are very tender.”

“I am listening! Kissing is a language I understand. It is rich and subtle and one cannot lie with it.”

“So what did I tell you?”

We had taken off our overcoats. I moved, again, close to her.

“Come, I'll tell you,” I said.

I kissed her passionately with all the feeling of love and tenderness, compassion and understanding I could muster. I kissed her for an eternity. When I stopped, I asked her.

“Do you understand?”

Yes,” she said very softly, dreamily.

I held her tightly. I caressed her heavenly breasts.

“That's a lovely dress you have on,” I told her.

She smiled.

“I thought you would appreciate it,” she said. “It is nice and wide and spacious.” She bent forward, found the hem and pulled it right up. I saw a luscious pair of legs and a brief pair of panties.

“See, no problem,” she said. “And while we're at it....”

She lifted herself slightly and removed her panties then she put her hands beneath her dress from behind and undid her bra. She looked at me and smiled. I don't know what expression my face wore, but for sure, my heart was beating hard.

“That's much better, isn't it? she asked. “Are you thinking of making love with your trousers on?”

I started fumbling with my belt and she helped me along and then I pulled the trousers and shorts right off. There was no false modesty on her part. She held me and caressed me and we started kissing and petting each other again.

“Do you know why when making love one feels he's in Paradise?”

“Oh, Eve, there are so many things. How can you single something out?”

“In Paradise man felt no shame. In lovemaking, too, one feels no shame. Everything is allowed. Please don't be shocked.”

She kissed me passionately, overpoweringly. I explored her flesh beneath her dress. I touched the nipples of my daydreams, the legs of my reveries, the moist female nucleus of my fantasies. It was passion but it was also love. It was Paradise just outside the gates. It was happiness in the world of pain where God consigned us for searching the truth. A world of meager joy. What a cycle of unending days, unending longing, unending uncertainties we had traversed to reach the limestone quarry. The moon was there. I could see her face, her rapture. Between her moans she was humming a tune. She bent to hum the tune with me in her mouth. What currents of ecstasy that brought on. With some acrobatic maneuvering I tried to repay. We could stand it no longer.

“Come inside me,” she said.

I smiled at her. “Let's figure out the logistics. Leg by leg, arm by arm, body by body. Do we need any Gold Coins?”

“Yes, we'd better. Did you bring some? I have a few in my coat pocket.”

“Oh, my darling you are too good to be true. A snake-befriending, veritable Eve. The eternal sensual woman. I am mad about you. I adore you. I love you.”

She liked to bully me at times. To shock me. To assert her seniority. Perhaps, to keep a sense of balance, a sense of reality. To remind me that love, for us, could be a dangerous trap.

“Cut out the mush, Alex. I want to fuck.”

“I do too, my love. But I have lost my mind. I worship you. Why do you act so tough and unsentimental at times? Do you not love me at all?”

“Stop twisting my arm.”

“Not even a little?”

“Oh Alex, do cut it out. Don't whimper. If you don't know by now, you'll never know. Give me the Gold Coins.”

She twisted a Gold Coin, extracted the condom and fitted it on me. We carefully changed places. I sat on the passenger seat and she straddled me. Our bodies knew their destination and we were off on our journey of passion and need and yearning. She started off slowly, sensually, humming her personal melody, kissing me, remembering sensations and movements she had missed, remembering how young she still was, remembering how much she needed this union with a man. Perhaps, any man, perhaps, not necessarily with me. She told me she loved me over and over and then she would smile and say ‘Okay?’ And little by little things became serious and beyond control, nearly violent. The humming ceased, the agony grew, her movements lost their deliberateness, they became involuntary and fitful. Her mouth stuck to mine sucking at my tongue, our breathing mingling, nasal and noisy. Our motion became frantic and her moans shrill and tortured. The release was what God tried to hide from us. He knew it was the one thing that would make us God-like.

We made love twice more that night. I was fascinated by her capacity for enjoyment of sex, by her lack of inhibitions, by the sense of fun she introduced to our lovemaking. She would hum her little tunes which I could never make out. She would tell me little jokes when I told her I loved her or tell me with a twinkle in her eye, how worried she was because she had forgotten to buy cooking oil at the end of a passionate kiss. She would cover my head with her loose, comfortable dress and ask me to bite her nipples. I told her if she were tired of me there were better ways to let me know than choking me to death or even trying to uproot my tongue with her savage kisses. She said she knew of even better ways than these. She would work me out till I dropped. She had that capacity and was sure I had it too. I said, 'Then, it's good bye,' I loved her but I loved young Alex as well. I was not quite willing to sacrifice him at the altar of love. And she wondered how dull a person could get! Not to talk of hypocrisy. All those avowals of love, where did they go? Disappear into thin air?

We put on our clothes as best we could and as I switched on the car engine to leave, being a man, I needed reassurance. I pulled her to me and kissed her tenderly and just when our lips parted I sealed her mouth with my hand.

"Please don't tell me about the lovely pair of shoes you saw at the shopping center."

"Okay, what do you want to know?"

"Did you really enjoy our lovemaking?"

She smiled and caressed my cheek. "I hated it, you little crybaby, couldn't you tell?"

But when we reached the main desert road and turned right for the city, she started crying.

I pulled her to me and she put her head on my shoulder.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now what! Now what! How insensitive can you get? You fuck and it's all over. What do you care?"

"You are terribly crude and unfair sometimes. I do care, very much, if you are unhappy. Do you want to talk about it?"

"No I don't," she said like a stubborn child.

She kept her head on my shoulder. Oh, the eternal Eve! At once my baby, my equal and, undoubtedly, my superior.

"It's the first time I have been unfaithful to Talaat," she said after a while.

"As far as I understand, he is not unaware and he is willing to tolerate it. Which is something absolutely out of the ordinary, even given the very special circumstances you are in, and speaks of a very compassionate, a very big-hearted person who loves you very much."

"You don't know the half of it."

"I'm sure I don't," I said. I was sure I was about to find out.

She was silent for a while. Then, she laughed.

"How funny you men are," she said. She reached and held my genitals. "Without this you feel worthless. Emasculated means to be feeble, ineffectual and helpless."

"Quite true my little Eve. Without this you were dreaming of the snake. It is part of love. There is so little love in our world and yet is life worth living without it? That is why I consider myself so fortunate I love you, whatever the consequences. That is why I

am so unbearably happy I made love to you. I shall probably not sleep tonight thinking about it.”

“Better take a sleeping pill, my boy. We have a squash date tomorrow afternoon.”

“I wouldn't miss it for the world.”

A little later she went on to talk to me about Talaat. The truest, purest Sheikh I have ever known. A genuine man of God to whose memory I dedicate this narrative.

Talaat bey met Leila at a party. These were very proper, family-supervised affairs, where young people were supposed to meet, enjoy themselves and single themselves out for eventual pairings leading to engagements and marriage. They took place almost exclusively in upper-class circles and all of the guests were of similar social status so as far as a social mismatch was concerned the odds were fairly low.

In the early sixties, the Islamic renaissance was still in the incubator and a moderate amount of alcoholic drinking was tolerated. After dinner, the lights were lowered, the music and dancing and flirting would begin in earnest. Bathrooms and bedrooms would be patrolled and the most daring sexual play would be a furtive kiss in a dark corner. Every age has its mores. The young people find their path to adulthood as best they can. Love cannot be stifled and a look or a touch of the hand can be as thrilling and as troubling as sex. Now that it is unbridled and we are getting on in age, we sometimes regret the sex we missed. But we had romance and dreams and we did not play with the law of averages: try for five, one is sure to fall. It took too much time and emotional investment to root for just one girl.

Talaat was there. He was older than the majority of young people but he was a friend of the family giving the party, was handsome, well-dressed, rich, in fact the most eligible unattached young man in sight. Leila, too, of course, was there. A fresh and gorgeous eighteen, gay and popular, having a terrific time, flirting with everyone. Nothing attracts a man more than the aura of a star and the popularity of a woman. Nothing attracts a woman more than the aura of success and assurance in a man. They were drawn to one another like a positive to a negative charge. He introduced himself, danced with her, found out her name, flirted with her and asked about her father. He was a lawyer. How lucky! He needed a lawyer. He wrote down her father's office address. She had just finished St Clare's in Heliopolis and was planning to enter the American University.

“Would you like that,” he asked?

“Sure,” she wanted to study literature and philosophy. “Well, it's either that or getting married,” she added.

Did she have someone in mind? No, that was the worst of it. She did not want to be bundled off to a rich, chubby little businessman.

“And if he were not chubby,” he asked?

She smiled.

“Do you mean someone like you?”

“*Masalan*” (for example), he said and smiled but peered at her with apprehension. Her reply interested him infinitely. Only she did not reply.

She asked, “How come you're not married?”

“I am a hardened old bachelor.”

She laughed.

“The more hardened they are, the harder they fall.”

He laughed too.

“Perhaps, you are right. You are wise beyond your age,” he told her.

They danced the rest of the night together. Then the driver came to pick her up and they had to part. He said goodbye and kissed her hand.

“I shall see you again soon,” he said.

“You have not asked for my phone number,” she told him. “Or am I expected to ask for yours?”

He laughed.

“Don't worry, I shall be in touch.”

The following evening he went to the lawyer's office. He introduced himself, Talaat El Lamloumi. The name was impressive. The extended Lamloumi families were practically feudal lords over a large section of southern Egypt. Whole villages were situated inside their holdings. The only government the peasants of the area had known, until the Revolution came along, was the Senior Lamloumi Family Council whose word was law. It was said, the family even had a gallows where they executed by hanging the people they put on trial for crimes committed in their area and were condemned to death by the Council. Abdel Nasser started breaking up their power, little by little, and eventually decimated them financially.

“How can I help you,” asked Leila's father.

“First let me tell you how happy I am to meet you. I believe we shall be seeing quite a lot of each other,” said Talaat bey graciously.

“I sincerely hope so,” answered the puzzled old lawyer. “The honor is mine.”

“Mustafa bey, I have two cases to put before you. One is more or less routine. The other is so serious that it shall affect the whole of my life and well-being. Shall we start with the minor problem?”

“As you wish. People usually start with their major problems.”

“I prefer to get the less serious affair out of the way. It is complicated and intractable but in the end it does not matter so much. The serious one, I believe, shall be settled satisfactorily in which case I shall be in no frame of mind to tackle the minor question anyway.”

They talked about the minor problem, which had to do with a school the family owned and staffed in a village and was now forcefully taken over by the Ministry of Education even though it provided free education for the peasant children. Then, when the course of action was settled, Talaat bey took out his visiting card and passed it on to the lawyer. The lawyer looked at it and then looked hesitantly at Talaat.

“I am not one of the very rich Lamloumis,” Talaat told the lawyer. “Please be kind enough to inquire about me.”

“Whatever for?” asked the lawyer.

“Yesterday, at the Mohammadi Soliman residence I met your daughter, Leila. I request her hand in marriage.”

Mustafa bey was flabbergasted.

“Talaat, my son, you met Leila yesterday and you are asking for her hand today? Are you serious? Does she know? She has had dozens of proposals and has rejected them all. She claims she wants to continue her studies. And you know, I tend to agree. I am against this conventional rush, rush of our society to marry off a girl as soon as she

finishes secondary school. I believe Leila is too high-spirited, too full of life to assume the responsibilities of marriage just now. I don't want our flower to wilt before her time.”

“That is the last thing I want, as well. Please, first complete your inquiries as to my person and then discreetly ask Leila whether she finds my proposal acceptable. I have reason to believe that she shall. I would not have made it otherwise. And you can call me when you have an answer.”

Three days later, he received a phone call from Leila.

“*Mabrouk!* (congratulations). You are accepted!”

“By whom?”

“By everybody. Can you come for tea this afternoon at seven?”

“Yes, yes. So my nightmare is over?”

“Perhaps, it is just beginning,” she said with a gay laugh.

“We got married in a hurry not because anything pressed,” continued Leila, “we were just very much in love. A fairy-tale marriage, of course, a month-long honeymoon in Europe and America and a new luxurious apartment to redecorate in Zamalek on our return. Then, things started getting sticky. The socialist virus entered Abdel Nasser's bloodstream and his bunch of thieving cronies encouraged this upheaval of our society to amass their wealth. Poor, envious, two-bit army officers most of them, who were incapable of defending their country when the need arose. The confiscations of land from large landowners started taking place, leaving us with two hundred acres.

“A year or so later, another chiseling left us with half that. Then the company where Talaat worked was nationalized and was dumped with a whole lot of other companies and all were bureaucratized, messed up, disorganized and made as inefficient as possible. Talaat lost his way in this labyrinth of army-officer cronyism and stayed on just for the eventuality that we might some day need his salary and later his pension to survive. Luckily, it has not come to that. Despite everything, we have led a very comfortable, happy life together. I used to tell him, ‘Talaat ever since we married, things have gone from bad to worse for you. I was your unlucky card.’ And he used to get so annoyed and angry with me. He asked me if this would not have happened had we not married. Was I responsible through this marriage, as well, for the fate of thousands that were treated in the same way? ‘You are the sun that shines in my life,’ he always tells me.

“We were of course unable to have children. We made the rounds of doctors without much success. It seems his sperm was congenitally weak from Lambloumi inbreeding and that was that. We thought seriously of adoption and it was I, finally, that rejected the idea. I did not think I would be a good mother and I did not want to be burdened with a baby that was not mine. Perhaps, that was selfish because Talaat wanted it very much. He said that in my later life a child would be a great comfort and companionship. But I was happy with my life as it was. I had my social activities and sports and studies. I call them studies but they were not really studies. Just some external courses now and then at the AUC when the subjects came up that interested me, and lots of reading.

“A few years ago when the question of adoption was finally forgotten, Talaat started worrying about the Islamic inheritance laws of this country. Without a child, if he happened to die, nine tenths of his money would revert to his family. So, little by little, he started, through fictitious sales, legally transferring his land and fortune to me. He did all

this as quietly as possible so his family would not notice thus avoiding quarrels and bad feelings. Now, practically everything he owns is in my name.

“The knockout blow in our lives was of course his prostate cancer. Evidently, we knew the consequences beforehand but what was the alternative? After the operation and recovery he fell into a severe depression. He could not bear the fact of his impotence. He was thinking of me above all else. He thought he did an injustice to marry me. That he wronged me, that he was inexcusable. He wanted to divorce me so I would find someone else to build a new life. He urged me to look around for another man and as soon as I found one he would divorce me. He threatened to commit suicide if I refused.

“I have been living this nightmare for nearly two years. How could I possibly abandon a man I loved dearly with body and soul for eighteen years? A man who offered me his unbounded love and all his fortune? One day, after an acute bout of dejection and saying he could not bear this life any longer, quite spontaneously I told him, ‘Talaat, please don't torture yourself. Please, understand that you are no longer my husband. You are my father. I am no longer your wife. I am your daughter. Whatever happens, I shall never abandon my father. I cannot imagine you would ever think of abandoning your daughter with your crazy suicidal schemes.’ These few words worked like magic. He started regaining his interest in life. He returned to work, and there he met and befriended, who else? Our Sherif effendi.

“He learnt that Sherif worked in a little industrial concern owned by a Greek young man called Alexanthros Patakis. He learnt that you were a good boy. Young and good looking. That you were university educated, polite, well mannered, a sportsman. It was important to him that you were a sportsman. You fitted, almost perfectly, a picture he had already constructed in his mind. The picture of my future lover. He was playing a dangerous game with human feelings and emotions, yes, but with us, at least, the possibility of marriage was altogether unlikely. All we could do was hurt ourselves. He had his back covered. There was not much fear he would lose me. Can this little bit of selfishness born of so great a love be held against him? Can this burial of his own ego with the sole concern for my well-being not be considered the ultimate of generosity and altruism?

“He asked Sherif to bring you to his office, supposedly for a coffee but in fact to give you the once over and you unwittingly went. It was after that meeting that he announced he had found my perfect dream lover. I was terribly shocked to start with. Surprised that Talaat would actually reach the stage of putting his vague notions to practice. But reality tempers you, and thinking about it reduces the outrage. I was even curious to see where it would all end. I could not imagine these mad schemes would ever come to fruition. Our subsequent setbacks were your recalcitrant refusals to accept our repeated invitations to the farm. ‘If he could only have one look at you,’ Talaat would tell me, ‘Mr. Alexanthros Patakis would be here like a streak of lightning.’ ‘Why don't you take a picture of me, naked, with your Polaroid and then we can send it to him in a sealed envelope with Sherif effendi,’ I suggested with some irritation. ‘If all else fails, it will be our last resort,’ Talaat told me laughing.”

She turned and kissed me on the mouth.

“But they say, if you don't win at first, try and try again,” she said smiling. “We did, we won and it was heaven.”

We fell into the pattern of meeting in the evenings of our swimming days. The next day would be the squash appointment but not an early *réveil*. The Friday was our Sabbath, our day of rest and recuperation. Leila would spend it with Talaat at the farm. I was often invited there by Talaat Bey but I never went. I could not overcome a sense of guilt and embarrassment towards that man. Often, in our sporadic phone conversations he used veiled language to insinuate that he had no problem with the status quo and that it was a practical and beneficial solution to Leila's problem and that he bore no ill feelings towards me. On the contrary, he was relieved that her life was moving so peacefully along.

He did not quite get it right. Our life was not moving peacefully along. It was moving passionately along. Deliriously along. It was moving at the edges of obsession and sanity. I believe we were both madly in love. We could not get enough of one another. Not only was our compulsive lovemaking indispensable. Our squash games were essential, our daily, morning telephone conversations were vital, our swimming and jogging were necessary, looking at each other's eyes was crucial. Our main problem was finding shelter for our love jousts.

Leila and Talaat owned a wooden cabin used for picnics at Sahara City, a stretch of desert behind the pyramids and we would sneak in at night, our hearts beating for fear that the Bedouin caretakers of the area would spot us. We would make love in the dark and leave just as furtively a few hours later. Often we would visit the limestone quarry or other deserted spots we discovered by and by. Once or even, sometimes, twice a month I would feign a trip to Alexandria and dismiss the servant for a day or two. We would sneak in the flat with Leila at two or three in the morning and spend the whole of the next day in bed in a shuttered house with locked doors, silent conversations, sandwiches and fruit for lunch and dinner and unanswered phone calls. They were the most joyful and blissful days of my life. An alternation of sleep and feverish passion, companionship and soul-consuming love.

Was the need to hide, the secrecy, feeding our passion? Perhaps. In any case, we did a good job of it. I do not think we aroused the slightest suspicions. At the most, an ironic comment might have been heard at the club, 'There goes Leila, again, with her little squash trainer.'

For two years, we were the best-kept secret in Cairo. Well kept because just three people knew it. Leila, Talaat and I. My family had moved to Greece at about the start of my affair with Leila as my father needed specialized medical attention which he could not get in Egypt. I had gained the reputation of an oddball, unsociable loner in the Greek circles where I should ordinarily be circulating. It suited me fine. My life was bursting with Leila. If anything our dependence on one another increased as time passed. Talaat had become the veritable father figure that looked over us and advised us through Leila. I hardly ever saw him. His kindness towards his newfound daughter was hard to believe, his complicity in helping her pull off the craziest of schemes was barely credible and his love for her seemed without bounds. He was still working at his public sector employment but Sherif effendi told me that he seemed to be aging fast. His health problems seemed not to be over.

Once, after soul-wrenching lovemaking, I told Leila that, sometimes, I imagined what we were experiencing could not possibly be true. We were most likely just a tale

from the Arabian Nights, *Alf Leila ou Leila*, of Scheherazade and that Talaat was the wise and benevolent Caliph Harun-al-Rashid.

She thought about it for a moment and then burst into tears.

“That was a horrible thing to say.” She hugged me and held me tightly. She searched my face. “What made you say that,” she asked?

“Horrible? My darling, I was trying to invoke the magic of it all.”

“It sounded like a prophecy.”

“What prophecy?”

“Don't you see? Nearly two and a half heavenly years have already gone by. Not many more nights are left from the thousand and one. Talaat is deteriorating steadily. I can see it day by day. I cannot bear the thought of his death and I cannot bear to think what will happen to us after he dies.”

“I am sorry to speculate on it, but what can possibly happen to us after he dies?”

“To start with, you are terribly unfeeling to pose the question so cold bloodedly. Secondly, you are either terribly naïve or else you know nothing of Egyptian society.”

“So, tell me.”

“Think about it on your own. I have no wish to continue this conversation.”

Was it an inadvertent prophecy this uttering of mine? That we were living a dream, a tale? And like all dreams and tales, this too, would not last very long?

A few weeks later, a distraught Leila played a terrible game of squash and in a fit of anger smashed her racquet to bits on the wall of the court. Her bad mood overpowered me. I could not be gay and insouciant, I was gloomy and silent. When she smashed her racquet, we collected the bits and left the court. We started walking to the changing rooms.

“It's Talaat, isn't it?” I said.

“Yes. We were at the hospital this morning for the results of the latest tests. He has had a metastasis of the cancer to the bones. There is nothing to be done about it except to irradiate him regularly at the Kasr El Aini to reduce the pain. He has just a few months to live. Of course, he has stopped working since about ten days. Sorry Alex, I shall not be jogging tomorrow with you. I just do not feel like it.”

The next day I was surprised to find her downstairs.

“Leila! Good morning my darling.”

“Good morning Alex. Talaat insisted I come,” she said simply and started jogging ahead of me.

It was a desolate piece of jogging that day at Shara'a El Opera. The pace was fast. No laughing and kissing, just a little caressing of her hair and a few tears. The swimming was much better. The alternating cold and warmth seemed to yank her out of her despair and when we finished and had our shower and were walking to her car, she smiled at me and the sun came out. She was the sun that shone in my life as well.

“I feel much better,” she said. “I am sorry, Alex. Call me up later if you can.”

Our life, inevitably, entered a new phase. At Talaat's urging we tried as much as we could to keep on the old track but that was clearly impossible. Every other day Talaat had to be taken, in the morning, to the Kasr El Aini hospital for Cobalt irradiation. Leila, of course drove him there and back. It was becoming a difficult exercise. He was, after just a few weeks, practically unable to walk and a servant would go with them to lift him onto the folding wheelchair they had bought for transportation inside the labyrinthine

university hospital. Luckily, he had the credentials, as a senior official of a public sector company, to be afforded special treatment. He did not have to wait for his turn, for hours, like the dozens of penniless unfortunates, old men, women and children who were there to treat their malignant tumors. He was whisked in and out of the lead-sheathed irradiation chamber and then wheeled to the doctor for a cursory examination in order to have the area of his spine painted and marked that would require the next irradiation. The whole process took less than an hour.

On one occasion when Leila's car was out of order, I offered to help them out and we drove Talaat to hospital in my car. He was a shadow of his former self but his graciousness and politeness were unchanged. He thanked me profusely for my help and was smiling and even gay all the time we were together. Leila hardly spoke throughout the trip and it was Talaat who kept the conversation going. When we returned home, he asked me if I could spare the time for a cup of tea with them.

"We have not talked much, us two," he said. "Perhaps it was due to our circumstances which were unusual, to say the least. And I would be grateful for a few words with you, my son. We have to reach an understanding because my daughter, Leila, will need special consideration after I am gone."

We went upstairs and sat in the living room. It was midday and Talaat ordered some tea. He asked Leila if she would like to stay. She was, of course, free to do so or not. He just did not want to pain her. Yes, she wanted to hear whatever he had to say to me.

We drank our cup of tea and engaged in inconsequential small talk for a while. Leila was silent and apprehensive. Lost is a better word. She kept glancing at Talaat and me. Where had that self-assured, spirited, witty, outspoken young woman gone? Talaat looked at me for a long time. He seemed to be taking my measure.

"First, I want to thank you, my son, for making Leila happy and allowing me to enjoy her brightness and cheerfulness, her radiance and luminosity, in my house, and the unabated love she has offered me all through our life together but especially these last few years. I do not think she would have ever left me but a happy woman is a happy and pleasant companion. Is it not strange that her love for two men bound her to me, dare I say, even more than before when it was exclusively mine? Is it not a miracle that I managed to overcome my ego, petty jealousies, my very conventional upbringing and stern religion and accept to become her father and pursue exclusively her happiness? I thank Allah for that. I do not pray to him often but sometimes I do express my gratitude for these small mercies. And the big gifts of life. The biggest of which is Leila and the immensity of my love for her.

"I shall soon be gone," he went on. "I shall be mourned. I shall be forgotten. Such is life. It is as it should be. Remember, time is the big healer. You must remember this because you, too, shall be hurt by my death. It is unavoidable in the society we live in. You love Leila. Oh, yes, I can see that. Promise me, my son, that you shall only do what is best for her. Promise me that you shall not think of yourself. Only of her. Promise me."

"I promise, Talaat bey."

"You solemnly swear this to me?"

"I solemnly swear it to you."

"You will have to leave her when I die. A thousand plans, a thousand thoughts, a thousand schemes might cross your mind. Do not be fooled. You shall have to leave her."

Leila started crying. Silently. Her head bent, covering her eyes with her palm.

“You extracted a heavy promise from me Talaat bey. I did not know leaving her was indispensable. I am not a Sheikh like you, or a saint. I cannot imagine how I shall ever manage that.”

He was shocked and angered. His eyes grew wide and his lips started trembling.

“Are you retracting your promise?” he asked in an incredulous voice.

“I cannot retract my promise, Talaat bey. I repeat to you what I promised: I shall do what is best for Leila. I shall not think of myself. That, I solemnly swear.”

“That is good enough. I know you are sincere. You shall soon realize how intractable the situation that will shape up with my departure will be. I do not want you to torture Leila with your love. I want you to act in her best interests and this you have promised me twice. In good faith, I believe. Go, my son, you have lifted a big burden from my shoulders.”

I shook hands with him. He could not get up but he smiled pleasantly. Not a hint of self-pity.

“I knew you were a good person,” he said, “the moment I saw you.”

I walked to the door and shook hands with Leila.

“Call me,” she said.

She did not have to tell me. My telephone calls like amoeba cells divided and multiplied. It was madness. We should have been drawing apart. We were seeing less of each other and drawing ever closer. I called her in the mornings. Every free moment she came to my mind. Sometimes just to say, “Everything fine? I love you.” She called me in the evenings because there were usually visitors and family at home. She called me in snatches, in between, and when they left at night to tell me Talaat's news. I had to know detail by minute detail. I started believing his words. That he was my increasingly withering lifeline to Leila. That his death would spell our severance. The why or the how, I never discussed with her. Nor the thousand frantic stratagems to preserve our love that cluttered my mind. She got angry whenever I tried to broach the subject.

“I cannot bear to discuss what will happen after Talaat dies while he is still alive in my house,” she would say. “Nothing will change with a lot of cold-blooded, shameless bla-bla. Can't you understand I love him dearly?” She would cry a little after that and then smile at me with tears in her eyes and say, “I'm sorry. We Moslems are a little like the ancient Greeks. We believe that you cannot escape your destiny. Here, I have jotted it down.” She fished a scrap of paper from her pocket. “Please excuse the pronunciation, she said and read, *To pepromenon fygheen athinaton.*”

I looked at her in wonder.

“Where am I going to find another Leila, I asked her?”

In the three months of Talaat's inexorable loss of grip on life, until his death, we managed to keep our love alive. What a pathetic understatement that was! We did not manage to control it. We did not manage to keep it from growing, from exploding. Desperation seemed to be feeding it. We met much less frequently at night but we did try to keep up our squash games, the jogging and swimming. The hours were convenient and short and they did provide Leila with palpable relief from her tensions and anxieties. She had grown thinner and her face a little gaunt. I could not take my eyes off her when we met. Was it possible that suffering and helplessness made her more alluring? Or were these just my mind's hallucinations?

The families were closing in. It is the culture of the country. They rush to help, to be useful whether they are wanted or not. Mustafa bey, Leila's father, had died a few years back but her formidable mother was in and out of the house constantly. Unilaterally and unasked, she had assumed command of her daughter's household. Talaat's younger brother and sister, their families and cousins were in relentless, solicitous attendance. When we met, Leila complained that she was suffocating. She could not even spend enough time with Talaat.

Gone were the dreamy, sensual days of lovemaking in my darkened, shuttered flat. Gone was the casualness with which we faced the future. Our evening encounters were impromptu affairs. Embarked on and snatched on the spur of the moment, as circumstances allowed. More often than not, we would meet at midnight soon after the stragglers, the last of the well-wishers departed from her house and Talaat was asleep. We would drive in a frenzy to the cabin at Sahara City and spend a few hours in passionate delirium. Tearing at each other's flesh to sate this thirst, this lust, this craving, forever. Alas, there is nothing in this life called forever. It is a lying and treacherous word. It is a word of children's fairy tales.

Talaat died three months after our last encounter at their home. She called me up at work just as I arrived in the morning. She did not say much. She did not cry. Her voice was subdued.

"Alex, he is gone," she just said. "You are the first to know. I walked in his room just now and he was gone. Peacefully. Al hamdu li Allah. One ordeal is over. How many more to come?"

A couple of hours later, I asked Sherif effendi to call and inquire about the funeral arrangements. The preparations were in full swing. He would be buried at noon and a *souan* (tent) would be erected on the street below his house for the offering of condolences in the evening. There, I went with Sherif effendi at eight. It was a huge tent, in keeping with the Lamloumi name and Talaat's position as a senior government official. The inside façade of the heavy cloth of the tent was beautifully embroidered and decorated with Arab and Islamic motifs in bright colors of which red was dominant. Just outside the entrance was a large table where sugarless Turkish coffee was being prepared for the mourners. At the entrance a long line of about ten unshaven, grim-faced men in ill-fitting suits, white shirts with buttoned up collars minus ties, were receiving condolences.

I walked along and shook their hands muttering, *Bayak fi Hayatak* (May the rest be in your life). I knew not a one of them. Leila was upstairs in the flat with the women. Probably being suffocated to death. We entered the tent and moved on to some empty chairs. On a platform, to the right, a bevy of Sheiks were sitting cross-legged on pillows on the floor, chanting into their microphones. The recitation was deafening. They were undulating backwards, forwards and sideways reminding me of Leila's Ophis. If God existed, would he have been as ironical as that?

In the isolation of the sound blast I thought of Leila. What would happen to us now? Was there no way out? She had suddenly left my orbit. So suddenly! A few hours ago. Now, with Talaat behind us, perhaps, we would be able to talk things over. But, God, it seemed such a lie. So futile and hopeless. The sound blast seemed to confirm it. You could not reason with a cyclone of noise. Where there were no ears to listen, just a loud mouth spewing a beautiful language of prejudice, narrow-mindedness and fairy-tale

encounters with God. Religion, tradition, culture, were all conspiring against us. We were all human but were not allowed to choose our destiny, to love as we pleased, to live as we loved. We were not allowed to be happy. There were rules and rules and prejudices and ancient hatreds to be taken into account. We were tied down to narrow strictures and pathways and our traditional societies did not tolerate deviations. If the supernatural existed, surely it was an alliance of God and the Devil. The consciousness of this was unmistakable in the ear-drilling rantings of the chant.

There was a break in the prayer and I got up to leave. Sherif effendi wanted to stay for another Sura, another half-hour chapter recitation of the Koran. I bid him good night. I did not think my eardrums could survive it. I moved to the entrance. People were arriving in droves. The handshaking tide was incoming. I waited a moment for a break and shook hands in the opposite direction. I moved my lips, they moved theirs and I moved into the darkness.

Suddenly, with shock, I realized that in his memorial prayers, I did not once think of Talaat. I only thought of Leila and myself. But I suppose that is the fate of all truly good, benevolent and selfless people. Finally, the good and the bad, God and the Devil, are deeply rooted inside each of us.

I called Leila at midnight but there was no answer. She called me up at three. I rushed to the phone, my heart beating wildly.

“Alex,” she whispered, “I am at my mother's house. Everyone is finally asleep. Oh, my darling, what a nightmare I've been through. I could not even cry peacefully. I am fed up with all these bloody witches trying to console me, trying to keep me company. Damn them. My mother included. They forcibly kidnapped me and brought me here. They packed my belongings and literally dragged me out of my house. They were adamant. A widow cannot stay alone in a house. Do they think I shall stay here forever? I told them I would leave in a few days. I cannot leave my beautiful home and my comforts. Talaat's presence is still in it. I feel it. He has not left. He shall look over us. They kept on repeating, ‘A widow cannot stay alone,’ until I got hysterical and I shouted, ‘So go find me a eunuch to keep watch over me.’ That shut them up. I shall have to find a woman, of course, to stay with me before I leave. And how are you, my little Alex?”

“Miserable, my darling. I think of you constantly. I dream of you. I feel I am losing you.”

“Be strong my Alex. I, too, shall recover my strength. This turmoil has sapped my spirit. It shall come back. We shall see what fate has in store for us with courage and with the great love that binds us. Talaat is gone. I am back to one love.”

“I was always there.”

“I know. Good night. I shall call you.”

I waited all of the next day. Not a sound. I felt her drifting away. Carried away by forces beyond my control. She woke me up, again, in the early hours. I glanced at my watch. It was one-thirty.

“Alex, forgive me, my love, for waking you up. It is the only time I have to myself. I am a virtual prisoner. I cannot leave the house. It gets packed early in the morning and empties at midnight. Don't these busybody bitches have anything else to do? Is it their new mission in life to relieve my pain? Talaat's brother and sister approached me this afternoon and offered to help me out with the inheritance procedures. I told them there is no need. Everything is settled. They turned pale. I think they understood.

Perhaps, I shall be seeing less of these two, in any case. I spend most of the day in my room reading the few books I managed to grab from home on my way out. And still they intrude and drag me out and drive me mad with their prattle, their loud voices and silly jokes. Oh, well, I hope this will not last too long because certainly my patience won't. I told them I just wanted to go down for a walk and my mother refused. I am living in a world of irrationality. How are you, my love? I think of you."

We fell into a pattern of post-midnight telephone calls. The situation remained much the same except that Leila was, eventually, allowed to leave the house for a daily walk accompanied by a maidservant. She refused to have any of the other ladies. She did a little shopping and bought some books for her reading. She stretched her walks more and more walking about in Zamalek and even going to the club for a cup of tea. But there was always a Cerberus on her heels. And she was not allowed to return to her own house. '*What would people say*', ruled her life. Two weeks later, she asked me to stay home in the afternoons. She would try to give them the slip and come to my flat.

"In broad daylight?" I was shocked.

"Talaat is dead. They cannot call him a cuckold. As for me, they can call me a tramp for all I care."

A week went by. I had lost hope she would ever come. I had invented dizzy spells at work and the need to stay home after lunch. And then, one day, she was there. I opened the door and stared at the apparition. She was so thin and pale and her hair had grown longer. She was like a Byzantine icon, like a suffering saint. But, oh, so beautiful. So heartbreakingly exquisite. She smiled and I just stared. I could not utter a word. I had not seen her for a month. We fell into each other's arms. I could not let her go. We moved into the living room and sat on a couch and still we could not talk. We just smiled, embraced and kissed one another for a long time. I caressed her hair and then pulled her by the arm, we went to the bedroom, undressed and made love.

It was a strange sensation, a sort of different body. Smaller, diminished, a new angularity, the skin less taut. A strange sensation because I loved her all the more. Her transformation filled me both with compassion and desire. With a love and a yearning that choked me. And her love was there too, palpable, demanding, the passion unabated, the sensuality more intense. We made love many times over. We did not talk much for nothing was clear. We did not know where we were going. We did not know where to strike out. Whom to fight. What weapons to use.

As we were dressing, she smiled and said,

"Just like old times! I wonder how many times more?"

"Many, many more," I answered. "Everything will turn out well."

"Oh you little dreamer, Alex," she said. "The conspiracy is widening."

"What do you mean?"

"Some other time. It was too beautiful an afternoon to spoil it. Good-bye, my love, I shall be in touch."

She called me at two in the morning. She was calm. She was laughing. For the first time in ages.

"Oh, Alex, all hell broke loose when I returned home. I had given them the slip and left without Cerberus and they were up in arms. I left them yelling and just walked to my room and shut the door. I was so calm and contented after our lovely afternoon that I did not bat an eyelid. My mother charged into my room and demanded to know where I

had been. I totally ignored her. It takes a bitch to know a bitch and she guessed I had been with a man. She closed the door and started insulting me. ‘You little tramp, I know you have been with a man. I can smell it. I can tell by your countenance, by the circles under your eyes. You cannot fool me. Not ever. Who is he? Have you been seeing him even when Talaat was alive?’ I just let her rant to her heart's content. I simply ignored her and finally she pretended to have a fainting fit, to be short of breath and left the room.

“I have been reading all evening. A book called *The Greek Legacy*. I love a Greek so I am reading about the Greeks. Well, the ancient variety. My mind is so clear. Does lovemaking clear your mind too? I have been thinking. Do you know what the ideal solution to our problem would be? That you find a passionate, sexy Greek girl-wife like me and I find an indefatigable, avid Moslem lover-husband like you. I would marry my surrogate Alex and you would wed your surrogate Leila. We would remain secret friends and call each other up now and then to exchange news. Perhaps even meet once in a while in our *garçonnière* to refresh our memories.” She laughed. “How does that sound?”

“Terrible,” I cried. “What a perverse sense of humor.”

“Yes. Truly terrible. Go to sleep now. You must recuperate. Our agony and passion, today, were too intense. Perhaps, we shall meet again for another lovely afternoon.”

“Perhaps? There is no perhaps about it.”

“Perhaps, there is. Perhaps, there isn't. Good night, little Alex.”

“Good night, my fiery Eve.”

Ten days later, the fortieth-day memorial of Talaat's death took place in a *souan* beneath his house. Sherif effendi wanted us to attend but I declined. I shall not be missed, I told him and he decided to go on his own because he knew some officials of the company who had taken over Talaat's duties. He also wanted to listen to a few Koranic Suras, to their laryngeal chants and guttural sounds and the beautiful turns of phrases.

“How can you bear the noise,” I asked him.

“You forget the noise,” he answered. “It is a way to let the words seep into your soul.”

Another big plus for the great philosopher. Was not Marx correct to call religion the opium of the people?

After her escapade, Leila was never allowed to move into her flat. She was closely monitored in her mother's house. She did continue her long walks with Cerberus and this, perhaps, was her lifeline to sanity together with her reading and the short, daily after-hours telephone calls we had. She told me that after the forty-day mourning period was over, the discreet campaign to find her a husband came out in the open. It was unabashed, shameless and demeaning. The whole family was conspiring. The pressure was immense. There was no way out.

“What do you mean, no way out?” I was indignant.

“Do you see something that I don't, young Alex?”

“I shall ask for your hand.”

“Marry me? Are you mad? Have you thought about it, you little idiot?”

“Sometimes. In desperation. Among other thoughts. Thoughts of leaving Egypt with you. Living abroad.”

“I am glad there is, at least, a tiny measure of reality in your fantasies. In desperation, you say. Yes, in desperation, is true. But even desperation cannot make this plan feasible. Shall we examine a few questions?”

“Yes, we must, my darling.”

“To marry me you must become a Moslem. You have an aversion to religion and though you were always discreet in your comments, I feel it is more so about Islam. You do not like what you call its fairy tales, its authoritarianism and its total involvement in our life. Are you prepared to undergo instruction by a mullah you despise in matters you ridicule? To learn the motions and words of prayer? To change your name to Abdullah (slave of God) or Sharaf El Din (honor of religion)?”

“For you, perhaps, I shall manage that.”

“Manage it and hate me for it?”

“How can you talk like that?”

“Did you consider our age difference? In ten years you shall be nearing forty and I shall be fifty. I shall start fading, creasing, my flesh will grow soft and loose and my veins will start showing. I shall be turning unappetizing. Ten years pass like a dream. Even twenty. In twenty, I shall look like your mother and you shall be looking around for something new, something fresh and young. And even if you would not, I would be constantly suspecting it. I am not Talaat. I could never be your mother easing the way for adventures with another woman just to keep you tied to me. I am Eve of the snake. I shall gouge your eyes out.”

“Twenty years! You really are thinking a long way into the future.”

“Yes, because thinking short-term will only multiply the problems. Leaving the country to go abroad and all that. What kind of life will we forge? How long will it last? Did you think, Alex, of your family? Their pain? Did you think of the ridicule that shall be heaped on you from everyone but especially from your Greeks? Did you think of their ostracism and derision?”

“No. I never gave a damn.”

“You imagine you are tough but you are a softie, my Alex. A good boy, as Talaat called you once. Talaat also told you to act in my best interests. I think we are reversing roles. I am acting for yours because I do love you. I have thought deeply about it. I have torn my brain apart. There is no way out.”

“There must be.”

“Think about it, you little dreamer. We shall be in touch for some time yet.”

'Yet' was not destined to be very long. Events were moving fast. Spurred by the curious logic of propriety, tradition and religion. By the overriding notion that no young woman should stay unmarried. That, especially, independent-minded persons like Leila should be tied to restraining bonds to keep them out of harm's way. Harm? Yes. To the busybody families, intelligence, freedom, love, happiness, a zest for life was harm. It could not be tolerated. The pull towards mediocrity was a set frame of mind. It was almost institutional.

In a strange way, this last confrontation of reality that Leila put me through, this dumping in the chill waters of truth, shattered my instinctive basic emotions. Perhaps, it finally dawned on me how impenetrable our circumstances were, compounded with her cold logic that could see no way out. I still loved her deeply. I still missed her appallingly. She always came to mind with an ache in the heart, with anguish, with a

churning stomach. But I seemed to have suppressed my physical need for her. Not for her presence but her sex, her passion, her desire. I did not dream of her body, of her moans, her humming and deliriums. I did not miss her thousand sexual improvisations of Paradise where there was no shame. I had become frigid. For the next couple of weeks we talked steadily in our post-midnight phone calls. I heard her news with a curious dispassionate interest. She was already out of my reach. I had not seen her for weeks. How many? I had lost count. Since our last obsessive meeting in my flat.

A man had been found. A very good party. Everybody was happy except Leila and me. A man a few years older than her. A widower like Leila, without children. Everything fitted perfectly. He was educated and wealthy. He had lived and worked in the States, married and made his fortune there. His young American wife died of cancer and he decided to return to his country. He met Leila and was immediately infatuated by her. She had the right balance of the European and the Oriental he was looking for. She had the brains. He could tell, behind the reserve. She certainly had the beauty. A certain melancholy resignation, too, that was so appealing. He asked her to marry him.

“Did you accept,” I asked calmly as if I were not involved. It is true. I seemed to be no longer involved; I felt I no longer counted.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he is by far the best of the crop that was paraded in front of me so far. Because it is the only way I shall be able to get out of this hellhole I am in. Because he is rich and he will provide me with a life of travel and luxury. Because I shall have security. Because he is pleasant, refined and a man of the world. Because he is educated. Because he loves me. Because he is patient and understanding and puts up with my moodiness. Because he wants a child and so do I and there is not much time left for that. Because, perhaps, in time, I might get to love him.”

She started crying.

“Oh, my darling Eve of the snake, I really have lost you.”

“My little Alex, it was Paradise outside the gates while it lasted. But didn't you know that even Paradise is temporary? You, yourself, told me that the word, forever, was treacherous and a lie. It is for children's fairy tales. We have lived through one, but it is over.”

Leila was mine for just Alf Leila ou Leila. Almost to the night.

18 / 3 / 2001

CHEZ RAYMOND

Stories, stories, stories. Stories without end. So long as life exists, fiction will have an inexhaustible supply of reality to feed on.

Orpheus Looks Back.

My name is Jimmy. It started off as Jiminy by some unlikely stroke of Raymond's humor but deteriorated to Jimmy within a few days. In any case, Tania called me Jimmy right off and Jiminy proved too difficult for the staff. Too long for the average brain capacity of our boys and girls. I cannot imagine where Raymond picked it up. He was barely educated and his English consisted of ten words, a dozen grimaces and a hundred gestures. But he did travel often to England and, I must admit, it was inspired since, I suppose, it was meant, if not to ridicule me, at least to tease me. For I am an ugly chap. Jiminy brings to mind a blond winsome, beautiful English boy. I am not a Quasimodo but there is not a single attractive feature on my face. When I look at the mirror, I wonder why everything went so wrong. I am on the short side, plump with wide hips, an awkward gait of wildly swinging arms and I have a loud, plaintive voice. I am also a little effeminate. Oh yes, I know it. It is not altogether bad for my job and, in any case, I cannot help it though I am not queer. At least, I do not think so. I am married and I have an ugly little boy who does not look altogether normal. Adel is all right but he looks as if he has a loose screw in his brain. A permanent look of surprise on his face. I love him dearly.

My real name is Makram Younes. I am a Copt. A Christian Egyptian. I was born forty-one years ago in a small village of the Said (Upper Egypt) called Timsaheia, which has a sizeable Christian community. My father was the local barber. Some years after I was born we moved to Cairo even though we earned our living quite comfortably, there. Well, as well as one can in a small, cheerless Egyptian village. He had all the Christian clientele and a Moslem barber all the Moslems. In those days, religious fanaticism had not yet flared up and we led a tolerable, tension-free existence although we did not mix with the Moslems and not much love was lost between us. In a small way, my father was a man of vision. He wanted to better our life, especially to provide me with an education, and to broaden the horizons that a small, dull, stagnant, agriculture-oriented village provided.

In Cairo, we settled on the fringes of a second-rate district called Shoubra. Many regions of Cairo had their 'European' centers, which were relatively clean and well kept with tramcars and viable communications and on their edges, near the fields, near the desert and the industrial areas were a hodge-podge of cheap, hopelessly unattractive and threadbare, small apartment blocks built on dirt roads. It was there that we rented a small flat. Years later, with Egypt's population explosion and relentless expansion of the city we found ourselves smack in the middle of Shoubra proper. All around us roads were carved and paved, modern, better-quality buildings were erected, new bus routes installed and a suffocating, crowded humanity was forever milling around the new shops, food

markets, offices and banks. But even in the early fifties, the move from Timsaheia to Shoubra was mind-boggling. The crowds, the shops, the coffee houses and bars, the gaiety and zest of life that the foreign communities provided, were new and exhilarating.

The main city center was populated almost exclusively by Greeks, Italians Jews and Armenians. Working class people and employees in the main, they were a colorful and lively mix. The Egyptians were relegated to the fringes. They were the second-class citizens of their country and it was evident that they could not have missed the racism, contempt and tolerant, good-humored disdain of the Egyptian-born foreigners. Not then, not now, did an Egyptian-born European consider himself a native of the country of his birth, nor an equal to the Arab Moslem or Copt. He considered himself superior to the local Arab stock. Perhaps that was inevitable given the poverty, the wretched living conditions, the lack of education and ignorance and, finally, the unthinking adherence to the religious rigor and narrow-mindedness of Islam and Christianity of the native population.

The foreign communities, ever since their migration to Egypt in the days of Mohammed Ali, have kept their culture, language, customs and religion intact. They built their own exclusive churches, schools, clubs, stadiums and hospitals. They published newspapers and literary magazines in their own language, produced plays and nurtured their poets and novelists, who in many cases achieved international renown. Always, at the back of the foreigner's mind was the thought that his stay in Egypt was temporary. He would stay put while the going was good, but inevitably, one day, he would have to return to his mother country. The exodus started with Abdel Nasser's 1952 Revolution. It was a trickle at first but within twenty years Shoubra belonged to its rightful owners, the Arab Moslems and Copts.

My father Younes managed to put aside a little money from his business in the village and this went a long way to shield us from undue hardship. It also helped him realize a lifelong dream. He took up a job in a small downtown women's hairdresser's shop at reduced wages for he did not have the skills to deal with the female head. He had always longed to be women's hairdresser and in Timsaheia this was clearly impossible. Women had no use for coiffeurs. They never uncovered or exposed their hair. They did not fancy having their throats slit by their menfolk. At the small salon, which was owned and run by a young Armenian coiffeur and his sister, he soon learnt the techniques and knack of washing, cutting, shaping, combing and permanent waving of long, beautiful and not so beautiful female hair. Both brother and sister were unstinting in teaching him the art and secrets of the trade and my father repaid them with hard work and canine devotion. Within a year, he was their right-hand man and was earning normal wages.

Two years later, brother and sister immigrated to Canada and my father negotiated a bank loan and bought the shop from them. For the next few years, the going was rough. Most of the original clients of the shop who had friendly ties with the Armenian couple did not wish to continue patronizing the shop under my father's management and took their hair-styling business elsewhere. To tell the truth, my father was a less than inspiring talent. I do not blame him. He came late to this dainty profession. He came out of a village in the Said, where as a men's barber, a shear or two out of place was rarely noticed and where instead of advising the client on what hair cream to use, he usually advised him to soak his hair with kerosene to get rid of the lice. He struggled pluckily for many harrowing years to keep the women's salon going and to

repay the bank loan and he did succeed but with a new kind of clientele. The emerging, native middle-class, which was replacing the Egyptian-born foreigners that were, at the time, leaving the country in droves.

I still live in Shoubra with my wife and Adel in a nice little apartment not far from my parent's home. They are both alive and kicking and I visit them at least twice a week. I really do feel I owe them a debt of gratitude for what they did for me. I was always an ugly child and was scorned by other children. Sometimes, disagreeably looking parents have good-looking children and, sometimes, as in my case, ordinary-looking persons have unattractive children. Because of my looks, I never had an intimate friend and it was my mother I turned to for comfort and support. She was always there to help me with her simple-minded advice and village homilies. She deliberately occupied me in my pre-school years with the upkeep of our house, taught me to be neat and clean and through the years made an excellent cook of me. She also taught me how to knit and sew and in those pre-television days I spent much of my time knitting the woolies of my family and the odd present we would give away, never revealing that they were my handicrafts for rear of ridicule. I had become quite an expert at it and my mother often told me I could, eventually, become a tailor or even start a small manufacturing business in woolen products.

My father had higher hopes for me. It was his dream that I would eventually enter university. It did not matter in what field of study. Graduating from a university was enough. It did not come to that but I am grateful for his aspirations, his efforts and sacrifices. I am grateful to him for this incongruity that now exists between my profession and my education and knowledge of the English language. I am grateful to him because I am happy with both. He, finally, did achieve his goal. He did widen my horizons even if I did not realize the whole of his dream.

At the age of seven, he enrolled me at the English Mission College. It was a sort of second-class English school. Not as exclusive as the English School Cairo, at Heliopolis, or the Victoria College of Alexandria, where the offspring of the moneyed Egyptian classes mingled with those of Middle Eastern prime ministers and heads of state, the sons and daughters of diplomats and all the English boys and girls that were available in Egypt. It was, however, a large, coeducational school of good reputation. It was also quite expensive but my father did not stint on the fees. He had just finished repaying the bank loan and our finances were turning around. He might have used the money in a thousand other ways but that never crossed his mind. In the end, I suppose I disappointed him but not a word of reproach escaped his lips. He was only doing what he had to do.

From the EMC I have not particularly happy memories. Nor unhappy ones either. It was a large school with all the trappings of the English public schools such as brown and yellow school uniforms, shorts with long stockings, blazers, caps and ties. With the same accent on sports and games and the same contempt for the 'swots', the hard-working students. The student body was practically all from the Egyptian middle-class with very few Egyptian-born foreigners. Boys and girls were taught separately and as in all the other English schools, after the Suez crisis of '56, Egyptian teachers replaced the English staff and the school deteriorated in every way possible.

Twelve years I spent at EMC, six at the Junior School and six as a senior. Unfortunately, I have not much to show for it except for my love and proficiency of the

English language and its literature. A little history and a little geography as well but that's about all. Do not ask me about mathematics and the science subjects. In those, I was a complete zero and as for sports, the situation was even worse. With that strange build of my body, I could neither run fast enough, nor jump and perform passable gymnastic exercises nor play any of the school games. In football, I was terrified when the ball was passed on to me. I tried to keep out of its way. If by a stroke of bad luck it reached my feet and a boy from the opposite side charged to retrieve it, I usually passed it on to him and ran away. I was the laughing stock of my class and my every timid and anxious effort, in whatever sport I tried, brought forth gales of derisive laughter from my classmates.

I was often maltreated and bullied; pushed around and beaten by the toughies at school. The verbal abuse and teasing were often worse than the occasional shoulder punch, leg paralyser or humiliating slap at the back of my neck. There were two or three nice boys that usually tried to defend me and rescue me from these nasty situations and kept a lookout for any trouble I might get into and though they were more than civil with me, they never warmed up to my attempts at friendship. More than once, I heard the word 'queer' and 'homo' being whispered about me. Perhaps, this put them off. I was very much on my own during those years at EMC. If I did earn a scrap of respect from my classmates, it was because of my mastery of the English language. I wrote fine, well thought out, sensitive essays which my teacher, often, had me read to the class. There was always a lot of noise and teasing while I read but I knew that at least in that I had no equal.

When I finished school, I just managed to scrape through the local GCE exams. My average grade did not enable me to enter university. I would have loved to study English literature in which I am sure I would have excelled but such is the inflexibility of the system that my nearly perfect marks in the English-related subjects were offset by poor marks elsewhere and I was left out in the cold with a pair of sorely disappointed parents.

Of the few options that were left open for me, I chose what might seem the most obvious. To go to work at my father's hairdressing salon. It was clearly the easiest choice but that was not the reason for my decision. My passion for reading and literature does point to an artistic bent. I loved painting and had I been able to afford to buy paints and oils and canvasses, I would have undoubtedly have started painting, if only as a hobby. I spent many a Sunday diligently rummaging in second-hand bookshops for books on art and pictures of the great masters. I loved beauty. It was something that touched my heart. A beautiful woman and even a good-looking man would nestle in my brain and I would think about them for days and days. I loved women in a dispassionate sort of way. I felt comfortable in their presence. Is it not reasonable after the awful treatment I suffered at school that I should feel this way?

Later, when I started working with them and mingling with them unselfconsciously and trying to the best of my ability to make them beautiful, I found that my affinity was reciprocated. Was it my ugliness and my slightly effeminate manner that put them at ease? Was it my desire to satisfy their slightest whim? My obvious sincerity? Another decisive factor for entering this profession was that I enjoyed working with my hands. I liked this temporary change of a face I achieved, the change of looks, the self-

confidence and satisfaction I imparted to a well-combed woman by the right hair styling and its skillful execution. I felt I had a talent that would bloom.

Unfortunately, my father's salon was not quite up to my expectations. Did I not know it? Had I not been there many a time? Of course I had and I should have expected it. Nevertheless, getting down to brass tacks is different. The salon was just a big shop on a main street in town just off the shopping district but could not accommodate more than three clients at a time. It looked slightly run down. What with all the expenses of my education, not much money was left for its innovation. Well, that could be fixed. What disappointed me more than anything else was the clientele. They were the middle and lower-middle class women of the neighborhood. A class that was emerging from oblivion in the wake of the departing Egyptian-born foreign communities. Women whose husbands were taking over the shops, the employment posts in large department stores, in banks and businesses that were being evacuated by the foreign exodus. Oh, they were nice enough but did not satisfy my penchant for beauty and glamour. Glamour is the privilege and flaunting of wealth. Beauty is rarely found in the absence of a comfortable lifestyle. It, too, gravitates towards money, is sucked in and adopted by wealth. I did not care to work with the likeable but ordinary, scruffy women of our class. Housewives with dull, uninteresting, stagnant lives, their faces lined with the worries of running a household where there was never enough money to spare, with unkempt clothing and frizzy, graying hair. However, it was with them that I started my career.

Once I decided to become a hairdresser, I had no other option but to join my father at his shop. It was a start and there I learnt the basic skills of this vocation. He already had three employees. A young man and woman who were skilled coiffeurs and a boy of fifteen or so who kept the shop tidy and clean and did the small chores that would arise. Hag Younes, as my father was usually called, Hag being the title of persons who had been on pilgrimage to the holy lands, picked up comb and scissors only when there was a rush or an old, favorite client to serve. Ordinarily, his day was calm and he had ample time on his hands to chat with neighboring shopkeepers, enjoy his Turkish coffees and when I joined the business, to devote time to teaching me the techniques of hairdressing. He was still young, in his middle forties, but he did look forward to the day when I would take over and he made an earnest and touching effort to pass on to me as well and as thoroughly as he could all he knew about his craft.

I stayed in the shop for about a year and a half before I gave notice to my father that I would look for employment elsewhere. He was devastated. He could not understand why I would leave a job where I earned good wages and a business that would eventually be mine. I found it very difficult to explain that I was suffocating in his shop with its dowdy clientele, its less than mediocre performance and its cramped space. I had learnt all there was to learn in that shop. All that my father could teach me and all I could pick up from my other two colleagues. By now, I knew I had talent. I knew I was a better craftsman than my father and all his employees put together. I was ambitious. Not for money, not to open my own shop but to excel in this fascinating art of making a woman beautiful by fashioning the hair on her head. I could not explain all this without hurting my father's feelings and I just kept on saying repeatedly that I needed a change and that, perhaps later, I would return. Luckily, my father had kept on his two coiffeurs and when I left there was no gap to fill. Hag Younes would just have to work a little harder. The salon, inevitably, slipped back to its former mediocrity but I do not think anyone noticed.

It was spring when I left the shop and an inconsolable Hag Younes. The time of the year when the heat was starting to be disagreeable and the dust from the *khamsin* very unpleasant. I went to my tailor, had light gray summer suit made and, in it, feeling dusty, sweaty and uncomfortable made the rounds of hairdressing salons in all of Cairo's luxury hotels. There were not too many in those days. Abdel Nasser, the Arab Maximum Leader had died leaving our country a political and economic shambles. Sadat's '*Infatah*', the gradual abandoning of socialism and opening to the West was still a few years away. Budgets were tight and tourism had not come into its own with all the international hotel chains rushing in to build new towers and refurbish old and famous but moribund hotels such as the Mena House facing the great pyramid, the Semiramis and Omar Khayam on the banks of the Nile.

In any case, it seemed that for me, the luxury hotels were out. One disdainful look by snobbish head-coiffeurs and the answer was usually a curt, 'No'. It was obvious they did not like my looks. They were not even interested to try me out. I was very much disheartened and I inevitably embarked on a downward spiral of preferences. I made the rounds of the so-called first-class hotels, which in those days were anything but that and had very little work in their in-house salons. Then I tried the bigger and better-class shops in town, again with very little success. I shuddered at the idea that I might have to return to Hag Younes. However, fate works in strange ways and a man from Timsaheia on two occasions marked my life.

He was my father's customer years ago at the village and they met by chance in Cairo, a few years back, as Rizk effendi's office was very close to my father's shop. He was an accountant and he fell into the habit of having a cup of Turkish coffee and a chat at my father's shop every so often if he could spare a moment. Of course, he was a Copt otherwise such intimacies would not have developed. We exchanged house visits often and I became friendly with his elder son, Osama, who was about my age. He had two younger children as well, a son and a daughter. One of Osama's girl cousins, Jehan, worked at a high-class hairdressing salon at the swanky district of Zamalek. Zamalek is a sort of island surrounded by the Nile, where most of the pre-revolution Egyptian aristocracy lived in lavish villas, surrounded by exclusive sporting clubs, expensive private schools, foreign embassies and luxury apartment buildings. Osama asked me if I would like him to ask his cousin to introduce me to the owner, a certain Raymond who was of Greek origin. Of course I would. I would be more than grateful if she would do this for me. In this manner, a date was fixed after Jehan asked for permission to bring a relative for a tryout.

The appointment was at eleven. I left Shoubra at nine thirty, took a bus to the city center and a mini-bus to Zamalek. I then walked around asking directions for the right street and by the time I reached the salon I was more or less on time. From a little way off, I saw the signboard with the flowery script, *Chez Raymond*. The shop seemed to occupy the whole ground floor of a luxury apartment block. It had its own separate entrance with a marble staircase of perhaps seven or eight steps, widening out a little as it descended with shining bronze banisters. The staircase ascended to a small patio and on to a large double door of spotless, thick glass with two, long vertical bronze handles where you could see your own distorted face. A gay colorful sunshade covered the staircase and on the pavement, all along the length of the building, were multicolored

ceramic pots in carefully arranged color schemes, with a large variety of flowers and plants.

I entered timidly inside and I thought, oh yes, wonderful, the place is air-conditioned. Right opposite the entrance was an elaborate period desk with papers, two telephones and a small wooden sign with the legend CAISSE. A pretty young woman was sitting at the desk and on the other side a blond woman of about forty. To the left was a large sitting room with comfortable armchairs arranged in three small individual areas, each around a small table with ashtrays and magazines. Facing the sitting room, the main working area of the shop opened up directly with no partition between the two rooms. It was spacious with eight working locations, each with mirror and chair, dressers, drawers and dryers and all the tools of the trade. Beyond, a few doors led to other parts of the shop. The shop was quiet and I saw just two ladies being attended to by two male coiffeurs and some women's voices could be heard chatting somewhere beyond.

I addressed the young woman behind the desk and told her I had come for an appointment arranged by Jehan. The older blonde woman looked at me inquiringly.

"You must be Makram," she said. "You are very punctual. I cannot say the same about Raymond. You shall probably have to wait a while. Perhaps a long while. It is with him you have to speak. I hope you are not in a hurry."

"I have all day," I said. I looked around and added, "This is a lovely hairdressing salon."

"Yes," she agreed and then she called in a loud voice, "Jehan."

A young girl appeared from inside and looked at us.

"Here he is," the woman told her. "Your boyfriend has come."

The girl looked at me and blushed deeply. A fleeting look of dismay crossed her eyes. She was dark-complexioned like most of the people from the south and pretty with sparkling eyes. The blush made her face even darker. We had never seen each other before and clearly, she did not relish the implied relationship between us. But she smiled at me and came to shake my hand, hesitantly verifying my identity.

"Makram?"

"Yes. Thank you for arranging this appointment," I said shaking her hand. Then turning to the blond woman, I explained, "Jehan is the cousin of a friend of mine. This is the first time I meet her."

The woman laughed.

"Okay," she said, "Okay, no harm done. You can go Jehan. Makram bring a chair and sit down and tell me about yourself. But perhaps I should introduce myself first. My name is Tania and I am Raymond's wife. I am also a professional hairdresser and I certainly know what is going on in here. I know who is working well and who is fooling around. I know who is doing good work and who is not worth keeping in the shop. The grand master, the artist, is Raymond but I am what you might call the chief executive. Okay? What about you?"

She spoke to me in perfect colloquial Arabic. She was a pleasant looking woman of average height and a slim build. Her hair was dyed in a subdued golden-blond hue, not too flashy, and I imagined that twenty years ago she might have been a very pretty and attractive young woman. I told her my meager life-story, my ambition to become a really tip-top hairdresser, that I felt an immediate affinity for their salon and that I hoped so much Mr. Raymond would hire me. She was a kind and simple person and told me that,

just now, they needed one or two skilled people and if I were reasonably good, Raymond would probably keep me. Then she added with a smile that though she was impressed by my English education, it would not do me much good in their shop.

“Most of us here,” she said, “can barely sign our names. The fight for survival started early on in our lives. I started working at fourteen at a salon in town. At eighteen, I married Raymond who was twenty and was working in the same place. A few years later, we managed to put enough money aside to open a small place like your father’s and went through the same difficulties you described. On top of that, our boy was born and for a time I could not work. Raymond is an artist. He has no head for business and what with the extra expenses of our son, we nearly went flat broke. For many years we fought desperately to keep afloat. Still God did not abandon us and here we are. Okay, Makram, take your chair now to that corner there and just wait for Raymond.”

I sat in my corner and waited. I would have liked to have a look at the rest of the shop but I thought that if I should be hired I would see it soon enough and if not there was no point anyway. People working at the salon started coming in and going out and I amused myself trying to figure out the organization. There seemed to be no coherence. Jehan came sometime later to chat with me. She told me not to worry and that Raymond was a darling of a man. He seemed aloof and strict but it was all a front. He was polite and kind to a fault. Tania was the real boss. Nevertheless, she was nice too as long as you did your work properly and she was friendly with everyone. The clients loved her. A tall, thin man with a mustache came in and Tania spoke to him in Greek, pointing at me. He came and shook my hand, introduced himself as Taki and told me he was Raymond’s brother and that he was a coiffeur as well. A little later, a well-dressed middle-aged woman came in. There must have been a changing room inside because she went in and came out in a *peignoir*, a robe worn over her underclothes, and went into another room to have her hair washed, coming out eventually with a towel wrapped around her hair in the style you see in the movies. Taki went to work on her hair, chatting away familiarly and having many discreet laughs and giggles. They certainly knew how to butter up their clients.

At three, I was still sitting on my chair in the corner. My behind was sore but things were starting to brighten up. Clients started coming in. The shop started buzzing with activity. With gay female voices and loud talk, laughs and jokes and exclamations of surprise when friends met unexpectedly. The boys and girls of the shop were moving around purposefully and the coiffeurs were working, chatting and almost certainly exchanging bits of gossip with their clients. It was the classic atmosphere of a hairdressing salon. It is a culture of its own, almost as important as the hair styling. I simply loved it. Oh my God, I thought, let Raymond hire me. I shall be heartbroken to be turned away. It was everything I dreamt a salon should be. A sanctuary for women; an ego-building haven suffused with both the camaraderie and the small, cattish jealousies that women are apt to feel for one another but a place which women considered their own. A place where they felt at home; a shelter from the constant oppression of the macho male. A place where they were served by a special brand of men. Men who felt at ease in their presence, men who were artistically inclined, who shared much of their femaleness, were often effeminate and homosexual but loved them. Loved beauty and loved to make them beautiful. Men with similar interests; less attracted to business, politics and moneymaking and more concerned with human interactions, sexual

escapades and scandals, love affairs and triangular relationships. Men, above all, fascinated by gossip, who seemed trivial and ridiculous to other men but who, finally, found the human being to be more intriguing than money and power, though power, in one way or another, permeates every aspect of our lives. Even the most tender love affairs.

Raymond had an appointment at three-thirty and when the client arrived he had still not shown up. I saw Tania getting annoyed, calling him on the phone and talking to him rapidly in Greek. It seemed this was not unusual. He often failed to arrive on time for his appointments and a good number of women just stopped asking for him. They accommodated themselves with the other coiffeurs. Tania ordered a coffee for the woman, sat with her in the sitting room and talked to her like a long-lost friend. No wonder the women loved her. Raymond arrived a little later, entered the shop without a word to anyone, went to the woman, smiled at her, kissed her hand and without a word of apology asked her to change and go inside to have her hair washed.

I stared at him. If I was strange to look at, so was he. He was not an ugly person. He was simply an image from the turn of the century. As if he jumped out of one of the faded, brownish, cardboard daguerreotype prints of the time. A flat face, not unpleasant to look at, expressionless eyes, a mouth dominated by a long, straight mustache extending slightly, left and right, beyond the skin of his face and a strange Afro hairstyle of curly hair, well before the Afro fashion had become familiar. He was tall and thin like his brother Taki but a dapper dresser. He wore a tight, beige summer suit with bell-bottom trousers, as was the style of the day, a silk, rose-colored shirt and a flashy, wide, red tie with an elaborate yellow-brown psychedelic design on it. Well, he did have a certain style. You either liked it or you didn't and sometimes you could not decide either way.

While his client was washing her hair, he chatted with Tania, at one moment turned round, looked at me, then turned away and gave me no more attention. I got up and walked out of the door to the street. I had been sitting down for hours and I was stiff as hell. I walked some way towards the main Zamalek road, found a small grocery store and bought a loaf of bread, some cheese and a coke. I left a deposit for the bottle and walked to the bank of the Nile, which was not far off, consumed the food and drank the coke. I felt much better but the weather was warm and I started to sweat. It was a relief to return to the shop and sit again on my chair. Raymond was working on the woman in his suit and tie just as he had come in. I loved the self-assurance with which he worked. His movements, quick, economical and accurate. Quite a contrast to Hag Younes. I could not take my eyes away.

From five to eight, the work at the salon was in full swing and Raymond did not stop working. One woman after another. So did most of the other coiffeurs. At eight work was over and the place finally emptied. Raymond called a girl from inside called Samiha. He told her to sit down on the chair where he was working and called me to come over. He introduced us and told me that Samiha had asked him if he could cut her hair at a moment he could spare the time.

“Will you please do the job for me?” he asked me politely. “I feel a little tired.”

Samiha protested. She did not fancy being a guinea pig.

“Don't worry, you silly girl,” Raymond told her. “I shall be watching him.”

Turning to me he said, “Look at her carefully. Look at her face and that wild mane of

hair. She is a pretty girl, isn't she Makram? Yet all you see is a mess of hair. Okay, Samiha, go wash it."

Samiha left and Raymond stretched on an armchair in the sitting room. I was left standing and paced back and forth very slowly. Five minutes later, she was back, hair dripping, with a towel on her shoulders and sat in front of the mirror. Raymond pulled a chair and sat right next to her.

"Go ahead, Makram," he said.

"How would you like it cut?" I asked Samiha.

"No, don't ask," said Raymond. "You decide."

I looked at her through the mirror and from behind and then face-to-face trying to figure out what would suit her best. I dried the hair a little more and I set to work. I cut it to about half its original length and with every clip of the scissors, I saw Samiha wince. Raymond was silent. I then started giving it its new style and shape. The hair was wet and flat and Samiha had no idea what was happening. She looked completely bewildered. When I finished trimming it, I gave it its final shape with the round brush and dryer and, suddenly, the poor girl perked up. She was interested once again for I believe she liked what she saw in the mirror. I really did a good job. The new hairstyle suited her. She seemed relieved and pleased and when she got up, she smiled and thanked me.

Raymond also smiled.

"Okay, good," he said, "Run along home now and be sure to be here by nine tomorrow. And, by the way, Makram won't do at all. Your new name is Jiminy."

"Jiminy?"

"Yes, Jiminy," he said with a smile. "If you want to work here at all, your new name shall be Jiminy."

Luckily, I was Jiminy for just a few days. The staff re-baptized me Jimmy and Raymond accepted it in good grace.

Next day at nine, I was at the door. The place was closed. I sat on the steps and waited. At nine-thirty Tania arrived in a taxi. When she saw me, she smiled and told me never to take Raymond's words, where time was concerned, seriously. He is an artist; he lives in the clouds and has no concept of time. She unlocked the door, we entered and I followed her to the kitchen where she put some water to boil. On the way, she pointed out the different sections of the salon. It was a complete, integrated unit with changing rooms for staff and clients, clean luxurious toilets, a hair washing room, a room where the staff would sit if they had no work, the room of a professional beautician or *maquilleuse* and two manicurists. Back in the kitchen, she made two cups of Turkish coffee and we moved to the outside desk.

"Mrs. Tania," I said, "you have a wonderful hairdressing salon. I am so happy Mr. Raymond took me on. It was always my dream to work in a place like this."

"First of all, everybody calls me Tania here and I shall call you Jimmy. Raymond was right. Makram is too banal. But Jiminy is the other extreme. It is just as bad. Nearly everyone in our profession changes his name to something more glamorous and foreign. Raymond's name is Andreas and mine is Malamatenia. Can you imagine, Malamatenia? So just call me Tania. As you shall see, our morning arrival is very flexible. Everyone knows his duties and comes and goes accordingly. It is a good system if it is not abused and of course, I do not let anyone abuse it. The payoff comes during the feasts when we have to work very hard and until very late at night and no one can complain or ask for

overtime. You give some and take some. My motto is: be pleasant and kind to your people but above all be firm and don't allow them play to around with you. I can tell I shall have no such problems with you. I liked your work yesterday with Samiha and so did Raymond but you still have a lot to learn and there is no better teacher than him because he is gifted in this work and is patient and kind. Unfortunately, he is not with us all the time. He works full-time as the personal hairdresser of an Arab princess and her family and travels abroad with them much of the time. When he is in Cairo, he comes here twice a week on his days off and I want you to stick to him to see him work and to have him correct your mistakes. I shall particularly ask him to do this for you because I believe you have talent and you are a good boy. I have a feeling that one day you will be my right-hand man."

With this monologue, I entered a world I had only dreamt about. A world of wealth and glamour, of beauty and creation, a world of mobile women. Women with ambitions and goals, with social connections and commitments, with pasts and futures, with racy reputations and new exploits, with love affairs past and love affairs to come. Women who are faithful, women who cuckold their husbands with young lovers or their young husbands with older but rich and generous men, women who are beautiful and others who are ugly and those who are neither but have one thing in common: the yearning to be desired, to be able to play forever the game of love. The one game that has truly gripped their soul ever since they were created from Adam's rib. Yes, I entered this world of the women of glamour not as a participant but a servant, an observer, a secret, timid lover of their sex. An aspiring Pygmalion. They came to me, to us, to *Chez Raymond* to become beautiful or, at least, comely and desirable and I racked my brains to do as good a job as was possible. They felt my will, my zeal, my passion and rewarded me with their affection, gratitude and love. Ugly, ungainly little Jimmy, before the year was out, was the darling of the shop. Before the year was out, I also knew practically all our women customers, their past, their present and could almost predict their future for I had, very intensely, this supposedly feminine failing, the love for gossip. Whether it is just a feminine failing is debatable but I must admit it was a particularly strong addiction of mine and it helped me get along very well with most of our customers. I must also mention the other main reason for my popularity. It was that, with Raymond's tutoring, I was becoming a very capable craftsman. I had a subdued taste in my styling and did not indulge in the more flamboyant hairstyles that Raymond went for. Even when he was in the shop, I was usually the most sought after coiffeur.

In fact, much sooner than Tania seemed to imply that first day at work, I had become her right-hand man. I opened the shop with her at nine-thirty every morning and closed it with her however late she might leave. It helped, of course, that I was not married and could go home at any hour. I felt and acted as if the salon was my personal property. I would not let anything damaging to the business pass me by. I would scold the culprit with my loud, plaintive voice and my effeminate gestures would bring a smile to their faces but the lesson would rarely go unheeded. I often scolded Tania herself and she would smile and say, "Oh shut up, Jimmy". Overall, however, I did get on well with my colleagues. I am easy going and considerate and I achieved my *primus inter pares* status not by being pushy but through my hard work, dedication and talent.

Besides Taki and myself, there were two other men and two women coiffeurs. There was Chris, a good-looking Greek young man about my age and Sassoon, an elderly

Moslem called Abdel Rahman, who earned his nickname when, after a particularly inept job on a client, an irate Raymond told him, My goodness, Abdou, you really don't belong here. I shall send you to Vidal Sassoon so you can teach him a thing or two. Chris left us a year or so later for Greece amid a haze of weird rumors and another young man joined us. The two girls were Mona and Samia. It is funny that women hairdressers rarely adopted assumed names. Apart from the skilled coiffeurs, there were another seven or eight girl apprentices and two boys for the odd jobs.

As for Jehan, how could I forget her? I was so grateful to her for helping me land this dream job that I moved her out of the hair-washing unit, made her my personal assistant and tried to teach her to be a coiffeuse. She never managed to get the knack for trimming hair and, in any case, she did not have an eye for the right hairstyle that would suit a particular face. I used her to save me a little time. When I finished cutting the hair of one client, I would move to another woman and let her do the drying, combing and brushing before I gave it the finishing touches. She improved as time passed but her progress was exasperatingly slow. Some things you cannot change. Some have it, some do not.

As time passed, my relationship with Tania became increasingly solid and resilient. A bonding that came with the understanding that I would never leave her. Never leave the shop even if a perfect offer for a new job presented itself for I had started building up a certain reputation in the circles of our profession. Personnel and coiffeurs came and went. I was always there, dependable, someone she could count on, which was important because Raymond was away most of the time.

I surmised that the Arab princess, Raymond's employer, originated from a tribe of desert nomads that, just fifty years ago, would be traveling from village to small village across the vast deserts of their country with their camels and tents. This need to move was like a virus in their blood except that now, with their unlimited petrodollars, they moved from one luxurious hotel suite to another in their private jets across the capitals of the world. Her husband, the prince, was not always with her. Perhaps he had a few other wives to take care of and serious business at the gaming tables of Monte Carlo, Atlantic City and Las Vegas. In any case, Raymond was liable to appear suddenly for two weeks and then disappear for the next two months. This had been going on for five or six years and I imagined much of the princess's money was used to upgrade the salon to its present state. To bring it to this level of luxury but not necessarily to prop it up, for the salon was a healthy business venture and was earning good money.

When he was in Cairo, Raymond, his unpunctuality notwithstanding, never failed to visit briefly the salon. It is strange that though a boss is usually feared and respected, his presence at the seat of his enterprise always gives the feeling of completeness and security whereas with his absence there is a void. Raymond was not feared and Tania was in fact our boss but when he was with us, the salon had an air of festivity and the smiles of both the clients and personnel multiplied a hundredfold.

I absolutely considered him my teacher and mentor. No. In fairness, I must amend that statement. My primary school teacher was Hag Younes, my father. Raymond was my university professor. I never failed to hone my skills with every single one of his short spells at work. He was a strange, funny man. A mixture: a muddle of talent and defects, of virtues and failings. Gifted in his art, simple of mind, uneducated ...but let us put some order in our description.

To start with, he was a bizarre figure to look at. A tall, thin man who, by his tight, colorful suits and ties, gave the impression of a turn-of-the-century dandy. He owned and wore suits of every color of the solar spectrum. His shirts, mostly silk, were similarly flashy and his ties totally eccentric. Talent does not always walk hand in hand with intelligence and, I believe, neither he nor his brother Taki was particularly bright. Not dim, but not very bright. Raymond had talent to spare whereas Taki was mediocre in every sense. Raymond had the temperament of an artist, which I could never decide for sure if it was the genuine article or if it derived from a certain sloth of mind. An artist ignores certain things that ordinary people consider important because he has other things on his mind: an image, an arrangement of color, a turn of phrase, an orchestral movement, a poem. Did Raymond's forgetfulness, his less than thorough attention to his environment and sense of time stem from thoughts of a new hairstyle creation in his mind? He would forget important appointments, forget where he parked his car and just take a taxi sending someone, later, with the keys to search for it and fetch it. He might be going to an important meeting and chance to see a nice pair of pajamas in a shop window, enter the shop, take his time choosing the article he liked but probably did not need, and arrive an hour late for the meeting.

His lack of discipline might have been due to his lack of education. He came from a poor background, was orphaned young and barely finished the primary Greek school because he had to go out to work to help his mother with the household expenses. He was a perfect son and a thoroughly good person. He was always very polite and kind and he loved his mother dearly. He was also extremely religious. Pathetically so. He unfailingly attended, or rather tried to attend the Sunday church services but usually arrived after they were over. However, once in church, he kissed every icon in sight. Lit innumerable candles and insisted on having a chat with the priest with whom he had cordial relations. He fasted meticulously and never missed the Holy Communion though, there again, he was often refused to be communed by the priest for turning up way after the ceremony was over. They exchanged recriminations, Raymond accusing the priest for un-Christian behavior and the priest telling him that the church had its own rules and rituals for which he showed a total disregard and disrespect by insisting on his leisurely comings and goings and special treatment.

Raymond and Tania married young and though they went through a lot of hardship were close and fought their battles for survival in unison, their characters and temperaments complementing one another. Raymond was also a loving father who, later, when money was plentiful could not bring himself to refuse the wildest of his son Johnny's requests and caprices. He obviously could not forget his own childhood of privation. He did not understand that spoiling a child is not always good. He was a simple mind and was unable to understand or would not be bothered to understand a great many things. His conception of our world was that of a ten-year old. He had few interests outside his art, his shop, his benefactress the princess and his travels. He had been very lucky so far in his life and he had the, 'I'm All Right Jack' mentality. Politics, wars, poverty, injustice, the ecological deterioration, the depletion of the ozone layer and imminent world shortage of water did not concern him. Probably he was unaware of the problems. In any case, what could he do about them? There was always God to take care of human-induced disasters. There was a natural, ironclad order of life, fine-tuned from above.

When his mother died a few years later, he was sad but not devastated despite his immense love for her. She had to die. It was inevitable and obviously was on her way to Paradise. I remember attending the funeral. After the service, outside the tomb, it is a Greek custom to open the coffin for a last look at the departed one. Taki was there with a camera taking pictures of the dead woman who had been combed and made up by the two brothers and Raymond asked him to take a few pictures of him and his mother. He caressed her and kissed her looking at the camera and then leaned backwards, his face next to hers for the final portrait. All that was missing was the smile. When the woman was lowered to her final resting place, Raymond put on his dark glasses and received our condolences calmly. Why do I write all this? I really don't know. It seemed to me terribly funny and it does say something of two simple minds.

When one is happy, time flies. Three years flew by at *Chez Raymond* and I could not imagine I would be happier working anywhere else. It was my world, my universe. I lived a parallel life through the lives of all the people who entered its doors, staff and clients. I made no secret of it that I was an avid listener of gossip because gossip is not about the commonplace. Gossip is about the unusual, the strange and the scandalous. It is about human behavior beyond the main, beyond the fringe, beyond the accepted. It is behavior that threatens society. The behavior of rebels. Can anyone who claims to be deeply interested in the human being not be interested in gossip? The whispering of aberrant behavior, of secret passions and actions? Why is gossip supposed to be a feminine attribute? Is it because men are so dull?

Through this gossip, I saw a world that would have been forever hidden from my eyes. I lived in the same world in which a novelist resides while writing his story. Fictitious, but vivid enough to make his heart beat from a chase he is inventing, to make him fall in love with the heroine that never existed. And I was lucky to have a certain something. What, I cannot say. Just something that made women trust me, nay, more than that: that induced them to confide in me. Often, I thought it might be my slightly effeminate bearing, my obvious affection for them, my loud hearty laugh and my unattractiveness in general that made me non-threatening to them. Perhaps, it was also my discretion in what I, myself, would repeat to others. For, indeed, I was very prudent on this matter. Yes, it was something I cannot put my finger on. But trust me they did and one day I shall start writing a book with all these confessions and confidences and it will be so long that I may never manage to finish it before I die. One thing I can assure you of: it shall be fascinating.

I started thinking of marriage. I was nearly twenty-five. Tania kept on urging me to choose a girl from the shop. They will not think twice about it, she said. All of them want to get married and all of them want security. Here, they know what you are worth. Or are you not interested in marriage, she would ask, slyly questioning my sexual orientation. Of course, I had sexual urges. Working in that hive of bees did not immunize me from the allurements, the sexual attraction of women. Most left me sexually indifferent but some unsettled me; literally caused me a cerebral upheaval. I could not get them out of my mind. They were not necessarily the prettiest or even the sexiest. They radiated a special kind of witchery. I was a virgin. I had never been with a woman. I did not have any close male friends so that the two of us would work up the courage to visit a brothel. Osama was a friend but he was slightly younger than I was and we did not have the kind of intimacy that would permit such a joint venture. To go alone was out of the question. I

was too frightened. Sex and marriage perplexed and troubled me. I constantly wondered whether I would ever find a woman that would marry a man with my looks. Let alone love me. Let alone be faithful to me.

Unfaithfulness and betrayal were all around me. Of course, fascinating as these stories were, they were like stories of a novel, the watching of a film. They were apart of me. They were not of my class. They were in the dream world of money and leisure and opportunity. A world where every whim had to be satisfied because all the basic needs, all the essentials were there and life would be tasteless without the excitement of the illicit. But was this the license only of the rich? Were the poor immune to cuckoldry? I knew a Greek mechanic, so terrified of being a '*cornuto*' that he deliberately married a woman as ugly as a harridan. He hoped no one would turn to look at her and thus preserve his honor intact. One wonders, is it better to have a beautiful woman who has lovers, breaks your heart and ridicules you in society but fills your soul with beauty or to have to face a repulsive hag all your life? Admittedly, a question of extremes but the jury has still not returned with the verdict. And then, we have the story of our very own Chris.

Chris was a ladies' man. He often boasted of his many successes with the fair sex. He was a good-looking young man and a skilled hairdresser. He was married for some years to a pretty Syrian girl and was the father of a young boy. I had seen her once or twice at the shop and she was a very quiet, shy person; a perfect companion for Chris. A few months after I started working for Raymond, there was an earthquake in Cairo. It was not very violent but it was felt well enough to create panic at the shop and most of the ladies and employees rushed out in the street, not only with disheveled, half-done hair but also in various stages of undress. A little while later, we all piled back in and resumed work. When work calmed down a bit, Chris asked Tania if he could take an hour off to go check on his wife who was at home alone, as they did not have a telephone. The boy was at school but he had managed to call there and everyone was unharmed.

He took his Vespa, went home and up to his flat. He used his key and the door was locked from inside. He rang the bell, banged at the door and shouted his wife's name. Eventually his wife opened the door. She was very pale and frightened and Chris asked her why she locked herself in. She was wearing her nightgown and said she was asleep, was awakened by the earthquake and frightened as she was, on an impulse locked the door. She seemed unable to calm down and Chris did not leave the house immediately. He was puzzled and suspicious by her inexplicable agitation. He went into the bedroom and looked under the bed. A man was stretched underneath. He left the bedroom, locked the door, descended to the street and from a public phone called Raymond. He asked him to come to his house immediately. Raymond asked for the reason but Chris would not tell. He just said it was terribly important. An unflappable Raymond could not be bothered to go and he sent Tania along. Without a doubt, it was for the best. I doubt it that Raymond would have known what to do. Tania returned a few hours later and no one knew where she had been. She seemed terribly exhausted but did not utter a peep about the affair. I asked her what was wrong and she said, 'Nothing', in a curt manner that precluded further enquiries. Next day a subdued Chris was back at work. Two months later, he left Egypt for Greece with his wife and child.

Rumors did start to circulate about the affair but the definitive version I got from Tania herself sometime later after Chris had left. She had arrived at the house and found Chris and a weeping wife sitting in the living room. Chris explained what had happened

and Tania told him that he would either let her handle the situation from start to finish or else she would leave then and there. Chris was frantic. He wanted to get the police and a lawyer and kept on saying that he wanted his wife out of the house. Tania got up and said that in that case there was not much for her to do and that she was leaving. That calmed Chris down on the double and asked her to proceed as she thought best.

Tania asked where the man was. Locked in the bedroom. Who was he? He was the young brother of the woman next door who was very friendly with Chris's wife. Were they lovers? Well, for sure, on that you could not get a trustworthy answer from the wife who claimed it was the first time the boy, for he was barely a man, came to their apartment. He came after the earthquake, to inquire if she was well. When Chris arrived, they panicked and he hid under the bed. She did not ask why the wife was in her nightgown, why the main door was locked when Chris tried to get in, or why it took her so long to open it but pretended to accept the story. She asked the wife to fetch the broom from the kitchen. She took the key of the bedroom from Chris and told him to stand in front of the main door of the apartment in case the boy made a run for it. Then she opened the bedroom door and called the boy. He was no more than eighteen or nineteen. He came out pale and trembling. She made him sit down on the sofa. The wife was sniffing on an armchair to the side. Tania stood right in front of him. She looked at him with disgust.

"Listen, you little creep," she told him. "Listen, you little piece of filth. I won't even ask you why you were here, or how many times you have come before this, or what you did with the wife of this man and mother of his son. I, a woman, will just give you a lesson that will make you think twice before you go soiling a family again, the household of a good and honest man."

With that, she started slapping him on his face. The boy just sat there and took it. He did not cover his face. Tears were rolling down his eyes. After about ten resounding slaps, left and right, she shouted,

"Now get the hell out of here, you punk."

As the boy was leaving, she picked up the broom and hit him mercilessly on his head and back. Chris opened the door and the boy left. I doubt it the wife would ever want to see the boy after this humiliation.

Tania made Chris sit down next to her on the sofa and addressed the wife. She told her that if it were not for her son she would have received the same treatment. Her main concern just now was the boy. She told Chris that for the moment his wife must stay at home for the sake of his son. He could divorce later if he found it impossible to forgive her but a cooling off period of a month should elapse before any decision was taken. If he did, finally, decide on a divorce it should be done as quietly and calmly as possible so as not to create psychological problems for Theo. He would be coming soon from school and it was a blessing he was not here sooner. The mother, she advised, can pretend she is ill so he will not suspect anything.

This was our Tania. Tough, practical, earthy and compassionate. The Tania I loved. And this, after all, is life. There is a terribly crude Egyptian saying: Life is like a cucumber. One day it's in your hand, the next up your ass. News of Chris did reach us from time to time until he crossed continents and oceans to escape his shame and we heard of him no more. In Greece, he quickly found a job and tried to get along with his life. But the glass had fissured and glass does not weld. He was brought up in a

generation that could not forgive betrayals of this kind. He lived with his wife for a year or so for the sake of the boy but could never sleep with her again. She found a job, learnt Greek, adapted well to the country and seeing his indifference towards her, started living her own life. He, too, met a woman, fell in love with her, divorced his wife, married his new love and together with his son Theo immigrated to Australia.

So where did that leave me? The truth is that I was more concerned about finding a girl than about her post-marital behavior. Despite the ease and familiarity with women that I acquired at the salon, I was essentially a timid person and my sexual inexperience weighed heavily on me. I did not want to get involved with any girl from work. Complications were bound to arise to the detriment of my job. They were girls with of a certain sophistication acquired from the gales of titillating stories and gossip that swept the salon. Moreover, I had the feeling that despite the respect and obedience they showed me, they made fun of me behind my back. It did not worry me unduly because they were a young and merry lot that ridiculed and teased almost everybody.

My parents, too, had started mumbling that it was time I settled down and I teased them by saying that, on the contrary, it was time I lived it up a little. My life could not possibly be more settled than it was. Their fondest and oft expressed wish was that I should eventually make a match with Rizk effendi's daughter, Odette. She was just the right age, three or four years younger than I was; a bright, pretty, dusky girl who was a second year student at the Faculty of Medicine. Personally, I thought she was far too good for me and in any case, although always friendly and merrily familiar with me, she never gave me the slightest show of affection or interest. Often, when I was at Osama's, I insisted on cutting and fixing her hair and she always seemed pleased with the result and used to say,

"Who would have thought Timsaheia would bring out such a talent? A ladies' hairdresser at that!"

My parents suggested I visit Osama's home much more frequently so that Odette would get used to me and so I did but with less than spectacular results. More often than not, I would not manage to see her at all. She would be holed up in her room pouring over her anatomy and histology textbooks or else dissecting a giant cockroach, a rat or a weasel supplied by the enterprising doorkeeper of their building for a very reasonable fee.

One day, in those days of my frequent and impromptu, Odette-oriented visits a bedraggled girl of sixteen or seventeen opened the door of their flat. I thought I had absent-mindedly ringed the bell of another flat. But no, the flat was correct. I asked for Osama. He was not in. Neither was Odette nor the younger brother, just Rizk effendi and his wife. She stood at the door, blocking my entrance. I said I would call again.

She asked, "Who are you?"

"Tell them Makram called," I said, "And who are you?"

"I am the maid," she answered.

She did not have to tell me. She could be nothing else. Oh, for her looks she could have been a princess but she was barefoot, wearing a long, summer dress twice her size and a woolen, tattered pullover with holes at the elbows. The shadows of her thin legs showed through the semi-transparent cloth of the dress. It was cold and I wondered how she could stand to walk barefoot on the marble floor tiles. Her hair was a mess but a faint beginning of beauty and sweetness seemed to try to flesh out on that face even if it did

not quite succeed on its own. It was for the beholder to visualize it, to conjure it up. It was the pair of sparkling, playful eyes that held you. I got the picture immediately.

“You are from Timsaheia,” I said, more a statement than a question.

“Yes.”

“Are you a relative of the family?”

“We are all relatives of one sort or another in Timsaheia.”

“And you came to work here?”

“As you can see.”

“When?”

“A few days ago.”

“How do you like Cairo?”

“I suppose I shall get used to it.”

“What is your name?”

“Mariam.”

We were silent for a moment looking at each other. I wanted to talk to her but for propriety’s sake I had to leave. I took a step backwards and gave her a small wave with my hand.

“Maa Salama Mariam, peace be with you. I come here often and we will meet again.”

“Maa Salama,” she answered with a slight smile and closed the door.

Mariam, I thought. Mariam. Mariam. Are you the answer to my prayers? Am I to be lucky enough to make you my wife? On my way home, I passed by the shop that sold wool in roves and braids and bought two batches of different colors. One was light brown, the other yellowish beige. I tried to sneak them into the house without my mother noticing but they caught her eye.

“It’s just some wool,” I told her. “I want to knit something.”

“What’s wrong, Makram,” she asked. “You have not knitted in ten years.”

“Nothing’s wrong, mother. Something seems to be turning out right.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“When I am sure, I shall tell you.”

I went to Osama a few days later. She opened the door and she smiled and made way to let me in. She was barefoot again, wearing the same tattered clothing, her hair in the same mess. As I squeezed by her, I smelled the carbolic soap they used for the wash. I saw her neck was white and clean. She seemed prettier than the time before. I was getting used to her face.

“Please come in,” she said. “Osama Bey is in.”

“How are you Mariam?”

“Al Hamdou Lillah, thanks be to God.”

“Getting used to Cairo?”

“One gets used to everything.”

“Does that mean you don’t like it here?”

“It is not easy to leave your home, your brothers and sisters. I miss them a lot. You can still be lonely living in the midst of people. And Cairo does not change anything. In any case, it is not like what you see on television. It is dirty, crowded and noisy. But as I said, one gets used to anything.”

Osama came out of his room to greet me and we sat in the small entrance hall. We talked for a while. Osama was in his third year of engineering studies at the university. He was already addressed as Engineer Osama by lesser mortals, just as his sister was Doctora Odette from the very first term at Medical School. Our relationship was friendly and yet formal. Timsaheia tied us together in a way Caireans do not understand. A sort of obligation to keep in touch, not to forget our roots. All of us had a family home in the village, good or bad, and periodic visits to see family and friends were a must.

Osama called Mariam and ordered two Turkish coffees, his manner offhand and peremptory. He brought out their backgammon board and we sat down for a game. I hated the game and hoped it would end quickly with Osama's win. It made him so happy to win and I could understand neither the game's popularity nor Osama's pleasure when he won. But of course, it was long drawn and ended with my reluctant victory. To console him I told him he ought to have taken the game. He had the skill; I just had the luck. I hoped it would make him feel better but he smiled wistfully and said it was usually so in life as well. Well, I dearly hoped so. For three days now, I was living in a daydream. I had been very lucky in my life so far and was praying for a little extension of grace to make my new obsession a reality.

Odette came into the hall and we exchanged a few pleasantries. I told her that her preoccupation with her rats and mice and books made her neglect herself. Her hair sorely needed my attentions. How would she ever find a husband? She laughed and said she still had at least another five years of studies and specializations and for the time being rats and mice were her only preoccupation.

"Surely," I said, "there are some handsome fellows at university whose attentions you would not spurn."

"Makram, Makram," she said laughing once again, "stop planting wicked thoughts in my mind. Do you want my father to take the stick on me? He has lived in Cairo most of his life but his upbringing is nineteenth-century Timsaheia. Like most sclerotic people of his times, he cannot accept the changing morality of our times, the evolution of our society."

"He need not know anything," I persisted.

"Oh dear, you really are a bad influence on me, Makram," she said gaily. "This is a new development."

Yes, it is, I thought. You are a fine girl Odette but you no longer interest me.

"By the way," she added, "there is the Abdel Malak wedding on Sunday. Do you think...?"

"Of course," I told her before she finished her sentence. "I shall come directly after lunch on Sunday. Be sure to wash your hair at least twice with the shampoo I gave you. I do not like to feel even the slightest hint of oiliness on the hair when I work."

Mariam, my tattered, barefoot angel, came in to collect the empty coffee cups. No one took any notice of her. Servants are usually invisible to their masters especially when they are barefoot and move about noiselessly. They are non-persons. They do not count. Except to people like me who sometimes fall in love with them. I looked at her and mentally took her measurements. I was pretty adept at that. I would start the knitting in the evening.

"You are invited, of course," said Osama. "Will you be coming?"

An opportunity had presented itself and I could not let it go.

“Unfortunately not,” I said. “Something has cropped up and I shall not be able to make it.”

In the evening, at home, I took out my thick pair of knitting needles and the roves of wool and sat with my mother who was watching television in our tiny living room. First, she helped me unwind the braids of wool and roll them into round balls. I, then, started adding and counting the stitches I put on the needles. My mother smiled.

“Just like old times,” she said. “Who is it for?”

“It’s for a girl I want to marry.”

“Odette?”

“No, mother.”

“Who, then, for Heaven’s sake?”

“Listen, I have not even talked to her properly. Just hello and good-bye. When things are more settled, I shall let you know.”

She looked at me surprised. I had never kept a secret from her. However, I did not want premature hysterics.

“May God illuminate your path,” she said and I started knitting furiously.

On Sunday, after lunch, I went to Odette with the little bag of my hairdressing tools and fixed her hair. Mariam let me in the flat and smiled at me. She was getting used to me. She seemed more attractive every time I saw her. Perhaps, I looked a little less ugly to her as well. We exchanged a few words. I asked her if she had news of her family.

She said, “No. The Doctora is expecting you,” and went inside to call her.

With Odette, I had a merry time. She was in high spirits. She did not want her hair too short and I cut it more than she wanted. She started complaining loudly, pretending to be very upset and I asked her to shut up until I had finished. I must admit, I did a very good job on her. I asked her if she would also let me make her up. She said Rizk effendi did not approve of makeup and I just emphasized her eyes with a little eyeliner, streamlined her eyebrows, removed with a little depilatory wax the hint of hair from her upper lip and put a touch of lipstick on her lips. She looked ravishing. She was so happy she gave me a kiss and said,

“Thank you Makram. You really are a talent. Long live Timsaheia.”

I told her if she would marry me, she would be as beautiful as this every day of the year and, with a laugh, the crazy girl went out of her room shouting,

“Mother, father, Makram has proposed to me.”

Her startled parents, Osama and young Fawsi appeared from their rooms and I did not know where to hide my face. Finally, when she started squealing with laughter, they realized she was making fun of me. Her father told her to behave herself and I pretended to be angry and told her she deserved no better than her rats and mice. As I was leaving, Mariam came out of the kitchen and gave me a thin smile and a questioning look. She obviously heard the commotion.

In the evening, at about the time of the wedding, I shaved, dressed and combed my hair this way and that to no avail. I so much wanted to be just that little bit better looking but there was no obvious improvement. Oh, well, the song of the day was Doris Day’s, ‘Que sera, sera’. It applied, perfectly, to me too. I walked to Rizk effendi’s flat and rang the bell. There was no answer and I rang many times more. In the end, I heard Mariam’s voice asking who was ringing.

“It’s Makram,” I said.

She opened the door and let me in. She wore the same clothes and was barefoot as usual. Her eyes were puffed up. She must have been sleeping.

"They are not here," she said. "They have gone to the wedding. Didn't you go as well? They told me not to open the door to anyone."

I walked to the small entrance hall and sat down.

"I shall sit here for a while," I told Mariam. "Don't worry; they shall not be back until late. Yes, I was invited at the wedding but I decided to come and keep you company instead. I wanted to talk to you."

"Why? About what?"

"Sometimes," I said, "in life, a person meets another and for no obvious reason feels an interest, an attraction to that person. He feels the need to talk and become friendly and familiar with him. It can happen between two women, between two men, or between a man and a woman. I have felt that way with you. That does not put you under any obligation and I do not want anything from you. I just felt this attraction and I simply want to be your friend."

She stood in front of me very much ill at ease and when I finished my small speech, she blushed. I asked her to sit down and she reluctantly did so, on the armchair furthest away from me. I asked her how she was getting on with her new life here, in the city, and tried to put her at ease by talking about Cairo, Timsaheia, my family and work. About our move from the village to Cairo and the difficulties we faced in our first years here. I asked her about her family, her brothers and sisters and her tongue started loosening. She was the eldest of six children. Her father had recently developed a heart condition and could not work and their circumstances were dire. She had to come here to work. Her salary, five pounds a month, went directly back home. She felt lonely because the Rizk family, contrary to what they had promised her father, did not treat her as one of them but purely as a servant. They did not tolerate the slightest familiarity. Even Doctora Odette did not bother to exchange a few friendly words with her. They kept a wary eye on the food she consumed and had her sleep on a mattress in the kitchen where she was sometimes awakened by cockroaches running over her. Then she stopped suddenly as if realizing something.

"Are you not courting Doctora Odette," she asked.

"I am Osama's friend," I said. "I have no interest in Odette. I did have, once, but it's all over. In any case, she is not interested in me either but we are quite friendly and familiar with each other. I fix her hair sometimes and she likes to joke with me."

"You made her very beautiful today."

"One day, I shall make you very beautiful too. You are much prettier than she is. Only we cannot do that just now. I do not want the Rizk family to know my feelings for you."

"And you are interested only in me?" she asked and her face went all crimson again. She folded her legs sideways on the armchair and covered her bare feet with her skirt as if she doubted anyone would be much interested in a barefoot girl. After the cover-up, she looked at me and smiled.

"Yes, I said, from the very first moment I saw you. And when we have another opportunity to meet on our own again, I shall tell you of some plans I have. We cannot cram too many things on our first meeting. We must take time to get used to one another.

This is more for you than for me. My mind is set. I just want you to get used to me. Now I had better get going.”

I got up and went to the door. She followed me and I reached and held her hand. She made as if to pull away and then relented. I squeezed it gently and a thrill suffused my being. I had never felt this way for a woman, before.

“Please be careful as you are going out so that no one will see you,” she said.

“Good bye Mariam. I had a lovely time talking to you. Much more enjoyable than going to the wedding. I shall be on the lookout for another opportunity such as this. You do the same.”

“Yes, I shall. Maa Salama ya Makram.”

On the street I wanted to run, I wanted to sing. I went directly home, into my room, picked up my needles and started knitting non-stop until midnight. The skirt was coming along very nicely.

Tania noticed the change. A new vivacity, a new gaiety in my comportment at work. Nothing would annoy me or put me out of sorts. My bustling energy kept the staff on their toes. My loud, hearty laugh was infectious and the smile coefficient shot right up at the salon with both clients and staff. Some aphorisms do turn out to be true. Smile and the world smiles with you, is one of them. My smile, brought about by what seemed a ready and steady acceptance of my person and intentions by Mariam. I kept up my visits to the Rizk household at discreet intervals, seemingly to see Osama but in reality to gaze and wordlessly adore my barefoot, tattered angel. To revel in the complicity of her glances. To exchange a few words and camouflaged tenderness. To squeeze her hand going in and out of the flat. To nurse my impatience for our next meeting.

“What’s with you Jimmy?” Tania kept asking.

“What?” I usually inquired pretending not to understand.

“Come on, don’t act dumb,” she would say. But I would not utter a word. “In any case,” she would add, “you do not fool me. Something’s cooking.”

Something was cooking all right but the fire was low and the stew would not broil fast enough. For five or six weeks I was unable to talk to Mariam privately. I could not act or take decisions on the basis of a tender look or a friendly smile. A proposal had to be accepted or rejected and plans to be made. I was getting impatient with the lack of momentum. Then one day, as I was leaving the flat, she whispered,

“Tomorrow they are all going out to dinner.”

“Are you quite sure?” I asked.

“Yes. Come at nine.”

The twin-set was finished. I had worked at it almost nightly. The top part came out well. The color combination was soft and pleasant. I packed it in a paper bag and took it along. I stayed outside the flat for a few minutes, silently listening. There was no sound inside and I rang the bell. My heart was beating hard. Mariam opened immediately. She smiled at my surprise. She had on a red dress that fitted her well, a jacket, as if she were about to leave the house, and wore a well-worn pair of shoes. Her hair had been washed and an attempt to give it shape was made. She was not the last word in coquetry but she was a presentable young lady. Almost, all of a sudden, too good for me. I had become used to the barefoot waif with the disheveled hair and tattered clothing. She was cut to my measure. One would have thought that my constant contact with women would have rendered me bold but, on the personal level, I remained as timid as ever. The new

Mariam looked intimidating. Nevertheless, she came up spontaneously and took my hand and when I embraced her, she did not push me away. Unattractive or not, I was her only friend. I was the only person who cared and who provided a little human warmth and affection in her arid and dreary existence.

“Mariam! You look wonderful.”

She smiled happily.

“Come in Makram,” she said, “we have not talked for so long. Sometimes I think I shall forget how to talk. The only thing I hear all day is, do this, do that, and I don’t even have to answer. I just do what I am told.”

“Listen,” I said, “you are all dressed up, let us go for a short walk. It will be a change for you.”

“We can’t. I don’t have the key to the house. We shall not be able to enter if we go out.”

I laughed.

“So you are a prisoner,” I said. “It’s funny. You cannot leave your prison because you cannot get in again. Well, we’ll stay here and talk. By the way, this is for you.”

I sat down on the sofa and she opened the paper bag and pulled out the pullover and skirt.

“Oh, Makram, it’s lovely. You should not have bought it.”

“Please put it on,” I told her. “I want to see if I got the dimensions right.”

She took off her jacket and started undoing the buttons of her dress. She kicked off her shoes, slipped on the skirt under her dress and then prepared to hoist the dress over her head. I covered my eyes with the palms of my hands and bent forward, folding my body over my legs. I was terribly embarrassed. Had the girl no shame? I heard some shuffling and then she said,

“Okay, now you can look. It’s perfect Makram. Thank you so much.”

It was a very good fit. My knitting exertions were successful.

“It fits very well, Mariam, and it suits you. But for God’s sake did you have to change right here?”

“Why not Makram? You are my friend. You are like a brother. I know I can trust you.”

I was annoyed. Were those tender looks and hand squeezing we exchanged meant for a brother? Was I never to be taken seriously as a man?

“I am your friend and you can trust me,” I told her, “but I am not your brother or like a brother nor do I want to be a brother.”

She was surprised and perplexed by the harshness of my tone.

“I only wanted you to know how close I feel to you,” she said shyly. “You are the only person I have here in Cairo. Why don’t you want to be like a brother?”

“Would you marry your brother?”

“No, of course not.”

“Well, that’s why!”

She was silent for a moment as the implication slowly sank in. Then she blushed and stared at me.

“Do you understand?” I asked.

She did not answer. She just stared at me.

“Mariam, come sit beside me.”

And when she did, I knew the answer. It was, yes, I do. Twice over. Some things do not need to be voiced. It was, yes, I do understand. And it was, yes, I do want to marry you. She said it her own way. She came out of her trance and with a hint of a smile sat next to me on the sofa. Very close. Our bodies, touching. She said yes with her body, yes, with her proximity, yes, with her touch.

I held her hand. I still needed to hear her answer in words, in her own voice.

“So is it, yes, Mariam? Will you marry me?”

She smiled and leaned her head on my shoulder.

“Yes,” she said quietly, “but you shall have to ask my father. I cannot give you the final answer.”

I traveled to Timsaheia for the final answer. It was the easiest part of my marriage arrangements. The family was concerned about the loss of the five-pound monthly income that Mariam provided. I undertook to send them twenty, with that the deal was sealed, and the protestations of Mariam’s first cousin, who had the priority to her hand, were ignored. The father arrived in Cairo and yanked her out of the Rizk household and back to Timsaheia, whereupon my twenty-pound monthly payments to the family commenced. My parents, and especially my mother, survived a severe bout of depression on account of my choice of a wife. They thought I deserved better than to marry a servant. Moreover, they deserved better than to rub shoulders with in-laws, the likes of Mariam’s parents. As soon as they recovered partially, we traveled to Timsaheia for the engagement.

I cut and shaped Mariam’s hair and she was like a doll but the family was outraged because they thought she looked like a hussy and the poor girl had to wear a headscarf whenever she left the house or when visitors arrived. She wore it all through the engagement ceremony but it did not spoil our good humor and high spirits. In Cairo, my cordial relations with the Rizk family cooled off when they found out after some delay that I had been the cause of their loss of a good girl servant. Only the Doctora was highly amused and would drop in now and then at the salon to have her hair done by Jimmy, who, she estimated and kept repeating, was the only artist Timsaheia had ever produced. Tania called me a sneak, when I announced my engagement but reminded me that not for one moment had she been fooled.

I started searching for a flat. I had put aside quite a considerable amount in savings and when I found one in a nice, quiet part of Shoubra, near my parents’ house, I had no problem in paying the initial key money to acquire it. I then started buying the furniture and mattresses, bedding, towels and carpets. Every week, I would take the train to Timsaheia to see Mariam. I opened up our family home, cleaned it up and for the five months of our engagement, stayed there overnight. No question, of course, of bringing Mariam there. As her fiancée, I would visit her at her home and meet her in the presence of other members of the family amidst their chickens, rabbits and goats. We had, in the course of time, developed a minor vocabulary of looks, smiles, grimaces and gestures that allowed us to communicate and share a few private, unuttered thoughts, understandings and amusement. And we did manage, on occasion, to go for walks outside the village, in the fields, where I started a little long-delayed experimentation with sex and romance. Perhaps, I should speak in the plural and say, ‘we’ started, because Mariam was earthy and interested and exhibited no false modesty. She fully participated in our furtive kissing

and groping on deserted spots and when, one day, we saw two dogs coupling, I tried to pull her away but she insisted we stay and watch.

“We shall be doing that soon enough,” she said with a laugh.

No doubt about it, her uninhibited attitude was a great help in overcoming my sexual fears and timidity.

Every weekend I would give her a progress report on our flat. It was a hectic period of my life. What with my work at the salon, running around to finish the flat and my weekend visits to Timsaheia, I was getting exhausted. I hoped the hassle would soon be over. At the flat, something new would be added or fixed during the week and Mariam insisted on being briefed in detail. She was excited and was dying to come to Cairo to see it. However, that was out of the question. Not even on an invitation from my parents was it deemed decent for her to visit us.

The wedding took place in Timsaheia. As was the custom, the whole village participated in preparing the feast. Well, mostly the Copts but even some Moslem neighbors prepared food and sweets for the occasion. The ceremony took place at noon at the village church. Mariam wore a white wedding dress, which I brought from Cairo. Her hair had grown and she no longer looked like a hussy. She did not have to wear the kerchief but a veil of tulle covered her hair. I wore a white silk koftan over a white inner galabeia with a sort of high collar and white shoes. Mariam was more beautiful than I had ever seen her before but I cannot vouch for my own appearance. In any case, the village had not seen such glamour before or the luxury of wedding dresses arriving from Cairo. Friends and relatives gathered outside our house with bongo drums, tambourines, flutes and clarinets and in a joyful, noisy, musical procession accompanied me to Mariam’s house. All along the way, the women would yell that peculiarly Egyptian wail with a wagging tongue that announces a *Farah*, a happiness, a wedding.

Mariam came out of her house, smiling, and I could not believe I was about to marry this angel. She joined me and together, holding hands, we made our way to the church. The ceremony was long and tedious but I left the church feeling I had accomplished perhaps the most important step in my life, a step that was to be the foundation of my happiness. That brought Mariam to my life.

We spent that first night at the village, in our house, with my parents occupying the room next door. Not quite the ideal condition for a honeymoon’s first night. Not when you could hear Hag Younes coughing and spitting in his handkerchief and your mother’s shrill voice disparaging, undoubtedly, your in-laws. But Mariam and I were in high spirits, commenting and recounting the events of the day. Little by little, without a break in our chatter, as if we had been married for years, that wonderful girl started undressing and I did the same. She put out the light, came up to me and taught me the sweetness of a woman. The delight of an unclothed female body. The choking desire that every little part of it arouses. The delirium of lovemaking. The all-consuming blissfulness of love.

We left the next morning for three days in Alexandria. I had booked a room at a decent hotel and Mariam was ecstatic. She was in high spirits and joked constantly, kissing me, telling me,

“Thanks to you I have moved from Rizk effendi’s mattress-in-the-kitchen to a room at the Metropole with a view of the sea.”

It was spring and the weather was cool. Out of the question to go to the beach. In any case, we had neither of us ever worn a bathing costume, much less plunged in the

sea. All we would do was sit on the parapet and watch the heaving waves break on the rocks and breathe the clean, humid, salty breeze. We took long walks on the Cornish along the seafront and feasted on peanuts, seeds and charcoal-roasted sweet corn. Took our meals in cheap restaurants and went to the cinema in the evenings. A real, magic honeymoon that lasted all of three days. Then back to Cairo to our new flat and a new exciting phase for Mariam of arranging the house. Of being the mistress in her own home. Of being a housewife and a loving companion to a strange, ugly little man that worshiped her.

It lasted a week, this whirlwind marriage and honeymoon and then back to *Chez Raymond*, and Tania and the teasing of the staff that for days and days referred to me as the 'aaris', the bridegroom, and seemed to find my marriage an occasion for a thousand jokes, insinuating questions and sly smiles. I took it all in my stride. Nothing could perturb my happiness. Not even the fact that my savings had been exhausted and that Mariam and I had, henceforth, to watch every piaster we spent. I asked Tania if I could take up some of the requests that often came my way, to go and fix women's hair at their homes on the days when the salon was closed. It would be a source of a little extra money. I had never done this before out of loyalty to our shop. Tania said she had no objection, as she trusted me totally and knew I would never put my personal interest above that of the shop. Little did I imagine what a vast new vista of life this would provide.

There is something mystical in this relationship of coiffeur and client. An intimacy that develops and cannot be easily explained. It is present at the salon but I found it multiplied a hundredfold in the homes of these rich and leisure laden ladies. Women who had everything and a surfeit of time to be bored. Women whose every need was taken care of except that little something that would make their life enthralling. They rarely had any intellectual interests or artistic inclinations and even when they meticulously attended cultural events, concerts and operas, it was so that they would see and be seen in the social arena. It was inevitable that the search for excitement would turn inwards to their own circle, their friends, their clubs and cocktail parties and the one thing that has forever engrossed and fascinated human beings, love affairs, men and sex.

Boredom is the source of everything that is bad, goes the saying. But then, everything that is bad, in this particular context, is what makes life interesting. It is the ongoing human comedy, that when seen with a pinch of objectivity, is funny, intriguing and eternal. It is the interplay of the reproductive instinct in a social edifice created by an intelligent species that possesses, besides the sexual drive, the sense of beauty, of time running out, of a thousand psychological inadequacies and needs, of a sense of uniqueness, an often enormous egotism and self-centeredness. My happy and peaceful home life with Mariam, by its completeness and need for nothing more, provided my own sense of objectivity. In this context, I was able to become a friend and confidant to most of my women clients that had a need to talk and expose their innermost feelings to a disinterested party who would not take advantage or spread this knowledge. I was the confessor who could not give absolution, the psychiatrist who could not pinpoint the illness or malaise but gave comfort simply by listening.

I sometimes wondered if these friendships were an essential part of my job. If, finally, I was sincere or, subconsciously, just used them as a way to entice the clientele and create a dependence on their part. Obviously, we were not of the same class. I was a

sort of servant to them in the sense that I provided a service. It could not be a friendship between equals. However, I believe, friendships can exist between persons of different backgrounds if there is mutual respect and, of course, a mutual empathy. The answer may be that I earned their respect by my talent and their friendship by a sincerity that managed to touch them because it was real. Very few women left me indifferent. Very few that did not possess even some small quality that drew me to them. It was an affinity I did not have with men. If human beings possess qualities of both sexes, which they do, I often considered my female part to be the more dominant.

Little by little, I started accepting assignments at the homes of some of the more affluent women of our salon. It was not my choice but it simply happened that the wealthier ladies seemed to need my services at a moment's notice, on Sundays and on days when our salon was closed. The here and now is absolutely the privilege of the rich. The less rich learn to be in less of a hurry and the poor to be patient. So while the upper crust summoned me, my darling Mariam waited. She understood our need for money and put up with my absences while I tried to make it up to her by taking her to the cinema in the evenings, or for walks by the Nile, munching our sweet corn and peanuts. As for me, these assignments soon became much more than a moneymaking chore. They became a habit, a pleasant pastime. They matched my character, my sociability, my love of women, my inveterate inquisitiveness. They were the drug to a peculiar addiction. The need to fathom the lives of the rich, the people who had the possibility and relative freedom to seek and act out needs and their fulfillment beyond the conventional. I had the opportunity to hear, first-hand, stories and events that would have been considered far-fetched even in fiction.

An accident, a sudden death could be a convenient ending to a short story. How unlikely for this to happen in real life. How strange that a death in one family would make for peace and continuity in another. Stories so banal except for their endings. Such is the story of Irini, a Greek girl, one of my first at-home clients. A lovely, lively girl who fell in love and married a rich Moslem boy a few years younger than she was. They lived in a sort of mansion inside a luxurious apartment building. A two storey apartment with a wide staircase leading to the upper floor, with salons, kitchens and bathrooms on both floors, the main reception area below and the bedrooms on the upper level. Irini was always friendly and polite and we always sat for a coffee and a chat before I started on her hair. I met her husband, Sherif, on several occasions and he was not only handsome and charming but one of those unusually sociable and friendly persons. The couple led the socially active life of the rich, of dinners and parties, dances and welfare functions even after a baby girl was born.

One day Irini looked at herself in the mirror and suddenly realized that the mad social whirl was taking its toll. Wrinkles had started installing themselves on her face. The age difference between her husband and herself started being apparent. She decided to cut back on the nocturnal activities and to lead a healthier life of morning exercise and energetic walks at the club in an attempt to delay the cruelties of aging as much as possible. Her husband saw no reason to curtail his daily nighttime forays of partying and card playing and the couple settled in an arrangement that seemed to suit them both. As it turned out, the suitability was considerably to the advantage of Sherif.

About a year or so later, Irini received the visit of a very good-looking and sexy young woman who told her that she was Sherif's mistress for almost a year and that

during that time they had been together practically every night. That Sherif promised to marry her but apparently could not work up the courage to tell her, Irini, about his new relationship and marital plans. Therefore, the young woman, finally, decided to take the initiative and precipitate matters, which could not possibly be allowed to drag on any further.

Irini was devastated. As usually happens, the betrayed person is the last to find out. She wondered what bumpy road lay ahead for her. How would her daughter take the divorce, her father's remarriage and their probable departure from their home? In the following days, neither she nor Sherif uttered a word about the visit. Did he know about it? She never found out. She just called up some of her intimate friends and asked them how they could possibly have left her in the dark about this affair and heard the usual excuses of not wanting to upset her. A few days later, the young woman, returning home in the early hours, probably quite intoxicated, opened the door of the elevator at the wrong instant and dropped to her death. Even in a short story, this would seem a contrived and unrealistic ending. An ending without interest. Yet it did happen! The friend that informed Irini said it was an act of God. It was divine justice. I have some reservations. What with an expanding universe, the millions of galaxies and billions of stars, the exploding supernova and voracious black holes, I doubt it that God has the time or inclination to mete out justice to three humans on planet earth. If justice it was.

I was never a passionate man. Neither in my sensuality nor in my intellect and beliefs. I was, however, a very lucky man. I managed to espouse a profession that fulfills me and for which I have developed a passion. But more than this, I was lucky to have found my Mariam who managed to ignite in me a latent and previously unsuspected passion for women and sex. Well, perhaps, that is not quite true. I have always loved women aesthetically and intellectually and I have always been lukewarm about sex. It was for Mariam I was passionate. She was the woman of my dreams, the woman cut to my measure, the woman that inspired me and aroused me. The woman, finally, that made me understand what this magic word, passion, is all about and why people are constantly searching for it. I have learnt to be tolerant and not to reprove people who searched for it, whatever the cost, even if they have failed to find it or acted selfishly in the process. Of course, passion is a state of mind more than anything else. It is not sensuality unlimited and though in the complex labyrinth of the human mind one cannot isolate single causes and effects, passion is to feel overpowering emotions and through them to feel alive and fulfilled.

Tina, another beautiful Greek client of mine, took this spasmodic plunge for a change of the landscape of her life. A life that choked her by its ordinariness. That provided everything but a meaningful existence. She left her sweet, rich young husband and two children and followed a foreign, lower-echelon diplomat who swept her off her feet. In his country, alas, she found she had left one humdrum existence for another and promptly left her lover and returned to Cairo. Her in-laws pressured her husband to take her back for the sake of the children. He finally relented and when the prodigal wife arrived at the door of her home, he greeted her with a resounding slap on her face. The story made the rounds of the salons and clubs and cocktail parties but luckily the memories of people are short-lived and, not long after her return, Tina was once again dazzling her milieu with her beauty, glamour and expensive clothes. Perhaps she is now

wise enough to consider security within her family to be more tangible than an illusive, dangerous and fickle passion.

There is a cynical viewpoint that claims that the truly happy households are those where the wife has a lover. The husband may or may not also be playing the field. That is not so important and, in any case, if it is one-sided, the husband's infidelity can be a source of friction. Whereas, the unfaithful wife becomes a doting wife. She is usually a fulfilled person. Emotionally and sexually satisfied by her lover, she has the peace of mind and contentment that enables her to be extra nice to her husband. Her double life is an antidote to the wear and tear, boredom and irritability of conjugal existence and, perhaps being aware of the injustice she is doing him, she makes a special effort to keep the poor cuckold happy. Okay, granted, some men will not accept this state of affairs. However, these are not too numerous. When the marriage has reached that stage, where the wife is looking around and is ready to betray her husband, the preconditions for infidelity are pretty much in place. So are the preconditions for the husband's complacency. He is usually occupied elsewhere: usually in business, making money.

There are two corollaries to this viewpoint. The first is that the 'horns' of the '*cornuto*' are painful to bear only the first time. Subsequent growths are borne much more painlessly. The second is that with the '*corne*' comes the cornucopia. A state of divine grace where nothing can go wrong for the cuckold. Where, apart from his marital adversity, everything else in his life rolls along as smoothly and as successfully as is possible. With the result, that he is scorned and ridiculed for his wife's infidelities and envied for his professional successes and moneymaking abilities.

I cannot vouch for the contents of the preceding paragraph and, perhaps, the beliefs are simpleminded, malicious and vulgar but a morsel of truth may be hidden somewhere as it usually is in many popular aphorisms. In any case, I meant it to be an introduction to the story of my experiences and difficulties with one of the most exuberant and unconventional persons I have ever come across. I have often wondered: are such persons born or made? They are so far out of the ordinary, so far beyond where a normal person is willing to tread, that one wonders at their strength, the facility with which they ignore the norms of society and at their insatiable appetites.

On second thoughts, Margot was born a goddess. One cannot develop physique, beauty, sex appeal on demand. Her character may have been molded but if we subscribe to the view that our mental makeup is an interaction of genes and environment then we must conclude that her physical attributes surely determined to a large extent her predispositions. She was made for love. Well, no, not love. She was made for lovemaking. Her innumerable affairs aroused the contempt of the envious moralists and I wanted to rush to her defense in the same way Phryne's lawyer defended her in a court in Ancient Greece. He disrobed her and her judges seeing the perfection of her body could not bring themselves to condemn her.

If I had to defend Margot, I, too, would remove her clothes and people would understand that a body of such sensuality and voluptuousness could not, should not be confined to a single man. She, in any case, seemed to subscribe to that view fully and so did the man she married. He tolerated her love affairs and seemed to be proud that a woman who captivated and seduced men, picked them and threw them away with such ease, was finally his. Not exclusively, but he had the responsibility of her well-being and had the good fortune of having her under his roof and the privilege of her presence.

In the early days of their marriage, he tried to limit her freedom but he quickly realized that he would lose her if he tried to restrict her movements. I suppose he experienced the first corollary of her unfaithfulness with some pain but he was a colorless, placid man and quickly got used to the ever-lengthening chain of lovers. Being called a cuckold also lost its impact when this became a normal state of affairs. Repetition is the mother of normality and banality. What 's more, he had his rewards. The second corollary seemed to have worked to the fullest. Ever since he married Margot, his business ventures flourished and his wealth increased by leaps and bounds. It is terribly annoying to people when a figure of contempt and ridicule is such an infallible businessman and prolific moneymaker. He often said that Margot was his lucky star and the statement was greeted with sneers of agreement.

He kept his lucky star in luxury. A villa in Zamalek with cooks and servants, foreign travel, clothes and jewelry from Paris, a chauffeur-driven limousine for her official transportation and a sports car for her to drive to her love jousts. Does one blame Margot for occupying herself solely with her amusements and pleasure? Of course, it is largely a matter of temperament and as such, it is ironical that a woman devoted so much to the act of procreation should scorn the role of motherhood. The ultimate sex symbol wanted no part of a woman's vocation.

I first saw her at the salon. She came in as if she owned the place and the truth is her presence electrified the atmosphere. She was tall with reddish-brown hair and a face that was not, at first sight, beautiful but was attractive in an exotic sort of way. Her eyes were slightly elongated, almond shaped and large on a broad face with a normal nose and a large sensual mouth. Her body was pure perfection. You could not miss that. It spoke to you. It was summer and her dress allowed you to see her perfect shoulders and arms, to visualize her full breasts, her wide hips and perfectly shaped legs that tapered to finely shaped calves and dainty ankles. She wore high heels, which made her seem even taller, and there was an air of sensuality about her that was almost tangible. It was not in her mannerisms and it was not contrived; it simply exuded from her being. She walked right into the salon smiling at Tania but not stopping at the desk. Raymond was there and his smile, when he greeted her, contained all the charm he could muster. This was not lost on Tania who was polite but cool. Margot did not have an appointment but as usual was in a hurry. Raymond, much as he would have liked to, could not leave the woman he was working on and asked me to take her on. Margot was not pleased and threw me a distasteful look.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Jimmy."

"Jimmy? Nice name! Well, Jimmy, I hope you will not ruin my hair."

I was surprised by her aggressiveness. I did not know it was her usual way of shooting from the hip.

"Raymond would hardly employ me if I were in the habit of ruining his clients' hair," I said.

"No, surely not. You are so young and I was just wondering if you have the experience."

"One never has enough experience. One never stops learning."

"Preferably not on my head."

"Especially on heads like yours."

“Oh yes? Why?”

“Because I think the hairstyle you have does not suit you. It is too much ‘*femme fatale*’.”

She laughed heartily and loudly.

“And yet, it ought to suit me. I have that reputation,” she said.

“I think a less sophisticated look would suit you much more. It would make you more attractive and make you seem more accessible. The *femme fatale* look scares off people as much as it attracts them. Raymond would not agree. He is my teacher but we have different tastes. Would you like to give it a try?”

“Okay but I shall be terribly annoyed if the new style does not suit me.”

The new hairstyle did suit her and we became the best of friends. She no longer doubted my professional skills but her manner was always cheeky and playful. She ruffled my hair, kissed me and rubbed her body on mine every time we met. I do not know if that was intentional or if she did it with everybody. She called me, “Jimmy my love,” and kept up a continuous banter when we were together. She enjoyed nothing more than to see me embarrassed. She kept asking questions about my girlfriends and my sex life and when I said I did not have any girlfriends, she would ask if I had any boyfriends. She would not stop teasing me and sometimes I would be so annoyed I would tell her to cut it out and she would break into peels of laughter.

Very soon she abandoned Raymond altogether and I became her exclusive coiffeur and she asked me repeatedly to go and fix her hair at her home. I never did until after I married Mariam a few years later and started going for home assignments on Sundays and public holidays. Even then, I was reluctant to get involved with Margot. To be quite frank, I was a little scared of her. I did not know how far her joking could go. She was very unpredictable and seemed to me shameless and uninhibited. Strange to say, she was the only woman apart from Mariam who attracted me sexually. I would not give a second look at anyone else. I tried to think what these two women could have in common that attracted me so. They were seemingly so different and yet I believe it was a lack of artificiality, a quality of earthiness. With Mariam it was natural and subdued whereas Margot flaunted it. Though physically and mentally entirely different, this quality came through.

I started going to her house sporadically and then it slowly became a fixed Sunday morning appointment. Her villa was not far from the salon. It was next to the Nile in the northern part of the island of Gezira where the two branches of the river join together again making it particularly wide for a few hundred meters before it resumes its normal width. The house, an architecturally conventional two storey single-family building, had a well-kept garden with grass and flowerbeds and a large variety of flowers. Within the villa, on the second floor, Margot had an apartment of her own. Though her husband had a simple bedroom and bathroom, her door opened to a comfortable ‘*boudoir*’, which in French translates to ‘sulking-place’ from the word *bouder*, to sulk. I doubt Margot did much sulking in her small salon however. The *boudoir* led to a large bedroom further on, which had a triple sized bed and boasted a glorious view of the Nile. Two other doors inside the bedroom led to a bathroom and a dressing room with cupboards and shelves for shoes.

That first day I arrived punctually at ten as was our appointment. I was led by a maid to the second floor to her *boudoir* and was told to wait. I waited a while and when

nothing happened, I knew I had been forgotten. Punctuality is never appreciated by the unpunctual, and the poor always wait for the rich. Sensitivity towards their inferiors is a quality the rich rarely possess.

I got up and knocked at the door of the bedroom. I heard her voice say, "Come in," and I entered the room. She was in bed. The window shutters had been opened and the room was bathed in daylight. Margot was reclining on three or four pillows and her eyes were closed. Even in that huge bed, she was larger than life. In a white nightgown, she looked like a fallen female angel, a saintly whore, a goddess of copulation. With the rather short hair we had adopted, her exotic, sensual look and the touch of vulgarity, she had a face you could not easily look away from. The strength of her personality radiated from it. I could well understand the fascination she exerted on the male sex if even a very fussy and odd person like me felt the vibrations. I looked at her for a while. She seemed to be asleep. I was at a loss. I did not know whether to go into the room or whether to leave.

"Good morning Mrs. Fahmi," I said.

She opened her eyes, startled, and looked at me.

"Jimmy! I am so sorry, I meant to get up but I dozed off again."

"That's all right. I'll wait outside while you dress."

"No, no. Pull a chair and sit next to me and tell me your news while I order coffee."

"Mrs. Fahmi, please go wash your hair and we can drink the coffee and chat while I work. I have a few other appointments, as well, after this."

"They can wait your other appointments. By the way, cut the Mrs. Fahmi out. Just call me Margot."

I pulled an armchair near the bed and sat down. She rang a bedside bell and the maid appeared a minute later. She ordered two Turkish coffees with milk. She threw the bed covers away and I saw two delectable legs. I was terribly embarrassed and looked away. She covered them up with the nightgown, which had bunched up near her panties.

"Sorry," she said, "I felt very warm. You'll have to get used to seeing a lot of skin around here. I am as shameless as a porn star."

I smiled. I did not know what to say. I could not help looking at a proud, upstanding, unsupported pair of breasts outlined by her nightgown. Oh, Phryne, rest in peace, you do have descendants in the twentieth century to keep the concept of female bodily perfection alive and to remind us of you.

"You have a lovely view of the Nile from your balcony," I said to make polite small talk.

She was not interested. She looked at me with a smile.

"Tell me about your wife, Jimmy. Is she as ugly as you?"

She loved to shock me and embarrass me.

"She is a lovely girl, Margot. She is far too good for me. I still marvel at the fact that she loves me. She reminds me of you. Not your beauty though she also is beautiful but the unpretentious naturalness. The earthiness, the honesty and straightforwardness."

"I hope, for your sake, the resemblance ends there."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't pretend with me, Jimmy. If we are to be friends, we must be honest with one another. Everybody knows and, almost certainly so do you, that I am what

people call a bitch, that I have lovers. That I am constantly unfaithful to Safouat. Does your wife have roving eyes?"

One shock after another with Margot. I tried to sidestep the issue of her extra-marital affairs.

"You have a social life. Where would Mariam find a lover?"

"Good God! You are naïve! He might be your next door neighbor."

Another shock! I smiled. It would take an earthquake for me to find that out.

"You know, Margot," I said, "I gave Mariam a good life compared with what she had. When I met her, she was a servant at the house of a friend of mine. I married her against the wishes of my parents. And I do love her dearly. She is the only woman I have ever desired. The only woman that arouses my passion. Isn't it strange? But then I am a strange person. I have never told this to anyone else. I was completely inexperienced in sex when I married Mariam. She helped me out tremendously by her understanding and her uninhibited attitude. Though she was a virgin as well, she more or less initiated me and took the lead almost like a man. She was the active partner and I the passive one. Even now, she usually initiates our lovemaking and though it may sound unlikely, we do have very good sex together. Do you think she would be looking for a lover?"

"The fact that you offered her a good life means nothing. Safouat offered me a good life and I was unfaithful to him within our first year of marriage. The only thing that might be an insurance against unfaithfulness is that you have good sex. Safouat was an indifferent lover and he was never a very tender man. He loves me very much but he is a cold fish. I suppose that is why he is able to put up with my infidelities. In any case, I would have left him if he had ever curtailed my freedom. I mean my sexual freedom, of course. He knows that only too well. For me, sex is not just physical pleasure, though I am lucky that I am thoroughly orgasmic but I consider it the only beautiful and pure thing left in our lives. When it is entirely divorced from commerce and self-interest, it is as close as the human being can be to God. One thing I am proud of is that I never made love with a man in order to gain something from him. I have never accepted an expensive gift. All I wanted was to be intimate with my lover, to be close to his soul, to give and take pleasure from him while our relationship lasted. It is, of course, ironical that I was able to do this because Safouat provided the wherewithal. But I have been conventionally moral in that I have always had one lover at a time. The only person I have been unfaithful to is my husband. And he is fully aware of it. Does that make me a bitch?"

The coffee arrived and we were distracted. I escaped having to answer a delicate and difficult question. We chatted on other less personal questions and from that day, a friendly and gay intimacy developed between us. After the coffee, she went in the bathroom for a shower and a shampoo. She came out in a white silk *robe de chambre* and I was constantly troubled while I was working at her hair because it tended to open and it was obvious she wore nothing underneath. As she told me that first day, I had to get used to seeing a lot of skin but this was easier said than done. On one occasion, she came out of the bathroom completely naked and before I covered my eyes I could not help seeing what a goddess looked like unclothed. When she saw me covering my eyes, she laughed and said,

"What a sissy you are, Jimmy. What if I asked you to give me a massage just now?"

"I wouldn't know where to start. I am a hairdresser, not a masseur."

“Oh, Jimmy, you disappoint me. I would have thought that you would jump at the offer.”

And we would get into one of those semi-serious, teasing and intimate conversations that inevitably cropped up every time I went there.

“Tell me, Jimmy, wouldn’t you make love to a woman other than Mariam?”

“No, I would not. I really don’t see, Margot, why you are so interested in my sex-life and preferences. I am not exactly the ideal-lover type that would suit you.”

“Jimmy, my love, my love, my love, how would you know what lover-type would suit me. Perhaps I have a weakness for ugly ducklings like you. But tell me, quite frankly mind you, was there never another woman you lusted for except your Mariam? She is turning out to be *hors concours*.”

“Oh, let me be, Margot, please.”

“I beseech you my love, answer my question. I have to know how far your madness goes. I have never seen another oddball like you.”

“People who live in glass houses...etc...etc. Will you hold still? With all this talk, I cannot concentrate on my work. You shall go to the reception looking like a clown.”

“Please, Jimmy. I am dying to know. Just say, yes or no.”

“Yes or no.”

“Come on. Cut it out!”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Today is just for yes or no. The who, is for next Sunday.”

I thought and thought about Margot. I could not get the image of her amazing nude body out of my mind. That night I made love to Mariam as passionately as usual but I initiated it. When we calmed down, she asked me what had happened that day. I said, nothing much, the usual routine with the crazy Margot and my other two clients. She said it was the first time I made love to her so passionately and the first time I started it. I told her I loved her more with each passing day. I could not wait for her to start kissing me. She said she would not give up her privileges so easily and she started kissing me and we entered into a second long-drawn session of lovemaking and when we finished she said it was the best time to tell me that in nine months she would make me a present. Some days are luckier than others.

The following Sunday, as soon as I entered her room, after our greetings and a little small talk she said I had promised to answer a question. I pretended I had forgotten what the question was and would she please repeat it. She smiled ironically indicating she did not believe me.

“The question,” she said, “was: Who?”

I said, “You.”

She smiled. She was happy. Even goddesses want to be told they are beautiful. The fact alone is not enough. It must be constantly acknowledged and reiterated.

“My vanity has been caressed,” she said.

“I really find it difficult to believe that my opinion matters all that much.”

“Of course it does. First of all, a compliment is a compliment even if it comes from a half-wit. You may be a half-wit but you are also a person whose opinion I value because, due to your job, you are in the midst of the most elegant and beautiful women of Cairo. The only black spot is that I come out second-best after Mariam.”

“In my heart. Not in fact. “

“Thank you, Jimmy boy, you may be the oddest, ugliest, most effeminate straight person I know but you are my true, good friend.”

“So are you, my dear Margot. If I didn’t have Mariam, I would, perhaps, not have covered my eyes when you strutted in the room without a stitch on. I might have even given you a massage. But wouldn’t that spoil our friendship?”

“It would all depend on you. Are you a good sport? Most men are not. They take a refusal as a personal affront. They think because I have an active sex life I take on all comers. So when I let them know they are not wanted, they feel insulted and they spread the most disgusting stories about me. They may say I threw myself at them and that they gave me the cold shoulder. You see having a bad reputation is a self-reinforcing process. Many more men than usual make a try for you and when they don’t get their way they start being nasty. And of course some things that happen accidentally add to the legend.”

“Like that incident at Agami?”

“Oh God. Are they still talking about it?”

“Well, I was told about it during my first days at Raymond’s when you came in and I had to do your hair because Raymond was busy with another client.”

“It was one of those things! A thing that happens so rarely and it had to happen to me. In public, no less. Some of the silly women said it was God’s doing. How stupid can one get?”

“What happened exactly?”

“Exactly? Exactly? You little scandal-monger, you want to know what happened exactly?”

“I’m sorry. Forget it.”

“No, no, I’ll tell you. Exactly what happened. Will it change anything? Will I be a different Margot?”

“No. But by the time you finish the story you’ll be a Margot with a different hairstyle.”

“Oh? Are we changing it?”

“Just a little. I saw something new in a magazine that might suit you.”

“Well, if it doesn’t, I’ll wash my hair and we shall start all over again and you’ll miss your other appointments.”

“Meanwhile ... ah hum!”

“Oh yes, the story. It was early summer and Safouat and I were invited for lunch at a friend’s villa at Agami. You know, lunches there are sumptuous affairs. One spends the day at the beach and lunch starts with *aperitifs* and *hors d’oeuvres* at three and extends almost until sundown. At the time, I had an Italian diplomat as a lover and I managed to get him invited as well. Aldo was a very good-looking chap. Not as good looking as you but he was young and wanted it all the time. Something like you and Mariam.”

“Forget it Margot. I have lost interest.”

“Oh you are a cry-baby. You just want to know all about my private sex life and you don’t want to reveal the slightest detail about yours. Do you call that friendship?”

I did not answer. I kept working on her hair.

“This Mariam of yours is giving me a complex. I want to meet her sometime. I am curious to see the woman that bewitched my sweet, funny little Jimmy and found in him

her ideal companion. That's why I keep referring to her. I have some indiscreet questions I want to ask. Shall I ask them? Well, I shall ask them and you need not answer. Is she a hot number? Does she want it all the time?"

She was teasing me as usual. Trying to get me annoyed. I pretended I was deaf. I kept on working.

"Okay, Jimmy, sorry. Let us get on with the story. You're not angry, are you?"

I did not answer.

"Oh, so we are angry! Okay. Better, get on with the story. We spent the morning at the beach. The weather was perfect and for once, the sea was quite calm. Its color has to be seen to be believed. A turquoise-green for the first hundred meters or so turning to a deep purple further inside. The house, a luxurious villa, was practically on the beach and the hosts had a bar installed in the garden of the house. Some of the guests were drinking, some were sunbathing and others were swimming.

"Safouat was drinking with some friends. He never swims. He is rather self-conscious of his paunch. At home, he has about ten showers a day and with every shower, he weighs himself without any clothes on as if the quarter-kilo of his underwear will muddle his calculations. He keeps track of every half-kilo that comes and goes and just like unwelcome guests, he pulls a long face when they come and rejoices when they leave. In the end, all the gloominess and all the rejoicing do not matter because nothing much changes. The paunch, much to his chagrin, is a permanent fixture.

"Anyway, I was sitting on a *chaise-longue* under an umbrella in a two-piece, sexy swimsuit with about ten men who could not take their eyes off me. We were talking, joking and laughing. Nearby, under another umbrella, about ten worried women were keeping a lookout on us. They were the wives of the ten prospective Casanovas. Aldo was another uncomfortable person. He was not one of the bunch and he did not like being ignored. Especially since he felt superior because he was the great Italian lover who possessed me body and soul. The truth is, Jimmy, that wherever I go the temperature goes up. I stir emotions and cause commotions."

"You can say that again."

"Oh?" She turned, looked at me and smiled. "I say, that got you out of your torpor," she said.

"Torpor? What torpor? Don't you see I'm working trying to make you beautiful?"

"It must be a tough job!"

"Oh Margot, you know what I mean. You would be beautiful even without any hair at all. I am just trying to make you as beautiful as possible."

"All right, Jimmy, I forgive your *faux pas*. Shall I go on with the story or have you lost interest?"

I looked at her and smiled.

"Do as you please," I said.

"Boy," she said, "you are as coquettish as a woman. You cannot say a straight yes. So, where were we? Yes. Aldo asks me to join him for a swim. We get up and dive into the glorious water. It was one of those magic early June days that was not too warm and the crystal-clear sea was just whispering and rolling tiny little waves at the edge of the fine, white sand. We swam some way off into the deep. Ordinarily, this is quite dangerous at Agami but on that day, there was no fear of underwater currents pulling you

in. The only currents tugging at me were the currents of desire. I felt like taking off my bathing costume and swimming naked. Have you ever swam naked, Jimmy?"

"No."

"You should try it sometime with Mariam. The sensation is truly unique."

"When I buy a villa at Agami and learn how to swim with a bathing costume on, I might give it a try without one."

"We're not bitter are we?"

"Can happy persons be bitter? I am a happy person. Like my compatriots, I am also a fatalist. I know Agami is not for me. It is way beyond my reach. So what I am really saying with a total lack of bitterness is that it is unlikely I shall ever swim naked. I shall have to rely on your descriptions."

"Oh, words cannot do justice to the freedom and sensuality one feels swimming without a bathing costume. It is as if an invisible hand is caressing you all over your body. It can be very arousing. There are beaches in the south of France where people go about completely naked and nobody takes any notice. Nakedness can eventually become very boring but swimming is another thing. Anyway, after swimming for a while with Aldo, we came out to where we could tread on the sand and we started playing games. We would dive, kiss and caress each other underwater until we nearly choked and would surface laughing.

"There were very few people in the sea and we started getting bolder and bolder in our underwater sex play. Then, suddenly Aldo yanked the bottom part of my costume off and swam away. He tried to frighten me and tease me. I was both worried and aroused. Danger of detection can be an aphrodisiac. I suddenly felt an overpowering need to make love. To make love within the field of vision of all our friends without anyone suspecting the slightest thing. I called him and he kept going further away. I followed him for about twenty to thirty meters and then I stood and waited until he came back and I dived and pulled his bathing costume down as well. I did not manage to get it off. It was half-way down his legs and I started fondling his genitals. He was surprised but stood still. He was enjoying the sensation and was getting aroused. He tried to kiss me and I told him to be careful. They must not see us kissing or they would suspect we were making love. All the action must take place underwater and we must also move about and not stay rooted in one place. We started lovemaking in earnest and when we could stand it no longer, he lifted me and I enveloped him with my legs. It was nice and easy in the water. I was light as a feather and the birdie found its nest."

"Boy," I said, "you really go into graphic detail."

"I thought you wanted the story exactly. And then why the false embarrassment? Do you and Mariam do it in some different way which perhaps we ought to know?"

"No, Margot. I suppose the basics have not changed much since Adam and Eve left Paradise except that we do it above water."

"Look, it was wonderful underwater. I mean if that thing had not occurred, it would have been perfect. We started moving slowly and sensually enjoying the sensations heightened by the novelty of the act, when suddenly the sphincter of my vagina contracted in a spasm and held Aldo's penis in a vice-like grip. He was surprised and pained and tried to disengage to no avail. We tried desperately to separate but it was impossible. Aldo was groaning with pain and the tight grip around the base of his penis prevented the blood from evacuating, which would cause him to lose his erection. We

were trapped. We were stuck like two dogs after a coupling. It seemed my reputation as a bitch was to be explicitly confirmed. There was no way out except to call for help.

“Anna, a woman from our group was swimming closest to us and I called her. She approached and I explained the situation and asked her to alert Safouat as discreetly as possible and have him call an ambulance. The poor woman was alarmed and embarrassed but she casually got out of the water, walked to Safwat and called him aside and then I saw Safwat go into the house. It was an interminable half hour before the ambulance came from the nearby village of Dekhela. I was very grateful to Anna and Safouat for their cool and composed performance. Until the ambulance arrived, no one had noticed that anything was amiss. But then as the two orderlies holding a stretcher, a doctor and Anna carrying a blanket walked towards us, they realized something was wrong. The little group waded into the water with their shoes and clothes on and the doctor and Anna gingerly laid us on the stretcher, which was held by the two male nurses. Aldo was whimpering. Undoubtedly, he was in pain and so was I but I tried to make it all seem a joke and told him he was all set for a leading role in a porno movie. And that if he managed to move a little bit, I might get an orgasm.”

“You really are inimitable Margot. I swear I admire your spunk.”

“Oh hell, what else was there to do? It was not the end of the world. What was unusual was my vaginal spasm and not the lovemaking. Adultery in our circles is practically a sport. The scandal and shock that was expressed by our friends was sheer hypocrisy. I would not be cowed by a bunch of hypocrites. Some of my so-called friends called me the following days to ask whether I was all right and to commiserate with my mishap. I told them it was too bad this happened to me just when I was about to have an orgasm but the sensation of lovemaking in the water is unique. They should try it sometime.”

“I absolutely do admire your cheek. So how did it all end?”

“Aha! You want to know the end? Exactly?”

I smiled.

“Forget it,” I said.

“You little hypocrite. Is it not enough I have to deal with the hypocrisy of this world, do I have to be burdened by your little phony tantrums as well?”

I had finished my work.

“How do you like your hair?” I asked.

“Very nice. Oh, yes! It’s really lovely. Thank you, Jimmy. You are terrific. That’s why I put up with you my little gossipmonger. So let me finish my story. I know you are dying to hear it. As I was saying, they laid us on the stretcher and Anna covered us completely with a blanket. At least in the sea we were cool. Under that blanket, we nearly suffocated. Anyway, we were carried to the ambulance and we drove off directly with Safouat in his car following. As soon as we were off, the doctor uncovered us and gave me a spasmolytic injection and in ten minutes, Aldo was released from my vaginal captivity. He gave me the bottom part of my bathing costume, which he had been clutching throughout our ordeal and I put it on. At the tiny and miserable village hospital, I put on my clothes that Safouat had collected and brought along. Of course, we left directly for Cairo with a sullen Aldo in the back seat. Safouat was considerate enough to collect his clothes as well and his other affairs. Needless to say, that was the end of my

romance with Aldo. I cannot abide persons without a sense of humor. I don't know how I manage to put up with you."

"And what did Safouat have to say about this whole affair?"

"He said, 'Darling, you really must be more careful.'"

If I were asked with whom I would like to find myself on a desert island, I would, of course, answer, with Mariam. However, if Mariam were excluded from the choice, I would answer, Margot. For there was never a dull moment in her presence. She was an extraordinary person. An original, uninhibited artist of life. Of her life. She fashioned it and lived it in the way she loved it. The true pure hedonist.

Adel was born a year and a half after Mariam and I were married. We had time enough to enjoy the intimacy of a couple in privacy but his birth in no way diminished our love and sexual craving for each another. Indeed his slightly premature birth, his feeble health and the anxiety as to whether he possessed normal mental faculties brought us closer together, if that were at all possible. He did not inherit his mother's good looks but neither my awkward unattractiveness. He was somewhere in between. He was skinny and sickly and I suppose that if he were left to fend for himself, unattended, as most of the very poor children are in Egypt, he would not have survived.

Mariam was a loving mother though she did not spoil him. She just took care that he would eat properly, sleep early and keep his person clean. He turned out to be of more or less normal intelligence though, often, the expression of his face did not look altogether normal. He had a permanently puzzled expression on his face and a look of wonder and surprise. Well, one does eventually get used to it but he was fated, like me, to be the butt for teasing and bad treatment from children of his age. Sometimes he cried because of that and Mariam consoled him and told him that in life not everything was smooth sailing. That there would always be people who would be nasty and unpleasant but that for us he was the most wonderful child in the world. Her tenderness always touched me. She constantly told Adel, "You are the happiness that entered our life." And I would remind her that there was a lot of happiness in our lives before that and she would smile at me and say, "Yes."

I was becoming well known in my profession. I could have easily opened a salon of my own and I would have started with at least half the clientele of *Chez Raymond* that would switch over to me but not for a moment did I contemplate abandoning Tania. It was to her I felt I owed my loyalty rather than Raymond. It was through her that I enjoyed the authority I had at the shop. She trusted me completely and even when Raymond was in the salon, she seemed to count more on me than her husband. In a sense, I had marginalized his role there. His very frequent and long absences inevitably led many clients to ask for my services and my more subdued and tasteful style of cutting and arranging hair was preferred by most of the women. He did not seem to mind. He was a cold, unemotional man and his conduct towards me was impeccable.

A question that troubled me was: did I have the right to forego the considerable amount of money I would earn having my own shop and thus deprive my family of a better life? There were pros and cons both ways and in the end, my loyalty to Tania always won through. I just could not possibly leave her. I could not become her competitor and break up her business by removing a good part of the clientele of her shop. In any case, she was aware of that and she paid me handsomely.

It is strange how much in life you can misjudge a person. Most of us are of the opinion that we are shrewd judges of character. The more extrovert of our acquaintances are always more predictable and it is true that still waters run deep and consequently we tend to be more circumspect in reaching conclusions about the quiet ones. Yet life never ceases to surprise us by overturning, sometimes so utterly and shockingly opinions, which we have long held. We witness events which we would never have imagined possible.

I had pretty much figured out Raymond. I had worked, by now, for him and Tania for well over a decade. He was a special talent in a vacuum. He was uneducated and generally did not exhibit any special interests other than his profession and a materialism that the money he earned from it made possible. He was constantly buying things for himself, his family and gadgets for his home. If you went to his house, he was liable to take you to the bathroom to show you a new shower system he brought from the States or the toilet paper with pictures on it, presumably to amuse a person before he put it to a more mundane use. Otherwise, he was not an interesting person to be with and he had very few opinions or issues that concerned him. He was more reserved than sociable and I always found it difficult to keep a conversation going with him. His extraordinarily strange turn-of-the-century appearance did not predispose you to imagine that he would be attractive to the opposite sex and though he was exceedingly polite and a kind person, he seemed more than a little boring.

I was unprepared for the telephone call I received from Tania. I had just returned from work and felt tired. Hairdressing is not an easy profession. Most of our work is done standing up with a lot of back and knee bending and when the day is busy, it can be very exhausting. Tania sounded agitated. She asked me to go to her house immediately. I tried finding out what the trouble was but she would not tell me over the phone. She lived in Zamalek not far from the salon and though I had returned home by public transport, I took a taxi to get to her. Raymond was abroad and I could not imagine what the matter was. When she opened the door to their flat, she threw herself in my arms and started crying hysterically. I nearly went into shock myself, to see my dear, tough Tania in such a state. I immediately presumed Raymond must have had an accident. That he was probably dead.

“What is it Tania,” I cried. “For God’s sake what’s wrong? Is Johnny all right?”

“Yes,” she answered between sobs, “he’s in his room.”

“And Raymond?”

“Yes. Damn him.”

“Damn him?”

“The bastard is married. He has two sons.”

I was lost. I could not manage to get a coherent sentence out of her. She was sobbing and her tears were wetting the front of my shirt. I took her hand and made her sit down on a sofa. Little by little, she started to calm down. She looked at me imploringly.

“Oh, Jimmy,” she said, “don’t ever leave me. I have only you to count on. The bloody kid has known it for years. But they were buddy-buddies. He kept his mouth sealed. Raymond even provided him with women. There was not a thing, big or small, he would not do for Johnny. All Johnny had to do was ask. His wife called me this evening.”

“Johnny’s wife? Is he married?”

“No, Jimmy. Raymond’s wife.”

“Please, Tania, calm down and tell me what happened, step by step, so that I can understand.”

She was silent for a while contemplating the ruin of her life. Nothing much would change really. Life would go on and materially she was as secure as ever. As she explained later, the salon was in her name and she had a respectable amount of money put away. However, the true life of human beings, the thing that gives meaning to their existence is the bond that binds them to others. The need of a consort, of a mate, the need to love and be loved by a child, and on a secondary level, the web of relationships with others that fuse one in society. Without these, life is meaningless. It was the betrayal of her mate and child and the abyss of emptiness that faced her that brought forth her outburst of sorrow and despair.

She said the phone rang and an Egyptian woman introduced herself as Raymond’s wife. At first, Tania thought it was a farce and then the woman explained that she had been married to Raymond for fifteen years and had two sons by him. She reminded her that she had worked for a spell at the salon and she claimed Raymond had fallen in love with her; had become a Moslem and married her as a second wife. She had decided to call Tania because a legal hitch necessitated her signature on a document they needed and Raymond did not seem disposed to ask her for the signature that would reveal his second marriage. Therefore, she had taken the initiative to get in touch with Tania for the signature and to let her know how things stood.

Tania’s world collapsed by an earthquake not of tectonic plate movement but by the uttering of a few sentences. She called Johnny and after lengthy, loud and furious interrogation found out that he had known about the marriage for years and had met his two half brothers and he told Tania to cut out the hysterics because it was no big deal. She was not of an age to act like a lovelorn teenager. It did not mean his father did not love her. A man can love more than one woman at a time. The attitude of her son was another stab in her back.

“I have no one else but you, Jimmy,” she said. “How strange to find yourself all alone so suddenly. How strange to clutch at a stranger for survival when your own blood has betrayed you.”

I was dumbfounded and completely at a loss. I did not know what advice to give for I was not the one feeling the pain. The only thing I could counsel was patience until Raymond returned from abroad to hear his side of the story. I stayed late that night with her, heard much of her life and was surprised to learn that Raymond was an inveterate womanizer. He had started exhibiting that trait as soon as he made some money and of course, he was in a milieu where the opportunities abounded. Tania, meanwhile, subscribed to the philosophy that the less she knew about his affairs, the better. The worst part of it was that he initiated Johnny in sex at a very early age and was spoiling him by satisfying his every whim. He had already succeeded in making him a cynical and insensitive macho even with his own mother.

Tania demonstrated her toughness the next day by going about her work as if nothing had happened. There was no doubt that this whole affair was gnawing at her insides but one could only admire her strength having witnessed her heartbreak. Whenever we happened to be alone at the end of the day, she could not prevent the subject from surfacing. From this, I understood how much it actually preoccupied her. She was searching the past for clues. She wanted to figure out how it started and how, for

over fifteen years, her husband lived a parallel life without her suspecting that something was not altogether normal. A life with another home, another wife, two children, a completely new set of in-laws and acquaintances, all of them Egyptian. Of a different race, a different language and culture, a different religion. How a man so devoted to Christianity could become a Moslem? What was his name now? Mustafa, Hamza, Abu Bakr? She vaguely remembered the girl. Her name was Sabah. Apart from her youth, there was nothing exceptional or particularly attractive about her or else she would have remembered. She worked in the hair-washing section and, yes, she was loud and a little vulgar. Perhaps, that is what attracted him. The vulgarity. A trait that seems to excite men. It fires their libido. Men are strange beings. They want a sweet, demure wife and a vulgar mistress. They deprive their wives of sex and go looking for it in the gutter.

“I can’t get over it, Jimmy,” she would tell me over and over. “Fifteen years he fooled me and I thought I was smarter than him! Of course, the circumstances helped him. His job with the princess gave him the opportunity to come and go as he pleased without arousing suspicion. Now, that I think of the past, I realize that this was the reason why he would never tell us when he would arrive from abroad. He wanted the freedom to be able to go and stay with his other family for a while. To go and see his children and make love to his other wife. Oh, how it burns me up. Did he have one or two mistresses on the side as well? I might be perverse but I sincerely hope he did. I cannot bear the thought that I was the only one betrayed with that sluttish washerwoman.”

Raymond arrived suddenly a few weeks later. When he went home, he found that his key could not open the door. The lock had been changed. Sabah probably told him about the phone call and he was wary of going to find Tania at the salon. He called her on the phone and she told him that, henceforth, his home was with Sabah and that if he wanted to talk to her, they could meet at a coffee shop. She asked him to do her the favor of taking Johnny with him at Sabah’s. She could not abide a younger version of Raymond in her house.

Since that first night of crisis, a new intimacy was born between Tania and me. There had always been trust but now I had become her confidant in her very personal matters. A sort of surrogate husband. There was a new tenderness in her attitude and whenever we were in close proximity, she always gave me friendly tap on my back or my arm.

She asked for my advice which I must admit was of poor quality because the issues were difficult and the responsibility great. How could I ever decide what was best for her? Was it better to break with her husband or to try to patch things up? I could not enter her soul and therefore I could not give her sound advice. I suppose the greatest service I did to her was to be a good and discreet listener. A listener with the patience to listen to her grievances, her arguments and counter-arguments, the endless repetitions and finally to witness the formation of her decisions. She realized she was dealing with a person of very peculiar notions and way of thinking. Did she not understand it before?

When they met, Raymond broke down and cried and told her that he could not live without her. That she was the woman of his life and now that his mother was dead, she was also his mother. He said he married Sabah because he slept with her and she fell pregnant and her brothers threatened to kill him if he did not marry her. The mores of the country were stern and unforgiving.

“Would you have preferred,” he asked Tania, “to collect me from the morgue?”

“Assuming you married her under duress and the first child was born, did you have to have a second child?” she asked him.

“Did you want her people to think I was impotent or a homosexual?”

Sometimes it was very difficult to have a coherent exchange with Raymond.

I have come to the end of my story.

It is an abrupt ending because the story does not end here at all. It goes on, and on, and on. It is the story of my life, which is a linchpin to a thousand others. Perhaps, I shall get varicose veins from standing up too long trying to make the gentle, tender sex, the female sex I love, beautiful. And I shall have to leave a profession I truly love. I do not envisage that moment with dismay because it might give me the opportunity to write the book I promised to you earlier. Those that hate gossip need not read it. But if they do, they shall love it.

24-6-2002

THE SPORTING LIFE

LOVE ON A SUNDAY MORNING

Despite the fact that it was he who had severed their relationship, Robbie could never get over Mona. It did not help that they often met in the elevator as she lived two floors above his flat. She was not beautiful. She was not even pretty but she did have a flawless body. Her face was slightly pock-marked from a childhood chicken pox and her eyes were round and plain. She had a nose that seemed to encroach on her upper lip and slightly deformed her mouth. But the body was extra special. Tall and milky white with perfect breasts and legs. A beautiful backside and front side and was breathtaking in between. There is a vulgar little saying, mostly mouthed by bitter, unsuccessful would-be Casanovas that claims, "Flip them upside down and they're all the same". Not even that is true. Let alone the intention to denigrate women, which, finally, only shows up mean, unsubtle male chauvinist pigs, as the current expression goes, who are not only scorned by the tender sex but are unable to appreciate their myriad qualities and defects, weaknesses and strengths. It is sad that of this vast, intriguing jigsaw puzzle called woman all they could come up with was that mean phrase.

Mona was very feminine and adept at using all the wiles of her sex and Robbie was never sure she enjoyed sex that much and whether she reached with such unflinching regularity and precision orgasms in unison with him. He loved her body and loved to see her move about naked. That her face was not pretty somehow made her even sexier. He made her do things which if described would render this story pornographic but even though she happily complied with all his unusual demands, that, was not the reason why he often thought of her. She taught him something basic about the psychosynthesis of women. At first it seemed quixotic and particular to her but the more he thought about it the more universal it seemed. Something like $E=mc^2$. To a budding woman lover it was as serious as that.

Mona had an elderly husband and a baby girl. Her husband was formerly her mother's lover and when Mona was eighteen or so, her mother ceded her place on condition that the lover married her. It was a solution of sorts. Too practical and cold-blooded, perhaps, but a question of survival. There was a severe housing shortage in the country and at a time when couples could not get married for lack of even a room to set up their household, the lover had a flat of his own. He willingly let go his mistress of many years who was getting on in age and married her daughter: young Mona. These things do happen sometimes and Robbie who lived in the same apartment building and suddenly became aware of these strange developments often wondered whose idea it was and how the emotional equations of the switchover were solved on all sides. One thing was certain, Mona liked the flat more than she was thrilled by her new husband. She met Robbie often in the elevator and was more than a little friendly and talkative and eventually quite a bit familiar. Robbie wondered whether he ought to take advantage of this promising situation that nevertheless was not free of possible entanglements. As he was about to take the plunge he noticed that Mona was perceptibly pregnant and Robbie's

advances went on hold though Mona showed no such inhibitions. Then the baby was out and the familiarity and talk and joking resumed. Robbie petted the baby whenever he saw it and Mona promised to bring it to his flat so he could play with it.

She chose the day perfectly: a Sunday. Her husband, a government employee, was at work, Robbie was at home and the servants had their day off. She rang the bell of his flat and when he opened the door she held up the baby and smiled and Robbie invited her in. They played and petted the baby for a while and then they laid her safely on a large armchair and petted and played with each other. With many laughs and kisses and playful tussles they removed each other's clothes and made passionate love on the sofa next to the armchair where the baby had dozed off. Again and again they fought to extinguish the flame that kept igniting and finally stopped only when the baby started crying. Mona picked it up and saw it was wet. With considerable foresight she had brought a change of dry clothes and set about changing it, naked as she was, while Robbie feasted his eyes on that wonderful female figure. She petted it and talked to it and the baby gurgled away and kicked her legs as her wet knickers and pampers were being removed. When she took them off, Mona started tickling her belly and making it laugh. Then she put her hand on the child's vulva and said to her playfully, "This is your treasure, this is your strength." She said it many times over shaking the baby with her hand between its legs. The baby laughed again, moving her arms and thrusting her legs and Mona started laughing as well. This is your treasure, this is your strength stuck on his mind. How basic this was to a woman, to our life, started dawning on Robbie.

It was a lesson he never forgot, more so because it took time to digest. This treasure, this strength, this weapon was not a sword that could slash and cut and be bloodily victorious. It was a subtle weapon of desire and unbearable sweetness. A weapon that was wielded by denying it rather than thrusting it out to injure. A weapon that needed strategy and planning and patience.

That was one side of it. The other was that Mona's strength also had its weakness. She seemed enslaved by it. She could not get enough of Robbie. She lived for the Sundays when she would tell her slimy old hubby that she would take the baby out for some fresh air to the public gardens by the Nile and would slip into Robbie's apartment and make love all morning. Robbie was young but he liked to reason things out. Why did Mona marry the old buzzard? In time, he realized that the main, the primary need of a woman was security. Once she had that, she would look to her other needs. She had to have her back covered, so to speak. Mona had her back covered by a middle-aged husband who just missed becoming her foster father, had cooperated with him to produce a heiress for the flat and now looked after some of her other needs that hubby's decrepit and deteriorating physical condition was unable to satisfy. Her former poverty taught her to take things as they came and she felt not the slightest guilt for her adultery; not the slightest remorse. Apparently, neither had she much affection for him. Robbie wondered if that was not a sort of prostitution and the more he thought about it, the more confused he got. Life was not that simple. The variables to be taken into account seemed infinite. He could not help feeling that the old cuckold deserved what he got since he contracted such a mismatched and selfish marriage. But then, was he to blame alone? What about the mother? What about Mona? He could not make heads or tails of the issue and in the end what really mattered to him were the lovely Sunday morning unending jousts with Mona, taking a break to feed and change the baby, grabbing a bite for themselves and

resuming their passionate lovemaking amid games and laughs until it was time for Mona to go upstairs to prepare lunch for hubby and time for a pale and haggard Robbie to take a sorely needed nap.

Robbie returned from England about a year and a half earlier. He entered his father's business because his studies, there, had stalled. One failure too many had exhausted both his and his family's patience. He was not serious enough, not zealous enough to give them what it takes to be successful. Perhaps, he did not have the brains. He was in a rut. He found the subjects of his future profession boring, verbose and pedantic and spent his time reading novels. He loved words and original ways to put them together. Or was he rationalizing an innate laziness? Probably. Other people were being awarded Nobel prizes in that same field. So he returned to Egypt with a sense of relief despite the family's disappointment and the aura of failure which dogged him for a while. He did not regret the freedom he left behind since he had not benefited from it. Despite the neglect of his studies, he had not entered the mad rush for parties and turnover of girls that his friends indulged in. In any case, in Egypt, he set about creating for himself a milieu of comparable independence. He left the family home and rented a flat on his own. He joined the most fashionable sporting club in the city with the intention of both exercising his body and meeting people. He tried to fashion a life in harmony with his tastes and his concept of self-improvement which involved extensive reading of both newsmagazines and literature.

Robbie became aware of Mona some months after he rented his flat. At first he only saw her mother going up and down in the elevator to her lover's flat and, after a time, they began exchanging greetings. Hers were polite and a mite embarrassed. She was an unlikely mistress: a slight, timid woman of indeterminate age, probably in her early fifties and probably a widow. Not that her lover deserved anything better. He was roughly the same age; normal height and thin with graying hair and a walrus mustache. He was unctuously polite. The type of person you want to snub for no reason. Then, Robbie saw Mona and she tried to hypnotize him. She stared and stared and when he failed to go in a trance, she smiled. Robbie was good looking and was often stared at but candid stares of this caliber were rare in Egypt. He asked the information department of the building, the door keeper, about the aspiring young lady hypnotist and was told of the surprising switchover, which was strange even by the standards of the slacker Muslim marriage arrangements and relationships. The first part of this story has been sketchily told. It is about the strengths, treasures and the needs of women. And it ends as human stories usually end. Through the constant dissatisfaction with what we have. We have enough, yes, but wouldn't it be better to have a little more? It is what makes a multi-millionaire get a heart attack. Trying to make a billion.

Robbie and Mona enjoyed many months of idyllic Sundays. Little Marianne was growing. She was nearly a year old. Things were becoming complicated. She was starting to move about restlessly inside the flat leaning on the furniture for balance as the couple moaned and groaned and nearly broke the bed. Mona started administering a cough syrup that induced sleepiness but it was sad to see the child groggy even after she woke up. She would soon be walking under her own power and in a few more months would be telling daddy that they did not go to the garden with mummy but downstairs at Uncle Robbie's flat. Mona started telling Robbie how miserable she was with her husband and how wonderful it would have been to be married to him, making him very uncomfortable. A

few weeks later she told him she was pregnant and was quite sure it was by him. This piece of news ushered a couple of nightmarish weeks for Robbie. He told Mona that she should have an abortion immediately and she said she wanted to keep the child. She loved him and even if he did not want to marry her she would keep his child to remind her of him. He interpreted this as arm twisting on her part and decided to play along. For two weeks they talked and talked interminably on the telephone and at their scheduled Sunday morning love sessions. Gone was all the excitement and fun of the occasion. He barely managed to perform the act of love and he did it just to keep her from suspecting his true feelings of disgust. He felt that she deliberately induced her pregnancy in an attempt to trap him. Finally, Robbie managed to persuade her that even if they were to marry, that was not the way to do it. She should have the abortion and then they could plan their future calmly. Robbie found the opportunity when the husband was away on an inspection tour in the provinces to take her to a private clinic and have the abortion performed. Little Marianne was with them, in his care, for even Mona's mother was kept in the dark. Two days later, when Mona had recovered, Robbie broke up their relationship. There were no tears. Mona said she was not fooled. She figured this would happen. He was just a rich kid unable to bear responsibilities. They met now and then in the elevator and greeted each other like two strangers with tense smiles and a few words. Robbie's heart would tighten. He could never forget her heavenly body and its treasures. He often bought little presents for Marianne who was growing to be a pretty and affectionate child and called him Uncle Robbie. He never managed to stomach the husband.

THE GOLF PAVILION

Robbie was an all-round athlete who did not excel in any particular sport but managed most of them reasonably well. At the club he decided to join a beginner's course in golf not because he liked the game but because it impressed him that so many people were fanatic about it. To him, the game seemed insipid. On the other hand, one found all the rich and glamorous ladies hanging out at the golf pavilion sipping exotic, colorful cocktails in between halfhearted, giggly, practice swings of the golf club on a nearby stretch of green used for that purpose. In time he found out that improving their game of golf was the least of their concerns.

He went almost daily to the club after work and enjoyed the games he played and the physical exertion. It dissipated all the accumulated tensions of work. He mostly played with professional trainers which was convenient and not overly expensive. After which he usually went for a plunge at the swimming pool and swam a few lengths before showering and getting dressed. The exercise and especially the swimming never failed to put him in a state of euphoria. He sometimes happened to meet some of his old school friends and joined them for a drink at the bar. But otherwise he headed straight for the golf pavilion for a refreshing cocktail that seemed to defy gravity and seep straight up to his brain and bring about that slight dizziness and relaxed wellbeing he loved. The pavilion was like a singles bar though most of the women there were married. Happily married, he found out soon enough, and happily attached to others. It was usually crowded and the atmosphere was light-hearted and festive.

The golf diehards were few and far between. Most of the people were there to socialize. Golf was just the excuse. Most of them knew each other. They were the *crème de la crème* of the country and had few financial worries to make them dour and sullen. As you entered, a thousand inquiring eyes turned on you to appraise you, to gauge your attributes, your potential and possibilities. It is so Middle Eastern this indiscreet searching gaze, thought Robbie. In England children are taught not to stare. Not to be rude. And yet, it is so dull to enter a restaurant or a club to the utter indifference of the people present. Robbie liked to be stared at and liked to stare. How could he possibly avert his eyes from a beautiful woman? It would be a double deprivation. It would be denying himself the aesthetic pleasure of beauty and would deny the woman the satisfaction of knowing that she was admired. Was this not, after all, the *raison d'être* of a woman of leisure?

Robbie bought a set of golf clubs and started on his lessons. He had to go to the practicing green where the trainer explained the use of each one of the clubs and told him that golf was not a game where strength counts. The main requisite is to learn the correct movements, the fluidity of the drive, the suppleness of the body and the total concentration on form. Putting in strength for distance will come later on its own. There on the green, whacking his pile of balls, Robbie chatted and started getting acquainted both with the regulars and those like him who were starting to learn the game of the elite, each for his own particular purpose. He was amongst the few young people involved with this sport.

It was the sport of middle-age. Of leisurely pace, of unhurried swings of the golf club, of waiting for your partners' turns, of a little fickle conversation and of long walks after the balls. Youth rarely went for the game. It took, therefore, some time before he penetrated the small groups that formed in ever changing combinations. But he was good-looking and tall and he knew that sociability can be cultivated and he did make an effort. He was there every day for a drink even when he did not practice his drive and was getting familiar with the faces. He spoke to the people he knew and was introduced to others. He offered drinks and laughed heartily at silly jokes. He used the fail-safe method of complimenting women on their looks and men on their golf and business acumen. He started understanding the relationships of the golfing crowd and the politics of these relationships. The pairings and separations of couples married to others. The fascinating sociology of the moneyed class in a socialist country. He started perceiving interested glances from a number of women and wondered when, how and if these would fructify. After Mona the stage was barren for many months and he did need to caress and kiss a naked female body. Maybe even fall in love but primarily his need was physical and intense. He was surprised by this sudden torturing demand and wondered at his five years of near celibacy in a London that offered such a variety of flowers to be plucked.

He was at the pavilion that afternoon. He played tennis earlier with a trainer and then joined in a game of doubles pairing with an American woman against two Lebanese gentlemen and after the game, his swim, and a shower went for his cocktail to the pavilion. At one moment, he felt a sudden dizziness and seemed to be losing his balance. The women started screaming and there was a mad scramble for the door. Tables were overturned and glasses smashed on the floor, bottles of liquor started tumbling from the shelves of the bar and breaking on the ground. The chandeliers were swinging violently, a few paintings jumped off their pegs with dust and plaster from wall fissures and crashed

on the ground, which kept on shaking for many more seconds. Then, silence and dust and calm. For some odd reason Robbie was totally unmoved. Totally unruffled while the panic continued outside as club members raced to their cars and tried to get out of the club creating a traffic blockage and a pandemonium of car horns.

“Robbie!”

A lone woman was standing in the slowly drifting dust, smiling.

“Fay! What are you doing here? My God, what a time to meet!”

She came up to him and they embraced. They had not seen each other for years. She was practically a baby when he had seen her last. A bright, sexy baby that was old enough to sit on his lap and kiss him. Now she was a sophisticated young woman. Self-assured and enticing with an inviting smile and a touch of irony that comes from experience. He hugged her and looked at her and then hugged her again and again. He could not let her go. They were the only people left in the pavilion. Even the barman and the waiters had fled in a panic.

“Goodness, what was that,” said Fay

“An earthquake, I presume,” answered Robbie

“I meant the panic. It was mad. Totally irrational behavior.”

“You must admit, an earthquake does make one feel sort of helpless and it only takes one person’s panic to infect a crowd.”

“How strange we should meet in this way. We might not have met without the earthquake. There was quite a crush of people this afternoon. I was sitting with some friends.”

“Did they just leave you behind? Nice people!”

“Oh, they panicked and ran. In any case, I did not get up to follow them. I was quite calm. Sort of detached and I continued sipping my drink, observing the mass hysteria until a man knocked my arm and I spilled it accidentally on the ground. And then as the place emptied, I saw someone who was as detached as myself and was also observing the madness. You know, even if it were not you, I would have gone and talked to him. I am terribly attracted to cool, self-possessed people. But, wonder of wonders, it was you and I am so happy.”

“So am I, dear Fay. Let me get you another drink,” said Robbie. “And one for myself. Let us celebrate this startling reunion. I spy some bottles that were not smashed and some glasses as well. What will you have? Please, none of the fancy stuff, though. I don’t know how to prepare them.”

“Oh, anything alcoholic will do. I was drinking a gin and tonic.”

Robbie went to the bar and fixed two stiff gins and tonic with ice and even found some dusty sliced lemon which he rinsed and put in the drink. He pulled a napkin from a drawer and dusted a table and two chairs and they sat down close to one another, smiling, just as fate seemed to be smiling at them. Sometimes when events are so completely unexpected and involve people and emotions and future entanglements, we call chance, fate, giving it a more intimate and intentional character as if a higher power is manipulating our lives. Undoubtedly, chance sometimes does take some unexpected turns.

“How are John and Ellen?” asked Robbie.

“Oh, both of them are fine,” said Fay. “Your pal Johnny is working like a bee making lots of honey. He did not tell me you were back in Egypt. How many years is it

since we kissed that day in our flat? I was what, sixteen? You must have been twenty one. I was paralyzed with longing. I had never been so aroused before but when things started getting out of hand you stopped. Remember? I was very disappointed. We have not met since.”

“And you have been married for some years.”

“Yes.”

“Happily?”

She made a face of bewilderment and shrugged her shoulders. She was what could be described as *petite*. Certainly not as tall as Mona but decidedly prettier. A pretty, smiling face that told of a gay disposition and two twinkling, lively eyes. A mouth that was large and whose smile and laugh, strangely, gave a hint of vulgarity which seemed to be confirmed by her uninhibited and amusing frankness.

“Life and marriage are too complicated to allow us clear cut appraisals,” she said smiling at Robbie. “I suppose if you are not unhappy in your marriage that is already an achievement. A good reason to keep it going. Perfect marriages need people perfectly matched and this rarely happens. Most marriages are borderline cases where the married couple is not completely happy but is reluctant to break it up. A break-up does take courage and the upheaval, social and personal, is often too distressing so one drifts on and on in a sort of purgatory.”

“Is that where you are drifting?”

“Not quite. Cracks are becoming apparent but I have not allowed them to reach the state of purgatory. For me at least.”

“Even a bachelor such as I knows that incompatibilities intrude after the first couple of years.”

“That is almost a rule. Ours is a marriage of two totally different people and what holds it together is, believe it or not, a lingering residual of love, that magic word of a thousand hues. In our case, that of a dog and its master.”

“If I am not mistaken, he is the dog and you, the master.”

She smiled.

“Yes, and contrary to the normal, the dog is docile and the master naughty. Well, let’s say, somewhat unorthodox.”

“Dogs usually are good and faithful and love their masters.”

“Exactly.”

“To tell you the truth, I have heard some rumors... but I’d better hold my tongue” Robbie said, smiling.

Fay was amused.

“Oh, do tell.”

“Well, it is whispered that the master, or rather the mistress of the dog, is a free spirit and not above tasting the forbidden fruit.”

“I cannot pretend with you, Robbie. The rumors are true. Of course there is always an explanation. Things rarely happen in a vacuum. My husband is a workaholic, always working late, always huddling with layers and accountants, always going off on business trips; never giving me a thought. Whenever I complained his answer always was, I am doing all this for you. No, damn it, I need a person next to me, not cash. It is probably as tough being married to an insensitive man who is loyal and madly in love with you as to an unfaithful one. It is he who finally pushed me to adultery though I was

hardly a little virgin. I started traveling to relieve my boredom and sliding in and out of love affairs. He found out, of course, eventually, about them and was wounded but he cannot give me up so he endures this state of affairs.”

“And is this life tolerable for you?” asked Robbie.

“For me, the marital situation is easier. I still have affection for him because he has always been good and generous with me though I hate to see him suffer and get depressed.”

“But you cannot stop.”

“It’s not that. Don’t make me sound like a sex fiend. Since he set me free through the lifestyle he imposed in our marriage, now I simply cannot give up this freedom. I can no longer be confined. He knows that if he tries, I shall leave him. I have a little money of my own and shall survive. That’s why I’m here. I have some property in Egypt and two or three times a year I come to collect the income.”

“Another drink, Fay?”

“Okay, so you can tell me your news.”

Robbie went to the bar and fixed another two gin tonics. He was already feeling a little dizzy but happy and relaxed. It was so strange to have the club deserted and quiet. To be sitting in the midst of overturned chairs and tables, smashed glasses and bottles and the smell of spilled alcohol mingling with that of broken wall plaster and dust. To have found Fay at such a moment. He took the drinks to the table and before sitting down caressed her hair. She looked up at him and smiled. They both wondered if the kissing that was interrupted by Robbie’s scruples a decade ago would resume.

Robbie did not have much to tell Fay. Five lazy years in England with failed studies and nothing worthwhile to brag about. His reading of novels, his addiction to the theatre and midnight solitary walks in the deserted London streets which meant so much to him were items hardly worth mentioning.

“I just wasted my time there,” he said.

“I wish I knew it,” said Fay.

“Why?”

“I would have come to live with you.”

“A student life with barely enough money to keep you going? You would have been bored to death.”

“Not with you. I have had many affairs but I still remember those kisses. Can you believe that? It is the longing that was never fulfilled. Don’t you think we would have been happy?”

Robbie was thinking it was time to go. He was starting to worry that the club gates would be shut. The gin tonics he fixed were heavy duty and the pleasant dizziness was turning too intense for comfort. He wondered how Fay felt. He sensed her attraction for him. It was coming back. Her admiration for her brother’s handsome friend was surfacing from her subconscious, that storage of unfulfilled yearnings. He reached and held her hand.

“Yes,” he said. “No doubt about it.”

“Have you anybody now?” she asked.

“Not before the earthquake.”

She smiled.

“And after it?”

They were close and he bent towards her face. He could have reached her lips but he did not. Halfway, he stopped. She looked at him and understood it was a question. She bent and kissed him lightly on his lips.

“Yes,” he said smiling. “After it, I have.”

She got up and sat on his lap. She caressed his hair, kissed him again lightly on the lips and looked at him tenderly.

“Isn’t that how it started? I sat on your lap and I kissed you.”

“You were so young I was surprised at your audacity. Later, I realized that you probably had more experience than I. But I was waiting for John and was afraid he would find me corrupting his sister. Or was it the other way round?”

“Yes, you little baby. It was.”

She kissed him and her tongue inched in his mouth. It was hard for the invasion and then soft and playful. It had the residual sweetness of the tonic and mingled with the scent of the gin. He liked the way she took the initiative and loved her expert tongue. He remembered that it was expert even back then. She was always precocious but he firmly believed that the time had come when the women were becoming the hunters. The initiators of sexual propositions. Public morality was moving forward by leaps and bounds. At the golf pavilion, was he not, after all, waiting for a woman to give him a sign, a nod, that she would welcome his approach? And the fact that she would almost certainly be married would mean they would enter directly into an illicit sexual relationship without pretense and the wasting of time. But just now he had Fay and her tongue was assaulting his psyche and sexuality. She stopped and looked at him tenderly.

“Sometimes fate gets it all wrong. We should have been together, us two,” she said.

“Why?” asked Robbie.

“Because you love me and perhaps I would have been a devoted wife. Don’t you think we are suited for each other?”

“For a kiss, yes. For a love session, yes. For a longish love affair, perhaps. For married life though, who can tell? You ought to know better than me. You are already married.”

“Don’t panic Robbie. It was just a thought not a marriage proposal.”

Robbie laughed and they started kissing again. When they stopped they were both aroused and flushed.

“Would you really marry me, Fay?”

“Oh, who knows? Life is full of unexpected twists and turns. At the moment I am unhappily married and all I can offer is to finish what we started five years ago. See if I can get it out of my system. Take it or leave it.”

Take it or leave it? Robbie smiled at the offer. Fay was a craving with long roots.

“Do you remember,” he asked, “every morning, as I was waiting for my school bus you used to pass by in yours and would always wave to me?”

“Of course I remember. My girlfriends used to ask me who you were. They thought you were terribly handsome. I used to tell them you were my lover. Obviously they never believed me. I was far too young, you were far too old.”

“Always cheeky and outspoken our little Fay. There are such a host of memories. I remember you by the seaside in Alexandria. You were always so gay and full of life. Riding the huge waves with laughs and song and when I was near you I peeked at your

budding breasts. You had that glowing sensuality that sometimes one finds in pubescent girls. I wondered what it would be like to kiss you and hold you naked in my arms even then. Why are the sweetest things in life forbidden? Then, ten years ago, the kissing and, today, the earthquake.”

“Yes. We might have never met without it.”

They kissed again and when they stopped, Robbie pushed her gently off his lap.

“We’d better be going, Fay. I hope the club gates are still manned and we’ll be able to get out.” He took her arm to lead her out of the pavilion and smiled at her. “What was that superfluous question?” he asked.

“Take it or leave it? It was not a question, it was a statement.”

“Tough and decisive, as usual.”

“Make up your mind.”

“I’ll take it, baby; you have a treasure I want to taste.”

“And I, a lovely lollipop,” she said with a smile, looking at him in the eyes.

POST-SEISMIC TREMORS

They made their way carefully past the debris, out of the pavilion and went to the car park. They held each other by the waist and swayed slightly as they walked. They were dizzy from the gin and perhaps a little from the kisses. A handful of club employees were moving about and the rest of the club seemed to have gone through an invasion of hooligans. Robbie’s car was the only one in the car park. The gates were closed but a guard opened them to let them out. Out in the street they faced the panic once more. People had flooded the streets emptying the apartment buildings all along the way. They were talking loudly to each other exchanging stories of surprise and terror, reluctant to go back inside lest a greater tremor follow on the heels of this one. The car traffic was sparse and Robbie drove carefully through the milling crowds. He looked at Fay and they smiled at each other.

There were many types of earthquakes. Some big, devastating and impersonal; others small, overwhelming and personal. They were much the same for the people they affected. They produced intense emotions. Robbie and Fay were heading for their own small and personal earthquake. The big one of an hour ago left them oddly unaffected. The people’s panic amused them. It made them feel superior. They were pleased that they did not feel the slightest fear. On the car radio they heard that many of the poorer districts with rickety, run down housing were flattened and that the army was already setting up tents in public gardens and empty lots and they felt sorry in a detached, intellectual sense. They were not depressed because the hardship did not affect them directly. On the contrary, they were perhaps the only two people that had benefited from it. They found each other.

They crossed the bridge and headed for the town center. The Nile was calmly flowing on its eternal journey north, unperturbed. Everything seemed normal except for the people on the street who seemed to be waiting for tremor number two. Their patience would be exhausted soon and they would shortly be heading for their flats. Most of the

shops and big department stores had shut their doors but the luxury hotels were hives of activity, their lobbies packed with their worried, chattering guests.

Robbie parked the car and they passed through the little crowd of neighbors that were standing patiently on the sidewalk of their building, talking among themselves and anticipating the second installment that would never come. He felt a pair of eyes almost physically penetrating him. He turned and saw Mona. She was standing next to her husband holding little Marianne in her arms. She smiled at him and he smiled back and waved at the child before entering the building. He was surprised at the look of complicity in Mona's eyes when she saw Fay. Not the slightest sign of irritation or jealousy. The doorkeeper warned him not to use the elevator but Robbie told him not to worry and they took it to the third floor. He held Fay tenderly and kissed her on the way up and asked her if she was real or whether it was all a dream.

"Let's just say it's a dream come true. Real today, a memory tomorrow. You see, tomorrow I am flying back to my workaholic husband."

They entered the flat. The big, impersonal earthquake had paid it a visit. A few fissures on the walls. A broken vase and one or two fallen paintings. The small, personal one started with a kiss just as they shut the door behind them. They sat on the sofa. They wanted an exact reenactment of that magic moment cut short ten years ago. They hoped to revive it today. To resume where it had ended. She sat on his lap and kissed him. He caressed her breasts. Her tongue wiser, knowledgeable, experienced, talked to him and thrilled him as it did even then. Her passion and desire were as flawlessly conveyed by it as electricity through a copper wire. They murmured words of love, still unsure they meant them.

He started unbuttoning her dress and she his shirt. He slid it off her shoulders and reached to unclasp her bra and release her breasts. They were ten years older, had bloomed and sagged slightly with the growth in size and age and the fondling of lovers. They were at that point of feminine mellowness that they seemed to implore to be touched and suckled. He helped Fay take off his shirt and flannel and held her tightly, her breasts upon his. He wanted to feel them on his chest, to feel they were his, their warmth, their fullness, the sensation of having breasts. He looked at them and touched her nipples lightly and teased them with the tip of his tongue until she cried that his gentleness was driving her mad. She wanted passion. She wanted to be bitten mangled and overwhelmed. Wanted her plaything, her lollipop. Wanted to be stripped and impaled. She kissed him wildly, roughly, sucking his tongue out of his mouth. Her dress was bunched around her waist and he made her stand and take it off.

Her legs were thin and shapely. He held her waist and pulled her towards him. He loved the curvature of the female form, this sensation of femininity and he liked to savor the delicacy, fluidity and smoothness of the female body. It was built to receive with soft, enigmatic genitals. Enigmatic because Robbie could find no explanation to his fascination. However much he looked at them, caressed them and kissed them, there was no satiety, no slaking of the thirst to feast his eyes on them.

For propriety's sake, love's toil, its free-for-all skirmish of passion and lovemaking is left to the reader's imagination with the guideline that it was long, spirited and varied and ended with the personal orgasmic tremors and pounding hearts that no ordinary earthquake can induce. They awoke after a drugged nap, had a shower and returned to a more intimate, unhurried exploration and tasting of each other. Mona had

taught Robbie that the human body has a scope of sensuality limited only by the imagination and inhibitions of the participants. Its music ranged from the hasty, grunting and groaning of the male on an unsatisfied, bored female, to subtle, melodious symphonies played on the instruments of infinite nerve endings and pleasure centers that each partner discovers on the other. Now, under Fay's tutorship, Robbie set about composing new and original sonatas of voluptuousness. The familiarity between them, the long years of association and restraints to their physical union added a note of the forbidden, a note of the incestuous, which made their excitement more intense. They talked and laughed, fought and played, explored and experimented, entered and withdrew from each other's bodies and souls until they felt the ebb of desire and the flicker of love. As their kisses turned spiritual rather than passionate, their forthcoming separation started burdening their thoughts.

"We have come to it faster than I thought," said Fay.

"Our separation?" asked Robbie.

She smiled.

"Our love, silly. Instead of liberation I am shackled. I did not get you out of my system. I buried you deeper. How strange to feel passion again for a man. Oh, how complicated life is. One is never sure where one is heading."

Robbie was startled.

"Is it strange to be in love?"

"In all my many affairs I have never fallen for a lover. Not once. Imagine? The word lover was absolutely a misnomer for me. In those short-term, purely sexual relationships one does not see the better side of men. More often than not one has to deal with manipulative lies, selfishness and vulgarity. Anything for a fuck. One eventually becomes cynical. My most tender friends are women."

"Then why persist?"

"Haven't I explained that? I am married to a man who loves me but in reality is more in love with his business and his money than he is with me. He is married to them. I am a detail in his life. He will never admit it but I have come to that conclusion. Had I found another worthwhile person, I would have left him in a jiffy. Unfortunately I have not."

"Not even after the earthquake?"

Fay laughed and kissed him.

"After the earthquake I fulfilled a dream. It was wonderful. I even think I am in love but am I? I have to reason things over. I am confused. Is one lovely afternoon a basis for radical decisions? Perhaps it is. I don't know."

"So you are definitely leaving?"

"Yes, but without my heart."

"You will be taking mine."

Fay laughed and kissed him again.

"A double heart transplant," she said. "An exchange of smitten hearts. Until we meet again."

"Meanwhile?"

"Meanwhile, you have the golf pavilion to keep you occupied. It will be soon repaired. Its function is essential. It keeps marriages from collapsing by providing

opportunities for the safety valve of adultery. So do your little share of philanthropy, Robbie. Make love to as many married women as you can.”

“And you?”

“I, too, shall be saving my marriage. I shall be sleeping around.”

“It sounds absurd.”

“And yet, it is for the best. It is a test we must go through. There are many things that have changed in my life and I must be sure.”

It was already midnight. They felt drained and dressed slowly and a little mournfully. They kissed and caressed one another tenderly. Robbie drove Fay to Heliopolis where she was staying with an old school friend. The streets were still crowded and the popular teahouses and coffee shops were packed. In Abbaseya they saw a few old wood-and-plaster houses that had collapsed and the occupants huddled next to them on the pavement holding pots and pans, blankets and dilapidated suitcases packed with clothing. They were patiently waiting for help. Patience was their only capital. They would probably be assigned a tent or would be lodged in an empty school building to be followed by hardship and discomfort for a few years. However, they must have been happy in their misery. Even misfortune, sometimes, has its compensations. The usual government practice was well-known. They would eventually be allocated a government flat in one of the new gulag-like satellite cities that were sprouting in the desert, on the fringes of Cairo. The main road artery they were on did not pass through the poorer districts and Robbie and Fay did not see any further destruction but many of the parked cars on the way were occupied with sleeping families.

Driving to Teresa, they tried to figure out the future. They made muddled and tentative suggestions for a future they could not envisage or truly believe in. They exchanged phone numbers. Fay would be back soon. She promised to keep in touch. She thought she was in love. Just as he thought. It was mad but what a joust that was! It brought back the unfulfilled yearnings of her tender age. Of a time past when she could still weep from too much longing. Perhaps, she mused, she had never stopped loving him. She would stay with her husband a few weeks, finish a few odd jobs she had and would fly back to stay with Robbie for a while. To wear out the obsession. To luxuriate in the physical pleasure. He would be waiting chastely, he said.

“No,” she pleaded, “please, no commitments. Just let things happen. If we plan it, an obstacle might crop up and I might not come at all. Or else you might find another love. Did we plan the earthquake?”

They reached Teresa’s house. Robbie knew Teresa. He met her once or twice, long ago, at Fay’s family home and more recently on a number of business meetings. She owned and ran a foundry she inherited from her father. It was a highly unusual occupation for a woman and, certainly, not an easy task to manage a specialized enterprise dominated by rough and uneducated male craftsmen. However, she was a tough cookie herself and managed to survive and thrive in the business. She was a bright, friendly but plain looking girl with one leg shorter than the other which caused her to limp slightly and to use a walking stick. She was of normal height and apart from her deformity was well built if a little on the plump side. Although not much older than Fay she was already branded as an old maid because though she eventually became quite wealthy she hardly changed her solitary and retiring lifestyle and devotion to her business. Her only concession to wealth was a new super luxurious flat she lived in with

two unusually good looking maids who kept her house, cooked and were rumored to be her girlfriends.

When she opened the door of the flat and saw Fay, Teresa let out a scream and pulled her into her arms. She scolded her, called her naughty and heartless not to have called her after the earthquake to let her know she was safe and not crushed by a collapsed wall or something. Then she saw Robbie and smiled.

“So you have found him,” she said to Fay. “I did not tell you he was around. I wanted you all to myself but you did find him and you have lost your mind. Now I understand and, well, I suppose I must forgive you. How are you Robbie?” she asked him. “Please do come in.”

Robbie shook her hand and kissed her but declined to sit because it was far too late for a visit.

“I just came to deliver Fay,” he told Teresa. “She was in my care during the earthquake. Or rather, I was in hers. She is a fearless girl. I was in her debt, you see. She kissed me ten years ago and today I returned the kiss and the accumulated interest. I want to marry her but she seems to be a little confused about her feelings, not to mention a little married already.”

He meant it as a joke but both women blushed and did not laugh and Robbie was confused. After a few moments of small talk he made an uneasy departure kissing them both and leaving abruptly. Going to the door he turned to Fay and asked her to call him soon and on a sofa in the living room he saw two striking Arab women. He had not noticed them earlier. One was Fay’s age, the other in her middle thirties. Both were dark-complexioned and exceedingly beautiful.

In the car he thought about them. If there was only one of them he might have believed the rumors. But two? How would that work out? But again he was thinking conventionally and things were not always what they seemed. Teresa seemed the epitome of ordinariness and there was not the slightest sign of the lesbian. She had short hair but it was always perfectly combed and her dresses, though never showy were tasteful and feminine. Robbie was too exhausted to ponder the question much longer. He thought of his lovely bed and sped the car as fast as he dared to reach it.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

After a few days of loneliness, daydreaming and pining for Fay, Robbie resumed his sporting life. The day following the earthquake he received a severe reprimand from his father for his absolute unconcern about his family. He had not phoned to ask about them, to inquire whether their plant had sustained any damage and to reassure them that he was well. Robbie was silent. He did not excuse himself. He could not very well tell him that he was making love all afternoon and evening that day and that, just then, nothing much else mattered. His father, annoyed at his silence, remarked that it was sad that after five years in England and the considerable expense it involved, his only achievement was to perfect the English stiff upper lip. Now and then, inevitably, his failure would surface to dog him.

He resumed his tennis and squash, swimming and jogging and, of course, his golf and his cocktails at the golf pavilion. His golf was improving. He started his incursions on the links and started playing for nine holes with other beginners. He started enjoying the game, the walk and the conversation. He enjoyed playing with women. There were more laughs and sloppy playing and less rivalry. For someone who was not all that keen on the sport, it was more fun. His circle of acquaintances was also growing. He was getting to know the regulars. Both men and women. And started identifying groups, friends and relationships. Some were obvious, others he surmised. He was happy that he was developing an ease in communication and starting to indulge in small talk with a facility that was previously lacking. His character was changing. He was happy that little by little he was being accepted as one of the crowd. He did not necessarily look up to them but it was pleasant to feel that he belonged. And after all was he all that much better than they were?

He started noticing that even when married couples came on a daily basis to the club, they rarely came together. Most were wealthy enough to own several cars and the spouses came separately. This enabled them to flirt and joke and practice their familiarities with greater freedom and, of course, to develop friendships with the opposite sex and illicit relationships far from the surveillance of their tender half.

He noticed that a married couple rarely carried on their flirtations on an equal basis. Usually it was either the one or the other that was actively playing the field. He noticed that the women who were misbehaving tended to have husbands who were usually rich and unattractive and were compulsively engrossed in the sweet pursuit of lucre.

With the men the situation offered greater variety. The successful businessman might have had affairs but had little time to spend at the pavilion. The regulars were either people with steady incomes and undemanding jobs that offered them enough leisure to allow them the pleasures of golf and the *après-golf*. Or were inheritors of money and professional time-killers, most likely married but forever in the search of thrills and kicks to give some meaning to their empty lives. They tended to be spoilt and trivial and had the special talent of bringing misery to any woman who might get involved with them. And of course, he could not but add himself to the list. There were the Robbies, young and up-and-coming, out to solve their sexual impasse in a civilized way.

He noticed that nearly every illicit relationship conformed to a similar pattern of behavior. The two adulterers and their spouses formed a closely knit foursome. They were stuck together. Seeing each other practically every day, planning their outings and holidays together, going to parties, theatre, opera and all social events as an inseparable foursome. It was usually love-for-two in the afternoon but always friendship-for-four in the evening.

He noticed that birds of a feather flock together. The word, bird, is rather apt. In English slang it refers to a young woman. When he finally started to understand the Who's Who and the Who's-with-Whom at the pavilion, he saw that the women who were regularly having and pursuing extra-marital emotions and commotions tended to form a grouping of their own. It was a fraternity with solidarity and an *esprit de corps* that was not apparent to the uninitiated. But Robbie's antennas had become extra sensitive and he reached conclusions almost scientifically. Through observation and correlation. He was

certain of this newly discovered sociological phenomenon and he drew further conclusions. Since the majority of the group were amateurs of the illicit it followed that the one or two, sitting in the group, on which he had no observable evidence, must be of similar disposition. He was happy for these discoveries. Knowledge was always useful. His vision was clearer. His aim more focused.

A few weeks passed and then a month. Not a sound from Fay. He tried calling her on the phone and there was either no answer or else a man replied. It was probably her husband and Robbie could not brazen it out and ask for Fay. He could not imagine what the reason for her silence was. Perhaps she found someone else. Perhaps she traveled to the North Pole and was shacking up with an Eskimo in his igloo. There was nothing much he could do about it.

One day, a few months later, he met Mona on the elevator. She was very friendly and asked him where the pretty girl she saw with him on the day of the earthquake was. Robbie smiled and said he did not know. She had left him. Mona let out a peel of laughter and told him it served him right. He was getting back some of his own medicine. He was annoyed and told her to go to hell. She laughed even more at that and Robbie asked her how her darling hubby was. She could not stop laughing and told him he was getting more senile by the day. Robbie told her it served her right and they both burst out laughing together. When they stopped on his floor she hugged him and kissed him passionately on the mouth. Robbie could not resist responding and they went into his flat, tore off their clothes and fought like two ravenous animals. She was short of time and at the conclusion of their turbulent confrontation she dressed hurriedly and ran to the door.

“Shall I come again?” she asked him just before leaving.

“No,” he answered and she ran out laughing.

Robbie kept up his sporting life. His squash and tennis were improving. His jogging and swimming were building up his body. His golf was becoming respectable. He was on speaking terms with most of the *habitués* of the pavilion. He was even invited to a number of cocktail parties and flirted discreetly and politely with most of the women in his vicinity. He knew that due to the fact that nearly all of the people were married, choosing or being chosen would be a slow and cautious process.

He had already singled out Aziza. They often went around the nine holes together and enjoyed each other's company. She was in her early thirties, bright, gay and educated and they conversed in English. She was earnest about her golf and, as the better player, he coached her and held her from behind to correct her drive. She was plump and pretty, wore an enticing perfume and the bodily contact aroused him. She was hovering on the fringes of the birds-of-a-feather group and Robbie wondered if he could make her a full-fledged member. She consistently sought his company and, always, at the end of their game they enjoyed a tall cocktail and light-hearted conversation at the pavilion bar. She told him she had picked up golf for the exercise. It was part of the diet she was undergoing to reduce weight. She had lost her shape after the birth of her child. Did he not think she would look better a little slimmer?

“It will be difficult to look better than what you look now, but perhaps, losing a little weight would suit you,” Robbie answered.

It was an ambivalent opinion but it pleased Zizi. And in any case, Robbie was not making fun of her. He liked her. He was not a devious flatterer. One day she introduced him to her husband and Robbie decided that his chances were pretty fair. The husband

was short and plump with a sizeable behind and fat legs. His main qualities were his sweet disposition, pleasant smile and fat wallet.

At their next game, right after they left the tee and started walking, Robbie asked Zizi if he could see her outside the club. She looked at him as if he were mad.

"Listen," he said, "I would have loved to take you dancing but since that is out of the question we can go to the cinema from three to six."

She smiled.

"No? We can go climb the pyramid of Cheops. Good exercise for your diet."

She looked at him and smiled again.

"No? You can come to my flat and I shall show you my stamp collection."

"That's an old one," she said laughing.

"Quite true," replied Robbie. "It's from my grandfather's 'How To' series. 'How To Repair Your Wireless Set'. 'How To Build A Chicken Coop'. The stamp collection ploy is from 'How To Seduce A Woman.'"

Zizi laughed.

"If you can find me the booklet of 'How To Be Unfaithful Without Feeling Guilty', I might consent," she said.

"I don't think I have that one," answered Robbie, "but I have several others bordering on that subject. 'How To Overcome Your Inhibitions'. 'How To Make The Most Of A Short, Dull Life'. 'How To Fulfill Your Secret Yearnings'."

Zizi laughed again.

"Dear Robbie," she said, "you do make me laugh and sometimes jokes liberate one's reserve. They provide food for one's brain. I give no promises but let's just say, I shall think about it."

Good start, thought Robbie. We're on the way. Since she will think about it, the chances are she will opt for the escapade, the illicit, for a thrill she has, perhaps, not tasted with her sweet Mohsen. She is a bright girl. Intelligence is daring, sly and adventurous. It thirsts for knowledge and experience. Just how good a start it was, he found out the next day. They had just gone through the nine holes in high good spirits and were at the bar drinking a fizzy, red concoction when Zizi said,

"About that stamp collection, do you think I could have a look at it sometime?"

Robbie nearly choked on his drink and they both laughed.

"Sometime? Sometime, is too far off," he said. "How about now?"

She smiled.

"I am expected at home. Tomorrow at three."

He bent to her ear and whispered,

"I am so happy. I do like you very much, you know. You arouse me sexually. Do you think we shall fall in love?"

"That would be a calamity," she said.

LOVE IN THE AFTERNOON

They called their love sessions, looking at the stamp collection. They took elaborate precautions not to be detected or suspected. They met no more than once a

week for the stamp collection and stopped being so obviously with each other at the pavilion. Whereas formerly they were there practically every day, they now absented themselves once or twice a week, each on a different day, from the golf so that when they were away together it would not seem fishy. Consequently they saw less of each other and missed each other more. They enjoyed the precautions, the planning, the conspiracy. It was their secret. Their secret happiness. Their secret transgression. Their secret corruption with its heavenly pleasures. They did not imagine they would suit each other so perfectly. Robbie loved her plumpness. It was something new. The heavy breasts, full arms, rounded belly and fleshy behind. Zizi loved his hardness, his lightness and agility. The freedom and airiness of his lovemaking not to mention its imaginative variety. She was not squashed and suffocated by Mohsen's ton of flaccid flesh. She loved his tenderness, the way he kissed. He loved her wish, her need, to learn about sex, to become a better lover. The readiness to try something new, to improve something habitual.

They looked at the stamp collection from three to six. Part of an excuse in case Mohsen looked her up at the club. She would say she felt tired and went to see a film. It was just about the right amount of time for two love sessions and a little conversation. Talking to Zizi was almost as important as lovemaking. Robbie loved to have her in his arms, gently caressing her ample breasts and listen to her talk. He loved her voice and her expressive intonations. Like most women, she felt the need to justify her fall to what her religion regarded as a deadly sin deserving death by stoning and her culture considered a surrender to a sordid instinct. By the most enlightened of even western opinions the betrayal of her husband was considered a bitchy act. The forfeiture of her self-respect. Society was intolerant of extenuating circumstances.

She looked at him and kissed him.

"It will be so hard not to fall in love with you," she said, "when the pleasure you give me is almost unbearably intense. Is that the orgasm, Robbie? I never felt this way before. Mohsen is a good husband but hardly the ideal lover. And this is how I repay him! But don't think too badly of me. I read too much literature to resign myself to a life without passion. To die having felt the pain of childbirth without the pleasure of sex. What am I, a cow? A pig? Though I must admit, if I am not careful with my diet, I shall soon be like one. At least now, I can pretend I am Juliet, if a little overweight and overage, and you, my handsome Romeo."

She kissed him again and her tongue gave notice that the owner was aroused.

"You are a terribly sexy Juliet, my Zizi," said Robbie. "I would not have guessed. And you don't have to justify yourself. Life is so complex that it is not easy to judge a person. Much less to condemn him. I do not go for superficial labels."

"But I do want you to judge me," said Aziza. "I want you to condemn me if you find fault and acquit me if you empathize. I do not want you to think I am an easy lay. What I did, did not come easily. It was both helped and thwarted by my past. And, of course, if there was no Robbie, the stamp collection would have been left neglected and unseen on the shelf."

She looked at him and smiled. A look of pain crossed her features. It was not pain. It was a yearning. To be kissed and caressed, to be touched intimately and penetrated. To feel vibrations of ecstatic tension race from her genitals to her soul, to her tongue, across Robbie's mouth and body back to her on and on at an accelerating pace on the race circuit of love.

That time, there was not enough time. On another occasion she made her case.

“I really do not understand my parents. They fondly believe they are progressive. They will loudly proclaim the need for a woman to be educated, to enter the professions, journalism and politics. They sent me to university where I studied literature and philosophy and as soon as a rich young man of good lineage showed up, I was bundled, bullied and forced to get married. I would not call it hypocrisy. Rather, I think it is stupidity. An inability to shed the narrow mindedness of their past. What has been hammered in their minds by our conservative culture and religion. Not a thought for my feelings and desires. For my mind that was freed and opened up and then thrown into a dungeon. For my feelings which dreamt of love and romance and were then forced to couple with a dwarf. Oh, you have seen Mohsen. He is not a dwarf. He is an easygoing, pleasant companion. But he meant nothing to me. We met at the university and he was forever following me around like a pup. He saw full well I was not interested but as soon as we graduated he asked for my hand. His family was very wealthy and this dazzled my parents and annulled my opposition, my feelings and desires. I told him to his face I did not want him but he neither had enough pride to be offended nor enough delicacy to consider my sentiments. He told me I would get used to him. You cannot imagine, Robbie, the pressure and helplessness I felt. The injustice and the anger as well. I made a promise to myself that I would find a lover. It would be my revenge. Well, it took me eight years to do so. Good things do not come easy, my Robbie, and sometimes I wonder how long this happiness, this carnal bliss will last. Kiss me my love. Yes, all over. I am yours.”

The story came in installments and Robbie loved to look at her. Loved to hear her voice and watch the expressions of her face. They reflected her emotions in harmony with her intonation and her narrative.

“You know,” she told him, “I nearly lost myself. My dreary existence nearly effaced my personality. It is so easy to let yourself go. A year went by. I got used to Mohsen. He really is a sweet boy. He spoils me and never goes against my wishes. But. But. Let’s not go into the buts. Nevertheless I do love him. He is the father of my child. I fell pregnant after a year and was busy with Samir, my son, for another two and I entered into a routine that occupied my life and made me forget its emptiness. One day I looked at my chubby face in the mirror and told myself that in a little while I would be just another fat, sexually frustrated, empty headed, gossipy wife like the ones I saw at the club. Where had my love of literature gone? My philosophy studies? My dreams? The promise I had made to myself? That round face woke me up. I went to a dietician and joined the golfers for the exercise and in the back of my mind I kept alive my hope of meeting someone. I made friends with the crowd you call birds-of-a-feather. I wanted to learn how they operate. I admired their guts, their secret disregard for conventional morality and finally their selfishness because above all else they dared to care about themselves. They nurtured their pleasure. They stopped being second fiddle to their husbands. I think you have helped me do the same. Much as I love him, I do not feel sorry for Mohsen. My logic tells me he had it coming.”

The installments went back and forth in time. They were snatches of personal history. After their lovemaking Robbie would often ask her,

“What are we on today?”

She would smile and say,

“You, of course. All my stories are connected to you. Why would I tell you a story that has nothing to do with you? I remember when I saw you the first time, I thought, That must be a nice person. I did not know the rest of your hidden traits. Even now, I know very little. I started going to the golf about a year and a half before you appeared but I used to go much less frequently and, hence, my very poor skill at the game. I practiced my drives, talked with the birds and surveyed the men. More out of intellectual curiosity than with an intention of doing something about it. Taking on a lover seemed over the moon. A sheer fantasy. My hard feelings towards my family and Mohsen and my thoughts of revenge had long since faded. Of course, there was still the frustration of my sexual life. The certainty that there was more to sex than what Mohsen had to offer. That my lack of pleasure was not due to my personal frigidity. That I had a right to sexual pleasure. Yes, all that may have been true but in practice things seemed so impossibly difficult. And then, the crop of men available did not inspire me. I thought, how ironical! The man I married, the man with whom I would live a lifetime was forced on me and was not to my liking. And I was being finicky in choosing a transient sexual partner for a short love affair! But it obviously had to be so. I would not enter into such a relationship for more of the same. It had to be something special, something worth the risk, worth the betrayal.

“I saw you from the very first days you came to the golf. You were young and good looking and those first days you seemed lost and withdrawn. You attracted my interest and I kept an eye on you. I saw you develop, gain confidence and become much more sociable. Your golf improved very quickly and pretty soon you were giving me pointers on the green. I loved it when you held me from behind to correct my drive. I knew you were aroused. I felt you were interested and I started to think, Shall I or shall I not? We became friends and this question was constantly buzzing in my mind. Shall I or shall I not? Until you asked. Until you proposed a look at the stamp collection. So, do I have regrets? Not in a million years! Oh Robbie, I do not want to say I love you because I shall believe it and I don’t want to, though it is probably true. But I cannot conceal that your lovemaking thrills me. It exhilarates me. I love those carnal sensations that flood my being every time you touch me. The arousal of your caress, the passion of your kisses, the vibrations, the tension, the agony, the love I feel, yours and mine, the hardness of your body, your need to bury yourself into me, to suck every part of my body, to build me up, on and on and on and on until I can stand it no longer, until your helpless growl of release triggers me off as well and I feel your love spurting into me. Then we rest a few minutes because there is not much time and we talk. Well, I talk mostly and I wonder why there is not a world where we could stay like this, in bed, forever.”

He asked her how she felt making love with two men. She looked at him reproachfully for bringing up something that was constantly troubling her. The feeling that she was being unfaithful both to Mohsen and Robbie. Each one with the other.

“With you,” she said, “I feel like a lovesick mistress. With Mohsen like a prostitute with her client. With my child like a traitor. With my family like an avenging victim. With the world at large like a secret agent. You see our affair has given me many faces.”

Robbie was ashamed he asked the question. It was indelicate but revealing. A woman’s adultery involved her soul. It was not easy to sleep with two men. Robbie kissed her and she responded passionately. Then she looked at him.

“It is for this,” she said, “that I have changed my life. It is so wonderful this coupling of two people. I am so lucky to have finally discovered it. Why did God make of it a riddle?”

She kissed him again and reached for his penis.

One day as they were talking about feminism and the birds that were, in a way, practicing a special brand of it, he asked her if she ever happened to meet a Greek girl called Fay. Aziza said, “Yes”, because Fay was often in the bird’s company.

“She is a lesbian, you know,” she told him.

Robbie was startled.

“No,” he said. “That cannot be the girl I was asking about. The Fay I know is married and lives in Greece.”

“I know, said Aziza. But she does come to Cairo every so often.”

Robbie was confused.

“The Fay I am talking about I have known since she was a little girl. I was her brother’s friend and I was in and out of their house for years. She never displayed any such tendencies. On the contrary, she was quite a lively and sexually precocious girl. She went around with plenty of boys. I met her at the pavilion many months ago, at the time of the earthquake and I wondered if you knew her.”

“I think it is the same Fay we are talking about,” said Aziza. “I mean, how many Greek girls called Fay are there in Cairo? It is not a usual name. Anyway, I only met her once or twice but I heard a few things about her from the birds-of-a-feather group. She is a brunette, pretty and petite and much younger than us.”

“What did you hear,” asked Robbie.

“That she married this fellow in Greece,” said Zizi. “That they do not get along well together but she does not leave him because he is very rich. That she is promiscuous and has innumerable affairs. The husband knows it but tolerates it because he loves her and feels responsible as he is much of the time away from home on business. That when she is in Cairo she stays with her lover who is a Greek woman in Heliopolis.”

It was getting more and more specific but Robbie still could not swallow it.

“What is the woman’s name?” he asked.

“I forget the name,” said Zizi. “The only thing I remember is that she is lame.”

“Yes, that’s the one,” said Robbie. “But you just said she goes about with innumerable men and just because she stays with that woman does not mean she is a lesbian.”

“Yes,” admitted Zizi, “perhaps she is not. Perhaps, she acquired that reputation because the other lady almost certainly is. But why are you so preoccupied, Robbie?”

“She is like a sister to me,” he answered.

Months went by and then a year. Aziza was blooming. She had slimmed down and took a new interest in her appearance, her hair, her skin, her clothing. There was a sparkle to her face, a radiance to her smile that made her quite the most luminous woman of the pavilion. She was constantly stalked and courted by most of the male sex-scavengers. With Robbie they still met at the pavilion and even played the odd game of golf together but kept apart. They were cautious because even their fleeting glances, when they crossed, betrayed their tenderness, their collusion. Their happiness was almost too great to hide, too precious to put to risk. Theirs was a once a week visit to paradise. It

was enough to keep the flame burning. Perhaps more frequent encounters would deflate their infatuation.

Robbie kept up his other sports and was much sought after as a golfing partner. He flirted conspicuously with other women and discreetly withdrew when the familiarity became an invitation. He was in love with Zizi. He had eyes for no one else. He often wondered, had she been his wife, would the adoration be the same? And thought, probably not. Their love, that strange condition of physical and mental need for one another was kept alive and kicking, alive and conflagrating by the obstacles, restraints and prohibitions of society and its condemnation of such relationships. By the dangers they encountered and the consequences they would have to face if discovered. He also wondered about the future. He knew there was no future. He wondered when and how it would end. He was still too young to be a cynic but he did know that there is an expiry date for everything.

Aziza fell pregnant. She made love with two men and fell pregnant by the one she did not love: her husband. Her emotions were ambivalent. She wanted a second child. She craved for a girl. She did not want to have it with Robbie. She thought carrying the infidelity to such lengths was unacceptable. There were certain moral limits you could not exceed. If she wanted a child with Robbie she would have to leave Mohsen. To do what? Marrying Robbie was out of the question for every possible reason. Financial, religious, cultural and because of their age difference. She felt hemmed in. With Robbie, they scrupulously practiced contraception. Mohsen had a sloppy and careless attitude and expected Aziza to concern herself with these matters. But mistakes do occur and decisions have to be taken whether to keep the child or abort it. She discussed it with Robbie who was reluctant to express an opinion and said that it had to be solely her decision and in the end rather than go through the traumatic experience of abortion she decided to keep the baby.

It was a strange new turning in their relationship. It was as if the baby was Robbie's. As though they were married. The wild, sexual desire subsided to the normal levels of a married couple and Robbie displayed an unprecedented tenderness towards her. They made love calmly, carefully as if to protect the embryo from the acrobatics and violent jabs of their former passion. Aziza was thriving. She was more beautiful than ever. She kept a strict regimen to keep her weight down and her visits to the pavilion were less frequent and she did not play golf. She took long walks around the horse-racing circuit and Robbie often joined her there at the far end of the course away from the crowds and prying eyes.

After the third month her belly started swelling and a few months later she started feeling the movements of the baby. Robbie loved caressing her belly and putting his ear on it hoping to hear a sound. They continued their lovemaking and the conversations after it. They were more subdued and thoughtful. It was as if a circle was being completed and something was coming to an end. Obviously their love affair but they could not utter the thought, would not admit it even to themselves. At times they were silent for hours in each other's arms. She had grown a little heavy and her breasts were swollen and sometimes, in their lovemaking when Robbie suckled them, she would laugh and tell him to profit because soon he would have a rival.

"I hope not for your love," he said.

"Oh, yes, that too," she would answer. "I feel she will separate us."

She was convinced she would have a daughter. They made careful love the day before the delivery. Her belly was stretched to the utmost, ready to explode. Robbie was in awe. He found the sight moving. Their separation was almost a good bye. She left by taxi. She could no longer drive. She would enter the hospital the next day and would phone him as soon as she could but they would not see each other for a long while.

Aziza did not call him. Not straightaway. At the golf pavilion he learnt that she had a daughter. That she was well. He wondered, why the silence? First Fay, then her. Had he done something wrong? He wished he knew what happened to Fay. He met Teresa a few times during that period at her foundry for work but he did not ask about Fay. There was something wary in her look and he connected it with Fay. He did not want to open a subject that was touchy and Teresa would perhaps not wish to broach.

It seemed the only constant in his life was Mona. They met constantly in the elevator. Usually with little Marianne. She had grown and was a lovely child. She was already four and was turning out much prettier than her mother. She called him uncle and Uncle Robbie and she was always ready with a kiss. He had not stopped buying her little presents. Dolls and balls and jigsaw puzzles and even a toy gun when she asked for one. As for Mona, she seemed to sense it when he was unattached. It was as if she were spying on him. For the nearly two years that he was with Aziza, he heard not a peep from her. Not since that extraordinary encounter when she taunted him about Fay. Now he was single again for several weeks and Mona reappeared.

She sometimes rang the bell at night during the week but she was always there on a Sunday morning. Usually early. Just after hubby left for work and Marianne was still asleep. Robbie could not resist her. They were the emotionally vacant periods of his life when the sexual stagnation built up his tensions and he was grateful for the mercy of her visits. The visits were not prolonged. Mona had not much time to spare. It was just as well. The half hour or the hour was well fought. Her sexual appetite and energy were inexhaustible and her passion undiminished. The relationship was purely physical, that is, if such complete sexual harmony can ever remain purely physical. They spoke roughly and taunted one another but their kisses, sometimes, after the passion was sated, were tender. He would send her away telling her,

“Come on, time to go. Marianne will be waking up soon,”

She would get up, annoyed, and tell him,

“I really don’t know why I come. You are such a son-of-a-bitch. You love to fuck me but you cannot stand me.”

Robbie would feel sorry for her and jump up and kiss her and ruffle her hair playfully.

“Yes, I really am a son-of-a-bitch,” he would say. “I am sorry. Please forgive me. Will you come again tonight?”

She would smile and say,

“I’ll think about it. Wait and see.”

Aziza called him eventually. Many months later. She begged his forgiveness for her silence. She had a difficult delivery and the baby Amina had an infection with respiratory problems and was in an incubator for several weeks. Now Aziza was breast feeding the baby and would be doing so for as long as she would be able to because the antibodies of her milk protected the baby from a recurrence of the illness. She was tied down to staying at home. She did not call; she would not be calling because she wanted

him to be free to live his life. She loved him dearly and was forever grateful for the love and joy he poured in her life. It made a meaningless existence worthwhile and gave her hope for the future. Perhaps they would meet again in the golf pavilion one day and if he were free they might pick up the thread of their love. If not, well, they might play a game of golf together. For her, even that would be enough.

“Live your life Robbie,” she said. “Right now I cannot share it. I love you.”

She clicked off so he would not answer and prolong the pain. Even in parting it was her that did the talking.

BI-FOCAL PENCHANT

“Robbie?”

He felt a hand caress his head. The voice was soft and questioning but, oh, so familiar. He had not heard it for two years. It startled him more than the hand on his hair. He spun around and got up. He was sitting at the bar of the pavilion. He was alone. He had just finished a game of squash, had jogged round the racetrack, showered and changed and was quenching the remnants of his thirst with a double gin tonic and lemon juice, all mixed in a huge glass with plenty of ice and was waiting for that pleasant, relaxing dizziness that had become his addiction.

“Fay!” He cried almost before he saw her. “I don’t believe it!”

She was laughing as they embraced. They looked at each other.

“Two years,” he said with a smile, “two years! Don’t you have a heart? Not a word, not a peep?”

She laughed again.

“I did not want to intrude,” she said.

“What are you talking about?” asked Robbie.

“I knew you were romantically engaged,” she explained.

“Well, yes,” said Robbie. “Months after I waited for you in vain. Oh, but I am so happy to see you. You look wonderful.”

They sat at a table and Robbie brought Fay a drink.

“Just like old times,” she said looking around the pavilion. “I arrived yesterday and was in town finishing some business and I thought I must pass from the club. I might see my Robbie.”

“My Robbie? Am I still that? I thought I had become a memory.”

“You shall always be my Robbie. We are lovers and friends and brother and sister. My heart skipped a beat when I saw you at the bar. You look fine too. Lean and mean and beautiful. And I owe you an explanation. You are so sweet. Never one to take offense.”

“Praises will get you nowhere. Say what you have to say, you heartless girl.”

“Not heartless. Scatterbrained, perhaps, but not heartless. I thought of you constantly. I was heartbroken when I left Cairo. I lost your phone number. I have a talent for misplacing things and throwing away important papers. I asked Teresa to send it to me but she ignored me. She hates it when I see or show an interest in other people. She is a funny girl. Of course you did not call either.”

“I did call, Fay. But there was either no reply or else your husband answered in which case I clicked off.”

“Yes? Well, when I came back the first time after about six months, Teresa told me you were with a girl from the club. A married woman. I think I know her, too. You had joined the merry-go-round and I did not want to intrude. I did not want to embarrass you or put you in a difficult position. After all, the mistake was mine. I returned to Cairo twice after that but you were still with the same woman.”

“How did Teresa know?”

“She has friends that tell her all the gossip in town. She does not circulate much but she is well informed.”

“Did she tell you I was no longer with Aziza?”

“No. Yesterday, as soon as I arrived, I called another friend who frequents the pavilion and she told me the romance was over. And here I am.”

“My God! I am astounded. I thought we kept the secret pretty well. I did not think anyone had the faintest notion.”

Fay laughed.

“I suppose the only one who doesn’t know is her husband. The people are wondering if the baby is his or yours.”

“Oh, poor Zizi,” said Robbie. “She really did not deserve this. Finally, the woman is always the victim.”

“And the laughing-stock is always the man,” said Fay with a smile. “Listen, perhaps she was wonderful and madly in love with you. The fact remains she cuckolded her husband. She has the world buzzing, speculating on whose baby it is. The blessing is that the world has a short memory. If you don’t get together again this affair will be forgotten in six months.”

Robbie was troubled by the news that his affair with Aziza was common knowledge in the birds-of-a-feather group. Fay was amused.

“You cannot be that sensitive in this game,” she told him. “Most of the Casanovas are callous and selfish. Not to mention the huge ego they usually exhibit. You must realize that, like a lie, any extra-marital dalliance will eventually come out. It is inevitable. Especially if it lasts long. The little group of hedonists you call birds-of-a-feather have horrendous powers of detection. These are little tips I give you. I have much more experience than you. And another thing, the more affairs you have the more your reputation as a lady-killer is enhanced and the more women will run after you. I know you are already in the sights of a number of birds. They are brushing up their golf to give you a game. I was told by my friend.”

“Who is she this useful friend?” asked Robbie.

“I do not reveal my sources,” said Fay and laughed. “Also, if you want to widen your field of action in sex, learn to play bridge and join the Bridge Group of the club. I believe they provide lessons for beginners.”

“Thank you for your solicitous advice,” said Robbie. “It sounds as if you are shooing me away. Trying to get rid of me.”

“Oh hardly. I would not have come searching for you. But I shall not always be with you and I want you to know the pathways to a happy and varied sex life. Staying two years with one woman is too long. It creates problems and attachments. You have been through that and you know what I mean. You must be as flighty as a butterfly and

go from flower to flower so that when I shall come I shall find you free or easily available.”

Fay laughed. She was sure Robbie would not take her frivolous advice seriously. Not everyone could live as she did. It was, certainly, a question of character but also of circumstance. She loved Robbie and their lovemaking on the day of the earthquake was unbelievable but would she be able to be faithful to one man for life?

Fay and Robbie talked animatedly for a while. Then the comings and goings of friends distracted them. They had to say hellos every few minutes and Fay had to get up to give and receive kisses and embraces. Practically all the birds paid their respects. She smiled at his exasperation and told him that not only was she a club member for many years but was one of the original birds-of-a-feather girls.

“I was a regular at the group before I left for Greece to marry and have become something of an honorary member ever since. I keep in touch and informed about the extramarital activities of the Egyptian upper classes. I personally know most of them and keeping track of the couplings and separations amuses me no end. Gossip really is the spice of life.”

Neither had gone for lunch. The alcohol had made them dizzy and hungry and they left the pavilion and drove to the Hilton cafeteria across the Nile. It was mid October. The weather was fresh and the day was shortening but though it was already almost dark it was too early for a restaurant. They walked hand in hand in the din, the constant movement and piped music of the cafeteria, found a table and ordered their food and wine. Fay told Robbie of her travels since the earthquake. A zigzagging of the globe. A cruise in the Norwegian fjords, Madagascar and Mauritius, India and Portugal. Vancouver to see a friend she met in Bali a year earlier and a friend in Montreal. A beautiful male model dying of AIDS.

“What else?” she asked herself. “Oh, well, mainly that. I try to travel cheap. I do not want to ask too much from my husband though, heaven knows, he has plenty of money.”

“My God,” said Robbie, “you make me feel so provincial. And Cairo, some backwater city.”

“No, no. In Cairo I have my roots,” she cried as if surprised that he missed this point. “Cairo, you, Teresa, the club, the birds-of-a-feather and this hotel, you are all my roots. When you travel so much you need a place of reference, a sort of mental anchor. For me it is the place of my birth and my growing up.”

They had finished their meal and drank a bottle of Omar Khayam. The spirit of the poet, his love of drink, his sensuality, seemed to have entered their being through his wine.

“Robbie,” she asked, “are we going home soon?”

“Yes, my love,” he answered. “Unless you want us to do something else.”

“Don’t tease me. Just hurry up.”

They did not just copulate. They made love like lovers, like friends, like companions, like brother and sister. They loved one another mentally and physically, epidermally and subcutaneously. They loved with every part of their bodies, the wet and the dry, the narrow and the thick, the outward and the inward, the mobile and the fixed. They loved with their voices, their moans and cries, their love words and vulgarities. With roughness and tenderness, strength and submission. With all the passion and

inventiveness that makes this simple, strange and funny act an art of a thousand variations, a thousand breathless yearnings, and a science relentlessly researched. Then the concluding orgasm that both enslaved them and set them free and let them sleep in dreamless lethargy.

They emerged from their torpor an hour later. They did not need to relocate. They were already in an embrace and they kissed. They were already in love and they reconfirmed their avowals with their voices, their smiles and caresses. Their wonder, too, that those two years were like yesterday, and their other affairs of no consequence. They slid into a less frantic and long winded lovemaking that ended with shrieks and heartbeats and uncontrollable ecstasy. They rested, looking at each other, panting, smiling and kissing gently. Then they showered and dressed and went down for a snack at a nearby restaurant, walking hand in hand in the crowded, noisy streets of Cairo.

The restaurant was quiet and dark attempting to create an atmosphere of romantic intimacy. They held hands and talked of their lives. Despite their lack of monetary worries, their life was oddly aimless.

“Even when I was in love with Aziza,” said Robbie, “I was not going anywhere. I was living day by day. She provided the novelty that I was initiating a married woman with child to sex. And she did have a longing to experience what she was missing in her marriage. You see, finally, a happy woman has no need to be unfaithful.”

“That’s obvious,” said Fay. “My unhappiness stemmed from my husband’s absences and neglect. He was never there when I was lonely so I looked for someone who would show some interest. Of course, in the last analysis, sex without love is never satisfying. It is like a drug that keeps you going but has lost the power to provide happiness. It is a physical relief but is emotionally neutral. No doubt it is better than nothing and sometimes, but rather rarely, when there is some feeling on both sides it can be very good. Robbie, my love, our lovemaking is superb. You are not technically expert. I have been with more sophisticated womanizers. It is your unassuming sincerity and love, and of course, mine too that creates the fireworks. I am in love again and it’s wonderful.”

“Oh Fay, leave your husband and let’s get married,” said Robbie. “I haven’t got much money and you will have to forget your travels but then you might no longer need them. No travels, no lovers,” he said and smiled.

She smiled, too, and touched his cheek.

“Too late, my love,” she said, “I have become too warped. But I shall not lose your number again. I shall call you regularly and we will meet often; here in Cairo where I have my roots. You shall be my deepest root if you wish. That is all I can offer. It is all you should ask for.”

“Why? I don’t understand.”

“I cannot belong to anyone. I don’t even belong to my husband. I do not trust myself to make any promises. That I am in love is your only guarantee that I shall see you again. A mite sporadically perhaps but I shall not disappear. Shall we go home, my love? I want you. I have no sense of measure.”

They returned to Robbie’s flat and made love and then Fay asked if he could take her to Heliopolis. If he were too tired she would take a taxi. It was one past midnight and Robbie told her to sleep with him and she said Teresa would be angry. She did not want her to sleep away from the house.

“Why?” he asked.

“She is jealous,” Fay answered.

To his mind came thoughts he had suppressed long ago. Rumors he did not believe.

“Fay,” he said, “don’t be angry. You know I love you. I do not want to hurt you. There are things that are being said about you. Are they true?”

“What things?”

“Your dear companions, the ones that were kissing you at the pavilion, the birds-of-a-feather, are whispering that you are a lesbian. That you and Teresa are lovers.”

Fay looked intently at his face searching for an indication of his feelings. A deep blush suffused her face. Was that an answer? That she was not indignant?

“I shall answer truthfully,” she told him. “But first you answer me this question. We made fantastic love three times this evening. I told you I love you. You told me you love me. So, does it matter?”

Robbie was lost. Did it matter? His mind was blocked. He could not tell.

“I really don’t know,” he said quietly.

“So the question is not so serious. It does not revolt you. You cannot decide one way or another.”

“No. I just feel strange. As if one part of you is beyond me.”

“In this life, and forgive me if I sound cynical, one must take what one can. And I am referring mainly to pleasure and love. Not justifying my so-called lesbianism but offering, once again, a small bit of advice to you. If you can have half of me and this half can offer you love and pleasure, don’t throw it away. Never let your devil-egoism trick you. I do not consider myself a lesbian. Teresa is in love with me and I have had a very particular, tender and comforting sort of physical contact with her. Almost devoid of passion. At least on my side. I do not lust for other women. Can you accept that?”

“Since you say so, I accept it. I cannot claim to understand it.”

“Are we still friends, my love?”

“Of course.”

“And lovers?”

“As long as I am your deepest root in Cairo.”

“I still haven’t given you an explanation.”

“You don’t have to. I do not need the details.”

“And yet I want you to know how this friendship evolved. A year after I was married things were becoming impossible at home. I was constantly quarreling with my husband and complaining and threatening to ask for a divorce. The funny thing is he never took me seriously until I had my first affair. He found out about it and it nearly drove him out of his mind. He made a thousand promises, he told me he loved me and that he would change his ways but you see I did not care any more because I was in love with this other man. I won’t go into all the ridiculous details of this love affair, which was a result of dejection and loneliness but will just tell you that eventually I broke up with him. I was miserable and my relations with my husband were at the breaking point. I needed a change of setting and I took a plane to Cairo and stayed a few months with Teresa. Those first few days at her house were very difficult. I hated myself when I thought that I allowed two men to devastate me in this way. Moreover I was still in love

with that creep and I did not know what would happen to me or whether my husband would take me back.

“In the mornings it was not so bad but at night a depression would grip me and I would cry and Teresa made me sleep in her bed so as to be near me. She used to comfort me and caress me and kiss me. She was very caring and tender and I accepted her petting without revulsion. She used to put out the light, undress completely and embrace me. She was meticulously clean and always wore a light, discreet perfume. Within a few days, she started kissing me erotically on the mouth and I accepted it. It did not revolt me. She possesses a tenderness that is not apparent in her everyday self. Her kissing was a spiritual union of souls. A rejection of men. There was no stopping after that. I started responding and eventually she used to bring me on to an orgasm with her hands and mouth. She still does and I cannot pretend I do not enjoy it. It is physical but I feel her love and tenderness and it brings on a peacefulness and sense of security that is balm to my soul. I am sorry Robbie. I felt I had to tell you all this. If we are to be together you must know where you stand. Better to hear it from me than to have malicious rumors reach you through somebody else.”

“As you were recounting this, I had a feeling you had left me.”

“No, my love, I did not leave you. With Teresa it is an intimacy of another kind. It is friendship and love and gentleness and peace. It is a physical release of tensions without violence and antagonism. It is generous because the object is to give love and pleasure with no demands. And if orgasm is not achieved it is of absolutely no consequence. The warmth of physical contact is enough. I suckle her breasts like a baby sucks a pacifier. With you it is different. With you I make love. I lust for your body. I need you to penetrate me. My emotions are huge, my energy prodigious and I have orgasms. Never-ending orgasms, my love. I love you, Robbie. Don't throw that away.”

Robbie took her to Heliopolis that night and they met practically every day of her two-week stay in Cairo to talk, have dinner together and make delirious love. He stopped, for that short period, his sporting life at the club. Fay single-handedly consumed all his energy. Mental and physical. He was confused about his feelings. Sometimes he felt he lacked manliness to have accepted this strange situation. He drove her to Heliopolis every day, at the end of their lovemaking. Driving back alone a thousand thoughts would invade his mind. He wondered whether she would follow up their lovemaking by coupling with Teresa. Was her energy inexhaustible? Would she take a shower to get his smell off her body? Was Teresa as complaisant as he was or were there scenes of jealousy between them? Did they talk about him? Did Fay warn her to beware of her devil-egoism? He kept thinking that because he loved her, he was her captive but though she claimed she loved him, she retained her independence and imposed her terms. She was a strong person. It was life that hardened her. Compared to her he was a softie. It started with her family. Her father had a flat above his office where young neighborhood whores visited him. Her mother had lovers. Her elder sister had married a very rich, unattractive, unemotional man and from the very start plunged in the extramarital sweepstakes. Her brother Johnnie, Robbie's friend was constantly on the move, oscillating from a string of mistresses to a string of wives. On and on and on his mind would spin. He realized he would not be able to reach an understanding of these happenings until Fay left and some time passed. Perhaps, then, a measure of objectivity would be possible.

LOVE OF BRIDGE – A BRIDGE FOR LOVE

When Fay left, Robbie sank into a short-lived depression. Short-lived because he was wise enough to resume his sporting life. He concentrated on the more energetic of his activities and his physical exhaustion relieved his mental self-torture and bad humor. He did not neglect the pavilion for his after-sport cocktails though he felt he was unjustly treated by the birds-of-a-feather and their gossip-mongering. He wondered how they found out about Aziza. Did they have to advertise it to the world? Not only that. They had brought to his notice Fay's dalliance with homosexuality and it was one more thing gnawing at his insides. His former amusement at seeing them sitting, spread out around their usual two round tables, talking loudly in a mixture of French, English and Arabic and laughing even more boisterously, turned to contempt. They reminded him of the chorus of the ancient Greek theater that was a sort of moral conscience, noticing, commenting and passing judgment on the goings on of the play. The birds were the chorus of the pavilion except that they were not altogether moral themselves. At other times he would come to his senses and wonder about human behavior. For the birds were human birds and, by God, the world without them would be a duller place. He understood that the codes of morality were ideals and though they were instituted to sustain a viable society, hardly anyone kept them though everyone paid them lip service. They were like the whip of the circus lion tamer. He cracked it and the noise was deafening. It rarely touched or hurt the lions but it kept a semblance of order.

A few weeks later Fay called Robbie on the telephone. They exchanged their excited voices, their happiness, their news and all the emotions and words that lovers use. There were a thousand miles of sea between them and their enthusiasm felt a little flat when they shut the phone. She promised to come as soon as she finished a few outstanding chores. He wondered what they were. She told him to get on with his life. Presumably she was exercising the same philosophy. Finally, he thought, it was the sanest option. She had a grip on life that he admired. He decided to follow another little piece of advice she offered.

He joined the Bridge Club and started twice weekly, seven to nine, lessons on the tricks and bidding and contracts and the elaborate rules of the game. He found that half the birds-of-a-feather group of the golf pavilion were bridge enthusiasts. He marveled at the happy life they led. He understood the opportunities the game offered them. Time away from home, from tiresome children, stupid servants and boring husbands. It offered regular games at the club and in various homes that hosted the game. The freedom of the non-specific duration of the game, which offered opportunities for fitting in alternative and vastly more thrilling activities. Tournaments every month or two lasting several days in different cities and summer resorts. It was a game that was difficult to master and so raised the self-esteem of the players. They were the elite, the intellectuals; the Freuds and Einsteins of card games. Whole libraries of books were devoted to it. Luckily his fellow students were giggly and not very bright young women and Robbie found the lessons palatable because of the laughs, the slow progress and the exasperation of their teacher. He was enjoying the lessons and inevitably learning a few things. A few things about the

card game and a few things about the love game. Love, he started realizing, had become an integral and indivisible part of his sporting life.

He met Mona on the elevator with little Marianne. Marianne was growing into a beautiful child. Robbie marveled that Mona and hubby could produce such a flower. He kissed the child and promised to bring her a present the very next day. Mona smiled at him.

“Is she gone again?” she asked with a smile.

“Yes,” he said. “Will you stop spying on me?”

Mona laughed and Marianne asked Robbie,

“Why is mummy spying on you? What is this spying?”

“She wants to know what I do every day,” explained Robbie.

The child thought this out and said that she, too, wanted to know what he did every day. She was going to spying on him too. They both laughed and Marianne joined in without quite knowing why. That evening Mona paid Robbie a fast and frantic half-hour visit and the following Sunday a more relaxed one stretching for an hour and a half. She remained true to the only passionate adulterous relationship in her life and generous in accepting without chagrin the intrusion of his other affairs, retreating until there was once again a vacancy for her in his bed.

At one of the bridge sessions he met Sohaila. She was a classmate at the English school he attended years ago. She had a crush on him for years and years and though she was a pretty and delicate girl, he did not pay much attention to her. In any case, in those days he was painfully shy and was unable to take advantage of the openings she sometimes offered. First loves are magic and Sohaila was flustered and could hardly take her breath when they were introduced. She was a brunette with very white skin and her blush was deep and obvious when she said,

“But we know each other. How are you Robbie? How strange to find you in Cairo.”

He explained that he had returned to Cairo some years ago and he was often at the club playing squash or tennis and had recently decided to learn to play bridge.

“So,” she said, “you must have loads of time on your hands. Bridge is a game for people of leisure. Presumably you are not married,” she said and blushed again.

“No. Are you?” he asked.

“Oh, Robbie, don’t you know? No one is allowed to be unmarried in Egypt. Girls are married off as soon as they finish secondary school. My husband is that elderly looking gentleman over there. He is not as old as he looks and is an exceptional bridge player. I learnt the game so as not to get bored when he plays by the hours but I play a rather poor game.”

“So do I,” said Robbie. “I got into it to meet people. Women, mainly, I must confess.”

“And so you met me,” said Sohaila and laughed.

“Yes. I had an awful hand today and played a terrible game,” said Robbie smiling. “It turns out the saying, unlucky in cards, lucky in love, may be true. I don’t know about love,” Robbie went on, “but I was certainly lucky to meet you tonight.”

She smiled.

“Let’s go to the bar for a drink,” he suggested. “You surely do not want to play any more bridge.”

She worried that they would spoil two sets of games.

“It is not a tragedy,” he answered, “It will just annoy a few people.”

They went to the bar and had two whiskies each and talked for hours about the school and their school friends and about their lives since they left school. Robbie told her about his years in England. About his sporting life and merry-go-round search for love.

“I am still trying to find myself,” he said smiling.

“Well, that’s at least something. You may be waiting for Godot but he might yet show up. I am trying to lose myself,” she said. “For me there’s nothing to find. Mine was one of those very successful, between inverted commas, arranged and mostly deranged marriages, where the loving parents married off their darling daughter to a million dollar bank account. Oh, he’s all right. You saw him Robbie. Kind and generous. Sends me to France for my shopping. So what! God, I shouldn’t be telling you all this. You shall think I am unhinged. I do not usually blab in this way. It must be the whisky or perhaps it is you. I feel so...so, how can I put it? So moved to see you. I feel I am in a gilded cage, that’s all. I cannot leave him. What would I do? I cannot go work as a salesgirl. I haven’t got the education for anything better. I am in the frightful situation of being a girl from a rich family without any money. Where my fate was in their hands and is now in the hands of my benevolent husband who offers me food, shelter, foreign clothing and an unbearably dull life. I haven’t got any children, which might have given some meaning to my life but, on the other hand, I am grateful for that because, perhaps otherwise, I would have felt more tied down than ever.” She smiled at Robbie. “I cannot even have a lover,” she said. “There are servants and drivers and cars and my every wish is instantly executed and in order to leave the house I almost have to sign a protocol. Even the phones are answered by secretaries. Egypt, my God, is a woman’s prison and a rich husband the gaoler.”

Going back to the bridge game a little before midnight when the club would be closing down, Robbie kissed her in a dark corridor. She responded passionately. They drew apart when they heard someone approaching.

“I should have done this long ago,” Robbie told her. “I was a terribly dull and shy boy in those days.”

Just before they parted, she told him,

“Thank you for the drinks and the kiss. I needed it so much.”

“How shall I see you again?” he asked.

“Do not neglect the bridge tournaments,” she said and smiled.

Robbie did not hear of Sohaila for some weeks. She did not come to the club or to the bridge games. He blamed himself for not giving her a phone number where she could reach him. It should not have been too difficult to do despite the secretaries. In early April, the club organized a bridge tournament at a new resort on the Red Sea. He thought of Sohaila and signed up for the trip but not for the tournament. He thought that even if he did not see her, he would spend a few days at the beach. They left early on a Thursday morning on an air-conditioned bus from the club. They were about thirty members but they would join up with other clubs at the Red Sea. Sohaila was not amongst the participants.

The trip was long, about seven hours and he sat next to a chirping bunch of the birds-of-a-feather group. They were in high spirits and they joked with Robbie and asked

him who was the soul that drew him to this trip and he said it was the soul of the sea. He had come to relax in the sun and swim in the sea. They arrived at four and half an hour later he was swimming in the blue Red Sea. When he came out he walked along the sand and came upon Sohaila and her husband. They were wearing their bathing suits and were sitting under a half tent, open at the sides. Sohaila was wearing dark glasses and her hair was wet. Her body was slim and she had beautiful long legs. She introduced Robbie to her husband who looked like her father. They talked about bridge and Robbie pretended he was an ace.

“We must pair up together for a game,” the husband said and got up. “Please excuse me; I shall go for a dip. See you at the game.”

He left and Sohaila said,

“Oh Robbie I didn’t want you to see me looking a mess.”

Robbie smiled.

“God, am I happy to see you? I came here exclusively for you and I thought you hadn’t come. What mess are you talking about? You are looking lovely. And those legs! A bit difficult to call them a mess.”

They looked at each other. They smiled. They could not hide their happiness. It is for moments like these that a human being lives. Moments of yet unexpressed love, eager to be declared, waiting for the right moment. Moments pregnant with promise. They knew something wonderful would happen in those three days. If it could not last they would live with the aftertaste, the memory. They were entering a dream they had. They would have to wake up but the dream would have been fulfilled.

“What is our program?” he asked quietly. He instinctively lowered his voice. The beach was deserted. Sohaila’s husband was splashing some way off in the sea.

“What is your room number?” she asked.

“305.”

“I shall be there around ten.”

The story has ended because after this it, more or less, repeats itself as life usually does. Only the epilogue remains and the reader may rightly wonder what the point was. Was he hoodwinked into reading the sexual adventures and misadventures of a superficial, self-centered, virile young man whose main concerns were his sporting activities and the gratification of his libido? Let us round off our picture by getting to know Robbie a little better.

EPILOGUE

His name was Rovertos. An unusual name for a Greek but not uncommon for a Cypriot. In Cyprus one still hears names like Roghiros (Roger) and Umbertos (Humbert). His father originated from that island which has a legacy of Frankish names left over by the Crusaders and Venetians and which survived two centuries of Turkish domination. Robbie was born in Cairo, grew up in Cairo and went to school in Cairo. His roots were in Cairo, like Fay, but unlike her he was permanently rooted there. He liked to say that he grew up in England, meaning that, that was where he matured and where the final formation of his adult ideas and beliefs was shaped. He had other, loftier dreams for his

life but, as we have seen, his scholastic mediocrity condemned him to a life in Egypt and work at his father's small manufacturing business. Contrary to the impression given above he was a hard and conscientious worker and he soon learned to manage the business.

He was quite realistic about his worth and had no illusions that he was very intelligent. He used to grade himself as the average man of the next century meaning that he was only average but possessed the education, the breadth of outlook that would be the gifts of the general population of the future as society became wealthier, better educated and overcame the ignorance, conservatism and religious fanaticism of the present. He knew he had a gift with words and despite his anxious preoccupation with women and sex, he never stopped reading serious modern literature and delight in language, something of which we gave no indication above. We might also have given the impression he was a loner, which is false. He had a circle of friends from school and from his London days that he cultivated and met both at the club and parties and outings for dinner. He was well liked by them because he was polite, considerate and tolerant. His one conceit was that he was good looking. He kept it to himself but its affirmation through the persistent stares of women and even men was, for him, always a source of secret pleasure and satisfaction.

We have given a picture of his life during the first few years after his return to Cairo. It did not change significantly for him as the years went by. His father died and he took over the reins of the business and henceforth most of the income. He eventually became wealthy but hardly changed his habits. He changed his cars often for he had two of them now but remained in his old bachelor flat and would not make up his mind to move to a swankier district or a more luxurious home.

His one addiction was physical fitness. The sporting life was his life. As the years went by, it seemed as if his physical prowess was increasing rather than diminishing. The fact was he was pushing himself ever harder. He was a fine squash player, fair at tennis, jogged ever faster for longer distances and swam for longer periods. His golf was respectable and so, surprisingly, was his bridge. Where he excelled, however, was with the opposite sex. As he grew older he cut an increasingly seductive figure despite his simplicity and lack of airs of a glamour boy. Or perhaps because of it. He was friendly, polite and modest as he worked his way through the birds-of-a-feather group. His affairs were well known and the birds seemed to be passing him on, one to another. He rarely got involved with unmarried girls. In Egypt, things got thorny with such relationships. He stuck to less complicated adulterous liaisons.

With Fay, the relationship held well for a number of years. There was a feeling of family and familiarity and, yes, of course, love and passion. Especially passion. Even if there was also the awkwardness of Teresa's presence in the background. Fay used to contact him often and used to give him notice well in advance of her arrivals in Egypt so that he would have ample time to disengage from the woman he was linked at the time. She often told him if he did not want to do so for any reason it was quite all right. There was always a next time. That perplexed him every time. What kind of a person was she that she could either see him or not. Did she, finally, love him or not? She came to Cairo twice a year and usually stayed two or three weeks. Just the right amount of time, she used to tell him, so we do not get bored of each other.

"And with Teresa?" he once asked and her answer vexed him.

“With Teresa we can never get bored of one another,” she said.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because with her there’s no passion.”

He was not stupid but some things he could not understand.

When Marianne was twelve, her father died. He was already two years on pension but he developed prostate cancer and did not last long. Apart from Marianne, not too many people were sorry. She was a beautiful young girl who looked at least two years older than her age and promised to develop the faultless body of her mother. Robbie predicted that he would have a problem with her in a few years’ time. The situation with Mona was unchanged. She continued being the spare tire. She was always there when Robbie was stalled with a flat. She was keeping well. She was a model of vigor and good health and her lovely body was unchanged. It never stopped bewitching Robbie. Hubby was dead but an impediment to her visits to Robbie, when he was available, did not cease to exist. It was now Marianne. She kept close tabs on her mother.

A few more years passed. Alas, operas and plays, novels and poetry would not be written or composed if the heroes reached a ripe old age. They have to die young with their passion intact. No, Robbie and Fay did not die young. Age eventually kills people but long before the final blow, it kills all in them that make life worth living. Despite their infrequent, twice-yearly encounters, Robbie and Fay’s passion for each other first lost its luster and then faded. And it was fatal for their relationship because in the end it was only passion that had kept them together. It was not the companionship of the married couple and the sharing of a life, children and experiences. The last time they met to make love, it was Fay, the stronger of the two, who told him that she would not be coming back to him again.

“It is better now,” she said, “that there are some remnants of feeling, than quitting in disgust and despising each other later. I left my husband finally,” she told him, “and you are probably the last man in my life. I shall be living with Teresa. You shall always be welcome to come and see us. And my dear Robbie, let me tell you, the last man in my life was also the best man in my life. He has left me a good souvenir.”

The realm of Marianne was dawning in Robbie’s life. At fifteen she looked a dazzling eighteen and Robbie was already feeling the pangs of love. He was ashamed of his feelings. He was supposedly an experienced and active Lothario and when he saw Marianne he felt his mouth go dry. He was annoyed and jealous when she went to parties and when he saw boys waiting for her downstairs at the building’s entrance. He bought her dresses and paid for a membership at the club and promptly regretted it because her retinue increased tenfold. He tried to initiate her into sports, firmly believing that a healthy mind is found in a healthy body.

When she finished her secondary school he undertook to pay for her education at the American University and a year later bought her a small car. He referred to her as his daughter but their relations were far from clear cut. She dropped the uncle from his name and was very affectionate and seemed to be annoyed when her mother and Robbie showed too much familiarity with each other. It was a trio whose emotions were developing and changing. Some were clear, some disguised and some could not be disguised. Mona was playing it cool and impassive wondering where it would all lead to. She realized the advantages of Robbie’s growing wealth for Marianne and had to weigh it against her ancient and continuing physical passion for Robbie. One thing was more than

obvious, Robbie's colossal infatuation for her daughter. Little by little he stopped his affairs at the club. He continued his sports but was hardly ever to be seen at the golf pavilion or the Bridge Club. He stayed at home in the afternoons and evenings and read his books and newsmagazines. And would phone Mona to ask whether Marianne was back and would she come to see him for five minutes.

When Marianne graduated from the American University she was a stunning twenty-three. Robbie remembered a quotation from a book he read many years ago. It said: The orgasm is nothing. It is the erection that is everything. He did not understand it then but he had reached an age when it was beginning to make sense. He was forty-eight and it started to worry him. A difficult decision had to be taken. It could not be postponed any longer.

He bought a luxurious apartment on the Nile, decorated it and furnished it and when it was ready, took Mona and Marianne for a visit. He showed them the master bedroom with its huge bathroom and veranda with a Nile view and told them that this would be his and Marianne's bedroom and another just as fine and told Mona that it would be hers. He showed them the rest of the house, the nursery and living rooms, the bathrooms and kitchen and asked them if they liked it and found the arrangements agreeable. He said the house was already in Marianne's name. It was a marriage proposal and a wedding present at the same time. Mother and daughter had to sit down in order not to faint. Then they smiled because they could not utter a sound.

As the reader will not fail to see, history repeats itself. Robbie was not unaware of that. He was, however, taking the risk.

15 / 9 / 2002

A CASE OF SELF RESPECT

In those days I still lived at home with my parents. They were days of sloth and aimlessness. I had finished a BSc. course in Geology at Ein Shams University a few years back and after knocking about in a few government jobs, I settled down as a researcher at the National Research Institute. It was a lovely, spanking new building in one of the higher-class suburbs that were snaking out at an incredible pace on every side of an expanding Cairo: a typical project of socialist Egypt, all show and no substance. Marble staircases, well painted, unending corridors and hundreds of offices devoid of equipment, which were staffed by unmotivated, underpaid, time wasters like myself. As the saying was, the government pretended to pay us and we pretended to work. My specialty, my expertise was supposedly soil analysis. A soil analyst was required at the Institute at the time; I applied for the post and got the job probably due to the lack of other candidates. I was given my own office with a desk, a single chair and a bench equipped with a number of glass saucers and a sink with a cold water tap. A few months went by before the first soil samples arrived in small, numbered plastic bags and at the beginning I fretted and wondered how to go about the analysis. I bought out of my own hard-up pocket a large, splendid magnifying glass, a few basic chemicals and wrote my first reports with their help, the help of my nose and sense of touch of thumb and index finger. The reports were never claimed and as far as I know, they might still be in one of the desk drawers I shoved them in at the time. More soil samples came in by and by and I arranged them on the bench very neatly. Now and then, I dusted them and cleaned my bench. I did not bother to write any more reports. My lovely magnifying glass was the only serious thing in my office.

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

inside the bus instead of hanging halfway out or squeezed like a sardine and leave a couple of hours later to go to the club. Oh yes, despite my penury I was a member at the most exclusive sporting club in town. With the rich boys and pretty girls and the huge American cars going in and out, pretending I was one of them. I joined other little groups of wastrels with unlimited time on their hands, swimming in the pool in summer and playing a game of tennis and, by God, yes, quite a bit of golf, as well, with borrowed clubs. I was a fine golfer, was available and was much sought after as a partner. The golfers were, in a sense, the elite of the club.

It was a time of great social upheaval. The rich were being demolished, their fortunes and land expropriated and nationalized. A new class of privilege and clout was emerging mainly from the ranks of the army and the police. Power-hungry, greedy and arrogant they were, but not golf players. They had too much inferiority to espouse a leisurely elitist game and too little time for the many opportunities they had to cope with. Luckily, there were not too many around in our club. The government had provided them with their own flashy clubs and courts and swimming pools. It could not provide them with class. Pig's hair cannot be turned to silk. For all the showy luxury of the establishments and the arrogance of the members, the aura of the second-rate was palpable. It was manifest in the officers' plump, vulgar, cantankerous wives and noisy, ill-mannered children accompanied by girl child-servants. Little girls of ten to thirteen years of age, badly dressed, badly treated with the trademark white kerchief covering their hair. The little *bonniches*, forgotten even by God.

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

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

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

I played tennis with Antoun Alekian for years, even before it became a regular weekly routine at the club. Ever since we were at school together. We were good friends as well and in a sense extended the saying, opposites attract, to persons of the same sex. No, we were not gay, just very good friends. But so absolutely, symmetrically opposite that we almost made a perfect fit. Again the allusion to homosexuality is misleading. The perfect fit was our friendship and though some of the opposites helped it, some were just surprising. His father was Armenian and his mother Lebanese while my father was Lebanese and my mother Armenian. His father was a jeweler and his mother owned a fashionable *Maison de Couture*. My father had a grocery and my mother did not work. Where are the opposites? Obviously, they were rich, we were poor. Well, not exactly indigent but by comparison. And another thing, they were divorced while my parents were a pair of cooing pigeons. Touny whom I called Tony was short and fat and funny looking while I was well built, on the tall side and, if I may say so, reasonably presentable. Whereas I am introverted and rather quiet, Tony was a boisterous extrovert, funny and garrulous. At school I was liked by our fellow students, he was loved. I was a good student and a fine athlete; he was hopeless on both counts. I went to university; I doubt he would have been admitted to kindergarten again, which does not mean a thing because in life I was a near failure while he turned out to be a very successful businessman. He entered his father's jewelry business and branched out into diamond trading traveling in and out of Egypt reputedly with the precious merchandise illegally in his pockets. People called him a smuggler but I say their accusations were sour grapes for he was not ever caught out. Finally, that funny little ball of a man had all the women he could manage while I pined away with daydreams.

We both loved our games of tennis. For his size and build, Tony did not play too badly. That is not to say he played well. He played a fun game and in doubles I was always his partner. His shouts and jokes and curses, his funny shots and labored efforts kept us in stitches and a crowd of spectators never failed to gather to watch him playing. After the game we would go to the club bar for ice-cold beers and it was the only time I

ever drank at the club. The good humor and laughing never stopped. And he was generous with me my little funny Touny. He knew my situation and did not expect reciprocity for drinks and lunch invitations and occasional forays in the Cairo nightlife. On the contrary he was forever telling me he was not doing enough for me. Do you need money Freddy? If you need the *garconnière* or a car for a chick you will let me know, won't you? *Je t'aime bien mon vieux*. Why don't you like me as much? Why won't you do me the favor of using me a little just so I can feel you love me too? Your detachment kills me. So what do you do for dames? I have plenty. I can introduce you to some or have you tied your pipi in a knot? But I had my self-respect. I could not let him know of my abjectness. I just smiled and kept quiet.

I knew both his parents well. In our junior school days I was constantly in and out of their house. In fact it was Mr. Alekian that proposed me for membership at the club and paid the quite substantial initial fee. He liked me and was happy his crazy, bubbling son had a calm and serious friend. His mother Mona Namour, ex-Alekian, was a large, handsome woman, taller than her husband, who passed on to Tony most of her temperamental characteristics but, alas, not her physical ones. Tony lived with her after his father left the house but he was affectionate with both his parents. This was another contrast, for I was rather remote with mine. I always asked him about them and one day, after our game, he told me he was going to the atelier and would I like to go with him to see his mother. It was a good opportunity for I had not seen her for months. A statuesque artificial blonde, she was exuberant and sociable and her large breasts fascinated me. Lebanese women of her class were liberated and her conversation was lively, earthy and pregnant with innuendos delivered with a smile. I half expected her to make a pass at me every time I saw her but that never happened. She seemed a teaser rather than a seducer of young men though she had a reputation of frivolity and a married lover who was devoted to her.

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

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

“Oh boy. Quite a Casanova. I wonder if he, too, was a Speedy Gonzales.”

Tony laughed.

“I bet he was,” he said. “And, you know, all I have to do is give them a nod and they’ll come running for more.”

“For the quickies or the few pounds?” I asked.

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

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

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

“Wow, Tony, you really are becoming an intellectual!”

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

“Perhaps she has a man,” I ventured.

“Yes, but so what?”

“Well, every rule has an exception.”

“Shit. Does it have to be Djamila?”

I had not been at the atelier before. It was a flat at the Khedive buildings of Emad el Dine Street. Old, imposing constructions past their prime and run down from socialist maltreatment and the diminution of rents, with big rooms high ceilings and wide corridors. The girls were gathered in two very large connecting rooms where a wall had been obviously removed. A large rectangular table in the middle with fashion periodicals, lengths of cloth, large pairs of scissors, boxes of pins, spools of multi-colored threads and buttons. A few mannequin torsos without heads, with dresses on them were stacked next to a wall together with three Singer manual sewing-machines and two ironing tables, each with an electric iron. When we entered the atelier, pandemonium broke loose. There was a chorus of cheerful greetings welcoming ‘Touny’. So many faces I could not take them all in. Young, old, pretty, ugly, with smiles, with a jumble of words for Tony and Tony going round kissing left and right. He babbled right back twenty to the dozen, joking, teasing, caressing, and showing genuine affection. Monette strode up to me, sticking her lovely tits to my breast kissing me three times, one cheek luckier than the other. A lone woman in black, sitting cross-legged, calmly was continuing her stitching hardly looking up at the commotion. The exception to the rule, I guessed.

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

“Madame Mona, I think of you all the time.”

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

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

She laughed.

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

“About golf?”

“Yes, and anything else you think might interest me.”

A smile.

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

She laughed again.

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

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

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

“Like exercising your body regularly?”

She laughed heartily.

“Something like that,” she said.

Tony came up to us.

“Mother, stop flirting with Freddy.”

“Mind your own business, Touny. But come along with me I need to talk to you.”

I was left alone for a few minutes. Standing awkwardly and stared at by a dozen pairs of eyes. One pair was calmly engaged guiding a pair of hands in the stitching of a dress. The head was bent, shoulder length black hair drawn and tied behind; a milky white complexion and features partially revealed: forehead, a cheekbone, a chin, a nose, an eye. There was an indefinable something that made for beauty. You could put your finger on it. You knew it without understanding it. After some whispers and giggles the girls went back to work. I looked at Djamila. One day science will be able to measure the energy of an intent look. It is palpable. It is felt. She looked up, met my eye and turned to her work. Almost immediately she looked up again, looked at me and smiled a half-smile and I half-smiled back. I saw an empty chair and sat on it. I picked up a magazine and leafed through it. It was full of sketches and pictures of dresses and models on the catwalk. Dresses I did not understand. Frills that meant nothing. Artificiality to embellish. Sometimes it does if it is simple. Mostly, it is an exhibition of bad taste, food for gossip and malice for the rich. But then taste is subjective. It does not bear discussion. It is locked up in our trillion brain cells. I put the magazine back on the table. The energy was coming on strong. I glanced at her and she looked back at her work. I looked at the girls without interest. Just dowdy hens in Tony’s coop. There was nobody there but Djamila. No, she was not beautiful. A face with a prominent bone structure, a wide forehead, a slightly large but thin nose and small, exposed ears. It was her large eyes and eyebrows, her mouth that defined and gave that special appeal to her face. Eyes both strong and soulful that softened with the half-smile she gave me. The rest of her, for all I could make out from her sitting position: a normal body of medium height and slender build and the gloom of her black attire. Was it mourning? Did her husband die recently?

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

“Will you have a coffee, Freddy?”

“No need.”

“Oh, yes,” said Monette. “Sweet, of course.”

She smiled.

“Like you,” she added.

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

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

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

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

“Duller than you can imagine. I hardly do any work at all. I feel I’m at a dead end and I don’t know how to get out of it.”

“But you have the club.”

“Yes, thank God for that.”

“And a girl?”

“No.”

“No? Why not?”

“Many reasons.”

“Why don’t you stick around with my womanizer son?”

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

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

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

“Oh dear, you do bring out the confessional mood with your seriousness. What shall I say? That I have the same vague dissatisfaction? Work, work, work. Enough money but so what? A little distraction with parties and the occasional night out. A little body exercise.”

A smile.

“And,” she continued, “the awful feeling that time is running out. A feeling in my bones that I am losing my youth, my energy. Something is missing. I suppose it comes at my age, you know. With the menopause and the lack of a stable relationship.”

She laughed.

“If Hagop would only put up with my infidelities, I would be very happy living with him. I still love him. I still call him daddy. It is not a question of money, of security. It is the family bonding that I miss. But he cannot accept that even now with his vanishing virility. He is as macho as a twenty year-old.”

Tony came up to us.

“What’s all this solemn whispering about,” he asked.

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

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

“Come and see me, Freddy. Don’t take another year.”

“Okay.”

“Promise?”

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

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

That afternoon, in the arid Sahara of my life, the spark, or was it sparkle, of two women fired a conflagration of thoughts, suppositions and lascivious scenarios of passionate jousts. As usual the blaze raged, lit and warmed me for a few days. In my bed,

on the bus, at the research center and then, unable to reach a conclusion, a decision, with interminable dialogues of my two selves, the man of action and the man of sloth, the aspiring stud and the pedantic philosopher, with the memory fading and the urgency dissipating, with the need for a little peace of mind, my slothful self appeared victorious. *La grande illusion* had sapped my libidinous energy and I gave up thoughts of conquests and sexual gratification. In any case, with whom?

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

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

“No more Speedy Gonzales?”

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

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

He laughed.

“How do I know? I am not a prophet.”

“What about Djamila,” I asked.

“Djamila who? You can have her.”

“But will she have me?”

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

I put the envelope in my pocket.

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

“Tony, what you don’t know won’t hurt you.”

“Is it as bad as that?” he said laughing.

“I don’t know what’s inside either.”

I opened the envelope a little later when I was alone. It was a blank page. On the top left hand corner, a telephone number in tiny script. My heart started beating. I walked to the club’s phone boxes in the main building opposite the squash courts and called the number.

“Hello, Monette. This is Farid,” I said.

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

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

“Sending it to you? I didn’t send it to you!”

But Tony gave me your envelope with the phone number.

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

“No nothing.”

She let out a peel of laughter.

“So he wrote it himself, the little pimp. Well,” she said, “let’s make the best of it. Can you come in an hour or so? By that time the girls would have left.”

“At the atelier?”

“Yes, my dear.”

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

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

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

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

She put her arm in mine.

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

“No.”

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

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

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

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

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you, Tony, so do I.”

She laughed.

“Do you know why he did it?”

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

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

A smile.

“I have a woman working for me, a widow...”

“Djamila?”

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

She laughed.

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

She kissed me and smiled.

“And I think he’s done it. But...”

“But?”

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

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

She caressed my disheveled hair.

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

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

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

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

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

My relationship with Monette was not the most important thing in my life. Yet it loomed as though it was. I had more important things to figure out about my future. I had to think of terminating my dead-end job at the institute and think twice as hard how to achieve my objective to get out of Egypt. I had to rationalize the guilt I would feel about leaving my parents behind and solve dozens of minor, pending problems. Yet my love affair with Monette sweetened my life. It satisfied the human need for intimacy and

companionship with the opposite sex. It annulled my sexual frustration and it was a relationship that did not add problems to the ones I already had. There was no question of marriage and the difficulties attached to it. I did not have to spend much because we did not go out to fancy hotel restaurants or nightclubs. We put in a movie now and then followed by dinner in one of the cheaper restaurants. Places I would be able to afford because I would not accept her to pay. I neither wanted to feel like a gigolo nor wanted her to feel she was keeping one. The difference in age put many restrictions and susceptibilities in our social behavior. Monette did not want to be seen in public with a man so much younger than her. She had a wide circle of acquaintances and knew its ways and the malicious glee with which the news would spread. We both tried to figure the logic why this should be so. We were very happy together and marvelously compatible in our sexual desires and aptitudes. Equal in the pleasure, tenderness and comfort we derived from each other. Were we at fault? Were we ridiculous?

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

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

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

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

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

We met in the jam of the cinema entrance, a sort of covered streetside patio under the huge signboard advertisement of the film. The usual crowd that packs the Cairo cinema entrances a half hour before the screening had already formed; noisy, exuberant, physically pushy, males in the main. We arrived separately and I stationed myself on the sidewalk just off the patio with the peanut vendors and shoeshine boys to monitor the approaches on two streets when I saw Djamila coming. I had not seen her since that single occasion at the atelier some months ago and though my happiness with Monette, my erotic satiety had halted the mad mental searches for an elusive sexual salvation, my polygamous male genes brought Djamila’s smile and furtive looks, again and again, to mind. Yes, it was her in the distance, black coat, black trousers, black bag, shoulder-length black hair. An interesting walk, light and unhurried, as it brought her white-complexioned face closer and diminished her height. She saw me, remembered me and smiled. A smaller woman than Monette, she was perhaps not more beautiful but decidedly different. A subdued air, with the total absence of mannerisms that in Monette with her humor, liveliness and outspokenness were so charming, nevertheless, gave Djamila a sort of enigmatic appeal. She exuded a greater attraction of the eyes that were strong and direct but clouded occasionally and gave the impression of inner turmoil and

suffering. And the aura of alluring maturity that begins in a woman at thirty-five and lasts until her physical rundown commences in her sixties. She offered her hand.

“I am Djamila,” she said with a smile.

“I know. And I am Farid.”

“I know. Thank you for inviting me. I did so much want to see this film and I hate going to the cinema on my own.”

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

“So you like Yousef Chahine?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

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

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

“And he has talent.”

“Yes. And guts.”

She smiled.

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

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

“Yes,” she said and smiled.

Monette came to us late and out of breath. Tall, elegant, smiling, she overshadowed us. She kissed us both and we hurried to the darkened hall. We were guided to our seats by the attendant with torchlight. The newsreels, the cartoon and intermission were over and the main feature had just started. I sat on one side, Djamila on the other and Monette between us. She searched and held my hand and I felt awed, as I usually did when she was well dressed and made up, that this imposing woman was my lover. A little self-conscious too that Djamila had noticed. The film absorbed us despite the general restlessness and whispering of the audience. They were not disposed to tolerate intimations of homosexuality. When we left the cinema, Monette invited us to a nearby restaurant where we had dinner with the luxury of aperitifs and wine and pleasant light-hearted conversation. A discussion of the film, of homosexuality, the morals of our inexplicably provincial and hypocritical society where every deviation from a narrow-minded framework invariably surfaces in gossip and Monette’s jocular recounting of the latest scandals. Djamila did not talk as much as she looked and smiled but her comments when they came were surprisingly adroit. We had removed jackets and coats and I stole interested glances at the body I had seen, sitting, bent, one leg over the other, stitching a dress a few months ago. Not a body to cause obsession but a body for that face, those eyes, the voice, for that articulate smile. It conformed to her psyche. It was normal and slim, shapely legs in trousers, small, assertive breasts pushing the black woolen jumper.

We left the restaurant a couple of hours later, walked Djamila to the bus station and I walked Monette to her car. It would not do to go to the atelier at this hour. It would

set the doorkeepers' tongues wagging. I met Monette on schedule the following Tuesday in her love nest and we kissed and joked and made obsessive, inventive and assorted love. When we lay to rest, to renew our urges and Monette was quiet, motionless with eyes closed, I started thinking that this happiness was detrimental because it kept my mind off my serious problems. I was now very happy in my stagnation, in my dead-end job and my utter lack of ambition. I told Monette about it for a laugh and she told me she was very happy as well. Of course she did not face the same problems though growing old preoccupied her too.

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

"Why can't it last?" I asked.

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

She pointed at Dali's melting clock.

"It melts away."

"But we have snatched it."

"Yes. So wait and see..."

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

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

"For the same reason?"

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

I laughed.

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

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

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

She smiled wistfully.

"You shall grow up," she said. "Meanwhile, give me your youth."

She rolled over me and slid her tongue in my throat.

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

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

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

"She's educated, too."

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

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

"Yes please."

"It is partly my life story too."

“So much the better.”

“In 1943, just after the German defeat at El Alamein, I started working as a salesgirl at Hagop Alekian’s jewelry store. I was twenty at the time and my family’s circumstances none too bright. My father had died a year earlier and I had to work to keep us alive. Hagop fell in love with me almost immediately and wanted to marry me but he was forty and I felt I was too young to take such a step and in any case he was not exactly the dashing fellow a girl at that age dreams about. Well, you know him. Imagine a younger version. Still he was kind and taught me a lot about the business. He had an accountant called Albert Sadek, two years older than me, who had a tiny cubicle at the back of the shop and spent the day there with his bookkeeping and invoices. He was a strange person this Albert. He kept on talking about this new religion and how it would change the world and everybody would be happy because there wouldn’t be poverty any more. No poverty, no wars, no armies. We were in the middle of a war, of killing, of poverty and famines, the destruction of cities and he was dreaming of benevolent governments and altruistic citizens. ‘And what religion is that?’ I asked him. ‘It is called Communism. It is the religion that will wipe all religions. It is a belief that when it enters your blood can make you a martyr and a saint.’ And it is true, he was quite mad my Albert. He was always penniless, squandering his pay to help friends and acquaintances, the worthy and the unworthy. Helping people left and right without discrimination. You are wondering why I call him my Albert. Because he was terribly handsome and whenever Hagop was not around he called me to his cubicle and kissed me. I could not resist him. We started seeing each other in the evenings, after work, whenever he was free because much of the time he went to meetings, which he never spoke about.

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

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

“Hagop, meanwhile, kept up pressure. I had a few short-lived affairs but Albert Sadek left me with a taste for exceptional good looks and passion. A passion not only sexual but a passion for life, for one’s beliefs, for action, for a whirlwind existence. As both were in short supply in my milieu, I took the conventional option for security and married Hagop. I was a blooming twenty-three. Here, let me show you a picture I have.”

She stretched her body, opened the drawer of the night table next to her bed brought out a picture, and handed it to me.

“In those days there were roving photographers on the streets who used to snap your picture and give you a piece of paper with which to claim it, a day later, from the photographer’s shop, if you wanted.”

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

“Wasn’t I pretty?” she asked.

“Yes, very.”

“So let me go on...”

“Just a moment.”

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

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

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

“Please.”

“When I married Hagop he was living in a small apartment in town. I made him buy the apartment in Zamalek where we are now. He had a lot of money. Much more than I expected. We crave for money when we don’t have it but, let me tell you, money is no substitute for passion. He was kind and caring and I have no complaints because what he lacked were gifts that could not be acquired. You are either born with them or you do not have them. He was not the man for me. I was a passionate woman and one sometimes does not realize his mistakes until he has fallen in the trap. A year later Antoun was born and I stopped working at the shop and was occupied full time with him until he started going to kindergarten. After that I had plenty of time on my hands and I continued going to the club in the mornings just as I did when Touny was a baby. I started some tennis and swimming and workouts at the gym but all that did not alleviate my boredom and to make a long story short, within the next few years, I met a few nice men and had a few nice, discreet affairs which raised my morale and made my life palatable. And then, one day, as I was window shopping idly in town, in Kasr-el-Nil, I met Albert Sadek.

“More than a decade and a half had gone by and it was I that recognized him. I could not have missed that face. He was roundabout forty and looked some years older with the few new wrinkles and weathered look imprinted on his face. A new maturity that added to his allure. He was well dressed, striding as usual in a hurry, in my direction. I blocked his way deliberately and looked at him, smiling. He glanced at me annoyed and looked again at my smile and looked and then stared at me for a few seconds. I thought for a moment that it was the same indifference he had shown that last day we met but suddenly he grabbed me in his arms and hugged me and kissed me, laughing. We went to Lappas, nearby, and sat and over coffees exchanged our news. I told him I had married Hagop and he said ‘Oh God!’ and that I had a boy of sixteen. That I didn’t work anymore and that I fooled around a little. He was the love and passion of my life, I could not pretend. I wanted him to know. To know I was available. He had married six years ago a

girl twelve years younger than he and had a boy of five. About his work, not a word and when I asked he just said, 'Politics'; nothing more. I could get nothing else out of him and I worried because politics, especially the politics I suspected he practiced, were a dangerous game in the days of Abdel Nasser. We talked of old friends and who did this and who did that. When we got up to leave, he kissed me and smiled. 'All this bla-bla,' he said, 'and I did not tell you the most important thing.' What? I asked. 'That you are as desirable as ever and that I fool around a little, too. Can I have your phone number?'

"We became lovers again and brought as much passion to our love affair as the first time. We were adults, had children, spouses, obligations and we had to be circumspect because of our marriages but it was, for both of us, a thrilling period of our life. I often asked him why he cheated on his wife. A wife much younger than him, than me. Didn't he love her? 'I love her, probably more than I love you', was the answer, 'but you excite me more than she ever will'. I was five glorious years with Albert. Although in my previous love affairs I meticulously covered my tracks, with Albert I turned careless and, in any case, I seemed not to care too much if I were caught out. It was the only thing that gave meaning to my life. Hagop started suspecting something serious was going on. He had his suspicions for many years, even before Albert, but this time my attitude was irritable and confrontational. In a fight where he exasperated me, I let it out that I saw Albert and that was the last straw for him. He packed and left the house to return to his old digs, which he had kept. We have lived apart since then. In a sense I found my peace and so did little Touny who suffered terribly from the constant quarreling in those last two or three years we were together with Hagop. But from then on I had to be both the woman and the man in the house. Well, now, Touny has grown but it was tough in those days. I stopped going to the club since I was not shopping around for transient thrills and, with a girlfriend of mine, went to dressmaking classes because fashion always interested me. I was very good at it and when I finished the course I found this flat and little by little business blossomed.

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

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

“Is she still around? Do you still see her?”

Monette smiled.

“I see her every day. His wife was Djamila.”

I was flabbergasted.

“Good God! So what happened?”

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

“So he was executed?”

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

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

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

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

“Well, perhaps. I am expiating my guilt.”

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

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

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

“Oh, not again!”

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

She laughed.

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

“It depends on you two, doesn’t it?”

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

“Meaning?”

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

“But will you two get together?”

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

I smiled.

“These are new confessions,” I said.

She kissed me.

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

“So you are preparing me for the exit.”

She kissed me again.

“Oh my little darling, don’t talk like that. So many things can happen. It might never work out.”

“Nevertheless, you are telling me, be prepared.”

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

She grabbed me by the hair and kissed me avidly, again and again. A vigorous, excited tongue swept my mouth, my teeth, stretched to my throat, set my mind reeling. I held her lovely breasts and haunches, the warm ample flesh, caressed her belly and her sizzling openings of love that electrified her psyche and there was no return.

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

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

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

Filing for divorce.

The son rushing in from Canada.

Pleading with his father.

The family council.

The General’s demand for money.

The bargaining.

The compromise.

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

Agreement, finally achieved.
No obstacles left.
Divorce taking its course.

The poetry of life in free verse.

“Could he see her now?”

“No. “

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

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

“Of course, Monette.”

“Thank you my dear. I love you too.”

I waited a week for my next move. Not only to think and reconsider the practically non-existent options of my situation but to recover from the melancholy of the abrupt severing of ties with Monette. I was surprised, finally, by how much it affected me though I knew it was coming and had vague but persistent thoughts, hopeful and chancy, for a new romance. I kept thinking of her. Not many women in her mold. The contradictions: the enduring great love for Albert Sadek, marriage with Hagop for security, a good mother if I were to judge from Tony's love for her, sensual enough to search actively for sex throughout her life, dynamic enough to build up a successful business, apprehensive enough of old age to seek a companion to share it. All with a zest for life, with a lively, outspoken, sociable personality. So what was I for her? Oh, probably another whim, another passing fancy. A face in her crowd of lovers. A last fling with youth, energy, and insatiable urges before the fadeout. And now that she was gone, the usual feeling that I did not appreciate her enough while I had her. That I had taken too lightly something that was precious.

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

“He never stopped being in love with her. That's what makes me sad,” said Tony. “He was not the right age for her and he did not have the looks or the personality to keep

her. All he had was money and with that he managed to keep her, precariously at that, for a time.”

He laughed.

“Enough to bring me into this world.”

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

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

“Tony! I don’t believe it!”

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

“Can’t you stop being frivolous?”

“I don’t think so. It runs in the family. And you my serious man, what shall you be doing now?”

It was the first and only oblique reference to my affair with Monette he ever made.

“I have something in mind.”

“Okay, good. I know you won’t tell.”

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

He got up with a gloriously happy smile and embraced me.

“You are my best man,” he said. “The very best.”

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

“Djamila?”

“Farid! What a coincidence!”

“Not a coincidence. I was following you.”

“Following me? Why?”

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

“Oh lovely. Did you call Monette?”

“She isn’t coming.”

“Oh Farid ...I don’t know...Here’s my bus.”

“I shall explain. Saturday, 6:30. I shall be waiting for you.”

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

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

The Rivoli was near my house, on the main road called Shara Fouad. A long avenue, it passed through the better and the lesser districts of Cairo but not the worst. It started at the Opera Square, a square with the Cairo opera, with the shopping centres, with the big department stores, crossed into a poorer section of workshops and *souks* and a few remaining, authentic, inhabited though decrepit buildings of Arab-Islamic architecture from Cairo's Middle Ages. It crossed the Nile into high-class Zamalek and another bridge to the Mohandseen suburb, which was new and developing though not tip-top or classy despite its planned, wide thoroughfares. My house, a two minute walk away from the Rivoli was on a parallel street to Shara Fouad. It was small and narrow and a *souk* or market as its name, Souk el Tewfikieh, implied. A food market with groceries, butchers, greengrocers, fruit and cereal shops as well as merchants for kitchenware. A few years back, cars were able to pass through but now wooden hand carts with diverse merchandise appropriated street and pavement and together with the dense humanity and strewn rubbish obstructed even the circulation of pedestrians. My father's grocery was at one corner of this, once tolerable, street and another central avenue. So despite the appalling deterioration of the neighborhood my parents would not consider moving elsewhere because of the convenience of being two steps from their work. My mother went to the grocery every afternoon partly to help but mainly to while her time away as my father's working hours were long and the only person at home was her dull and taciturn son.

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

She smiled.

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

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

"Thank you."

"How's Monette?" I asked.

She turned and looked at me to see if I were teasing.

"She's very well," she said. "Why isn't she here with us?"

"I shall explain Djamila. Shall we go in?"

We entered the hall and found our seats as the lights were dimming. This time we saw the newsreels and the cartoons and previews of the coming features, the *prochainements*, which we usually missed with Monette and had an ice in the intermission. We made small talk and little jokes and I was happy that Djamila was in

good humor and our easy exchange and familiarity held good even without Monette's presence that previously was the common denominator. I asked her if she could tell the couples dating from the married couples. She laughed and said, "Of course, the couples on a date talk and smile. The married couples are silent and glum."

"Is there a lesson to be learnt?"

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

"Why? Because no one would get married?"

"Oh, it's more complicated than that."

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

She turned and smiled and said, "I shall explain."

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

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

"Oh? You have read the novel?"

"Yes."

"In translation?"

"No. In the original."

"You know English?"

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

"Djamila! I am impressed."

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

"Yes, though I have not read it."

She smiled.

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

I laughed.

"Is that why you did not let me hold your hand?"

"It is one third of the reasons."

"And the other two thirds?"

"The second third is Monette. The third third is personal."

"Is the third third, another man?"

“Aren’t you being a bit indiscreet?”

“Of course I am. And believe me, it is not my nature. But I do like you. I want to be your friend. I think you are someone very special.”

“Is that your opening line?”

“Yes it is. To you, Djamila. Will you give me five minutes to introduce myself?”

“Mr. Farid Naguib, if I am not mistaken. Pleased to meet you.”

“So you know my full name Mrs. Djamila Aswad. The pleasure, the happiness, the interest, the trepidation is all mine.”

She smiled and I extended my hand over the table and she shook it.

“May I proceed with the introduction?”

“Please do.”

“To start with I am not wealthy. That is why I brought you to this pizza place instead of one of the classy restaurants where Monette invited us.”

“Yes? Then we will share the bill.”

“Will you stop being aggressive?” I said.

She was smiling. It was a game she started playing. Was she flirting with me?

“I am not a playboy,” I continued, “because a playboy with empty pockets is a contradiction in terms. I realize this might disappoint you but it is the truth. I want to start on the right foot with you.”

“Which brings us to the question, start what?”

“Is friendship too daring, too *avant garde*, too immoral?”

“Is that all you want?”

“Do I discern a note of disappointment? If it is not enough we can up the stakes.”

She laughed.

“Go on,” she said.

“Secondly, I go to the club every day because I am employed in a research centre that has no research and the little I do does not interest them and the club is the only thing that helps me to retain my sanity. And thirdly, with Monette it’s all over. She is getting married to Fawsi something or other and she has dropped me as quickly and as easily as she picked me up.”

She smiled again.

“And you are disconsolate.”

“She was nice to me. I was nice to her. We had good sex together. It is over. It was a shock. I am not devastated because she kept the relationship nicely balanced avoiding sentimentality and mawkishness. In any case it could not last. The age difference was forbidding.”

“Our age difference is quite big as well.”

“I am glad you are considering the pros and cons of our friendship, my sweet Djamila.”

“Don’t make assumptions that are not there,” she said and laughed.

“So can you tell me what the third reason for not wanting me to hold your hand is? I believe I dispelled your other two reservations.”

“Because I believe you have been frank with me I shall tell you a few things. First of all, there is no man in my life. Well, there is. My son. He is sixteen and I have not seen him in over five years. He lives with my sister in New York and my one objective in life is to join him there. To see my son again. And then, without going into details or

discussing it, I have to tell you that I have had some quite horrible experiences in my life and I have no desire, at least for the moment, to get involved with a man.”

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

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

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

She smiled.

“We’ll see,” she said.

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

“I have to think about it.”

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

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

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

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

She laughed and waved and the bus took her away.

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

“For Heaven’s sake Tony, we only went to the cinema.”

“It’s a good start, my boy. She gave me the cold shoulder.”

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

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

“Intelligent and pleasant enough but something’s eating her. And your Rosie?”

He let out a chuckle.

“Not very intelligent but pretty and sexy and she wants it all the time. Just what I need.”

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

“Yes. Isn’t that wonderful? You must meet her sometime.”

“Bring her for a game of tennis.”

“She doesn’t like sports. Well, except one, that is.”

“You really are incorrigible.”

I did not see her in the madding crowd that was milling at the Metro entrance and spilling on the street creating a strident cacophony of car horns. She pulled my arm and I

turned round and saw her familiar face and lovely smile. Impulsively, I uttered her name, "Djamila," and kissed her and she kissed me back. "I am so happy you came," I said and I could see my pleasure reciprocated in her smile and her eyes. I took her by the arm and we pushed our way to the entrance of the cinema. Inside we were in a sane world once again. We looked at each other to replenish the void of a week and we smiled and slowly climbed the stairway to the upper tier where our seats were. The film was long and the cinema dispensed with the newsreels and cartoons and the main feature started as soon as the lights went out. People kept coming in, noisy and vexing, but the screen was huge and the sound loud and overcame the commotion to some extent until the seats were packed and the only sound was the intermittent coughing of the audience. The music, the beautiful scenery of the desert took us to an exotic world of the past, of legend and adventure, of bravery and ideals. There was an intermission half way. I got up and bought two ices.

"How was your week, Djamila?"

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

"Do you watch television?"

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

"Long and lonely, too. I could not wait to see you."

She smiled and squeezed my hand.

I leaned towards her and whispered,

"Sometimes the squeezing of hands is more thrilling than an orgasm."

She was startled and turned round abruptly to look at me and then she smiled.

"I never thought of it this way," she said.

"And the perfume you are wearing is very nice."

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

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

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

"Only if I share the bill," she said.

"I can manage, Djamila."

"I insist, if we are to go out together."

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

smile. Her smile, again and again. I couldn't get enough of it. And conversation that did not falter.

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

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

"Oh, I don't know Farid..."

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

"I don't want to raise your expectations."

"Of a pleasant day together?"

She smiled.

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

"What about a comfortable friendship?"

"One thing leads to another."

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

"You are twisting my arm."

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

"That's why it is so difficult."

A bus screeched to a stop.

"It's mine," she said. "Good night, Farid."

"Good night Djamila. See you tomorrow."

She was on time. She looked lovely. The wide forehead, the prominent cheekbones, the strong eyes drew me like a magnet. As did the smile, the air of happiness. The black coat was there, of course, and black trousers but beneath, a dark red pullover, a touch of makeup. She was inching out of mourning. One could tell. Why did it take so long? We took the bus to Midan el Tahrir and from there the bus for the pyramids. An empty seat for two in the first class section and a noisy, stop-and-go journey along the familiar landmarks. The Nile, two bridges, one long and flat, one short and humped, the Botanical Gardens, the Cairo University, the Zoo. Passengers getting on and off at every stop. Then the flat, green fields encroached by the monster, the land-gobbling, expanding city, dissected by the arrow-straight highway to the pyramid plateau. Sitting, arms and legs touching, comfortably and comforting, a dawning of intimacy, chatting, looking at the hamlets, the date palm trees, the little overworked donkeys and placid, munching buffaloes, commenting and pointing at a thousand things we had seen before but hardly noticed, until the great pyramid of Cheops loomed into view and sent a shiver down our spine because it was stupendous, because we were together and our thrill was multiplied by two.

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

the vast ignorance of his existence and of his universe: the first unavoidable, the second unknowable.

“What do the pyramids tell you, Djamila?”

She smiled and thought for a few seconds.

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

For a moment I wondered what or whom she was referring to. I knew very little about her life.

“For me,” I said, “like any cemetery, they tell me that there are no answers to the big questions of life, that time is short and not to be wasted. Unfortunately, I am not heeding their message. I am ignoring their warning. But this is the fate and flaw of the human being, the narrowness of his vision. His sole preoccupation with the trivial.”

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

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

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

“I am happy now.”

She smiled.

“And were you happy with Monette?”

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

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

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

We walked a lot that day. Talked and walked around the pyramids and the Sphinx and in the desert with galloping horses in the distance and flat-footed, swaying camels. With the sunshine, the pure, desert breeze and the blue skies of the Pharaohs. With the tourists wearing the Bedouin headdress, taking snapshots, pretending they were El Aurence. I held her hand sometimes when we were alone and she did not pull away but did not draw closer. A wall most decidedly between us; friendly and pleasant as far as walls go but still defining our boundaries. On our way down we visited the Mena House Hotel, a landmark in Egypt’s recent history with the nice clean toilets we needed. Coming out, I pinched my face with mock disapproval and told Djamila that the restaurant here was not quite tip-top. That I knew of a better place and we walked further down the road to a grocer and had two large, delicious, fresh bread sandwiches with white feta cheese and olives and a coke for dessert. She could not imagine Djamila said with a smile, that the meal at the Mena House could have been half as good. It was about four by then and

the afternoon sunshine was giving way to the evening chill. We took the bus to town and at Midan el Tahrir she switched to the one for Daher refusing my offer to accompany her.

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

Unexpectedly, she kissed me.

“Thank you, Farid. I enjoyed it too. This is my phone number.”

She gave me a scrap of paper which she fished out of her bag. She must have written it earlier, at home.

“So I have passed the test?” I said.

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

The next day at four I waited for her at the coffee shop opposite the Khedive building. I needed to see her. I missed her all through that day. I missed her as soon as I left her the day before, in fact. I thought about her and questions kept circling my mind. I wondered if her behaviour was a normal reaction to the horrific ending of her marriage, to the temporary loss of her son. Did she feel that a new life, a renewed quest for happiness would be a betrayal towards her executed husband? That this pursuit would mean the neglect of her son and that she would be unable to overcome the guilt this happiness would engender? Would some minor detail I did not know provide an explanation? And why did I care so much? Tony gave her up as a bad job. But he was faced with a blunt refusal whereas the reluctance I faced in her response had small increments of diminution and an ensuing acceptance of my person, with each consecutive meeting. I felt tied to her because of her story, even because of my relationship with Monette and the strange link of their lives through the same man. And that I, another man, another link to their chain was repeating a similar move again, from the one to the other. All this, apart from the fact that I found in her a beauty that perhaps was not there, a mixture of vulnerability, hopelessness and strength that intrigued me. That made me eager to protect her even as she was trying to protect herself from me. From another possible happiness. I wanted to hold her and kiss her, to tell her that she was still young and the little pleasure she could yet wring from this world should not be thrown away. That I longed to touch her and give and take from her body the love I already felt.

She came out a little before five. Most of the girls had gone by and she came out alone. I rushed out and called her.

“Farid!” She exclaimed with surprise, a smile of pleasure followed by a frown.

“Oh, Farid, this won’t do. You are complicating my life. I can only take emotions and companionship in small doses. Too much and I shall lose my balance.”

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

“Why? Did something happen?”

“Yes. Not now. There’s a question I want to ask you.”

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

“Well?”

“Remember that time I came to the atelier with Tony?”

“Yes. What about it?”

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

She laughed.

“Searching for hidden meanings where there are none?”

“Yes. Because I am convinced I fell in love with you at just that moment. There! Now you know.”

She laughed again.

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

“Yes, that’s why. Do you understand?”

“How was your day today?”

I smiled and held her hand.

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

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

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

“Give me a break.”

“Give *me* a break!”

“Okay. After tomorrow.”

“I’ll think about it.”

She laughed.

“Giving me back some of my own medicine?”

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

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

“I missed you, though.”

“So did I. Terribly.”

It started in fits and starts but we fell into a routine of seeing each other daily for coffee and going to the cinema on Saturdays and any other weekday that was convenient. Sunday was our day out of the city. The Botanical gardens, the Zoo, the Barrages which were the first large dams of the Nile built by Mohammed Ali, the tombs and step pyramids at Saqqara, the Japanese gardens at Helwan, the Citadel, old Cairo with its superb mosques, and the Coptic museum and antiquities. After a couple months we were running out of places and I was running out of patience. I was in love with Djamila and she seemed to be in love with me although sometimes doubts would poison my mind. I did not know how long a love between two adults could last without any sexual contact. I asked her this question often and she would answer that if I truly loved her I would be patient. That she could not indulge in sex at the moment. That she had gone through a terrible nightmare and she was working it out of her system little by little. With our love, the lovely days we had together these last few months, the companionship, the holding of hands, the hugging and the kissing we stole in secluded places and moments. “Farid,” she told me, “if I have any hope at all to recover it is with you. Please be patient.”

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

“One day I shall tell you my story.”

“Why not now?”

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

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

“Oh, Farid,” she said, “If you cannot wait, find yourself another Monette at the club. I am sure they are not lacking. I shall understand. We shall still be friends because I can hardly conceive losing you.”

We were alone at a garden somewhere, I forget the exact place, and I kissed her on her mouth and caressed her breasts. Her tongue was eager and passionate. Her breath quickened.

“I don’t understand,” I said and caressed her face and hair. “Is it easier for you to send me away than to join me in an act of love that will bind us even more?”

She looked at me with that soulful look that had almost extinguished little by little in the months we were together.

“If you knew how I feel about you, you would love me more for uttering this suggestion.”

A few months went by, sweetly, companionably even passionately despite the absence of physical fulfilment. Spring was in the air with the khamsins, the hot winds and desert dust before the pleasant month of April and the increasing warmth of May. I sensed a growing desire in Djamila for caresses and kisses. A greater tenderness and need for tactile contact. She held my hand and caressed it and surprised me by kissing it every now and then. She was less reluctant to externalize her feelings. I took her one Saturday afternoon to the club racetrack to see the races and I pointed at the horses at the starting line, prancing, excited and eager to be off. I told her they reminded me of us.

“Are we at the starting line Djamila?”

She smiled.

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

“Yes, but where?”

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

“What?” I asked. “What?”

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

I continued my sports at the club and my tennis with Tony. He asked Rosie to come to the club to get acquainted with their best man and we met one afternoon. Not for tennis. I do not think he wanted her to see his game. Just to meet me, his friend and

brother. She was a pretty, lively girl with a perfect body, dressed in a short skirt and high heels, which out of regard for Tony she should have avoided as she was already slightly taller than him. She had dyed blond hair, a pert, perfectly made up, smiling face on a long neck on slightly wide shoulders that led the eye to her wonderful breasts and arms and ended at the extraordinarily well shaped legs. A piece of Turkish delight for my dear, little barrel Tony. We shook hands. She told me she was so happy to meet me because Tony loved me and I said the feelings were mutual and ancient and we sat and talked for a while at the bar over a beer. Well, Tony did most of the talking and most of it as crazy as usual.

“I have to have your okay, Freddy, because I’m thinking of marrying her. I have not yet decided for sure but she seems to be the one. As far as looks are concerned, she is, obviously, above my class but at least our children if they are half way between, they shall be reasonably good looking. I don’t want my offspring looking like me.”

He looked at Rosie and smiled and then turned to me.

“There are many things that will make this a stable marriage. Rosie loves sex and loves spending money. Aren’t these things basic? Did you know that short plump people are very sexy, Freddy? Rosie does. Don’t you, my love?”

Rosie giggled.

“I can’t get enough of her and I have plenty of money. Anything else Freddy?”

“Well... I don’t know...?” I started cautiously.

“God, I don’t want a treatise. Just something I might have overlooked.”

We both laughed.

“No Tony, I think you have the main issues covered.”

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

I looked at Rosie. She was smiling with a perfect set of teeth.

“I hope,” I told her, “you have learned not to take him seriously.”

“How else would we get along?” she said.

“So do we have your approval?” Tony asked.

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

At our next tennis game, Tony asked me what I thought of her.

“Quite a dish, Tony. And very, very sweet. Unlike the other hens in the coop where you played the cock.”

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

“You come up with the most amazing statements.”

“How are you getting on, by the way?”

“Okay.”

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

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

“You are invited, of course? Aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful. At last I shall dance with you.”

“I haven’t decided on the reception yet.”

“Please, Djamila.”

She smiled.

“I’ll think about it.”

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

“I am Tony’s friend and a friend of the family,” I said.

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

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

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

Tony laughed.

“Is that a proposal, Freddy?”

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

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

“Why the long face, before?” I asked him.

“I just cannot stomach him,” he answered.

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you believe I love you, Djamila? That it’s not just sex? What are you hiding from me?”

She kissed me on the lips and I pushed my tongue in her mouth and her tongue told me she loved me, again and again. That she needed me; that she was aroused just like I was.

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

I was startled. I looked at her lovely eyes.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said. Almost a plea.

“I’ll think about it, my love,” I said and she smiled. We kissed again and again, oblivious to the people dancing around us.

We left soon after. It was past one. The party was in full swing. Tony told us to stick around so we would leave together and then he smiled.

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

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

"Remember the races?" Djamila asked.

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

"Yes," she said, "And today we won the race."

Up the stairs we went to the first floor of an old, slightly rundown building in a narrow side street. Djamila unlocked the door, switched on the lights and we entered a dowdy sitting room.

"Not much of a house," she said.

"It's beautiful," I said and she laughed.

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

I held her and kissed her.

"We shall alleviate them and enrich them."

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

We kissed for a long time standing up and felt our passion rising.

"I love you Djamila. Being in love with you is accepting you totally. What I know and what I don't."

She took my hand and led me to the bedroom.

"Please, lead me back to life gently," she said caressing my hair, looking into my eyes. She switched off the light and lit an *abat-jour* on the night table. She started undressing. "Take off your clothes and lie on the bed," she said. I undressed and lay on the bed. She came to me naked. A lovely, slight, perfectly proportioned body. I yearned to caress the exquisite breasts, shapely legs, the hair between, the hidden opening of life. I waited. She sat looking at me.

"Farid," she said, "This first time, I must take the initiative. I have been abused and it is my way to fight back, to recover, a way to heal my hysteria. Please, do not move. Let me caress you. Let me get used to your body. What a wonderful, muscular body you have. I did not know you were an Adonis."

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

We did not rest for long.

“My darling, Farid,” she said, “I am very grateful to you for being patient and gentle. For bringing meaning to my life once more. I thought I would never be able to love a man again.”

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

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

I kissed her mouth and she was ready again for my longing. It was my turn to explore her and I drank the secrets of her femininity like the heady nectar of the Gods. I was intoxicated with passion and sensuality for her delicate body and troubled soul and through my mouth, my hands and body, like an electric current, they flowed into her.

We were drugged for a while after our second orgasm and then she caressed my face and hair.

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

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

“What shall we do then?”

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

She laughed.

“Choose an author,” she said.

“Naguib Mahfouz.”

“Why?”

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

“Shall I tell you a story about our country? A story he might have well have written?”

“Yes, my love.”

“It is a story of a girl. My friend from university.”

“I’d love to hear it.”

“It’s rather long.”

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

“Hardly to freshen up, I would say.”

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

She laughed again and was thoughtful for a moment.

“I met Rania on the very first day I went to university. I felt rather lost that first day in the crowds of boisterous students, the noise and the incessant movement, while trying to find my way to the lecture hall in the labyrinth of corridors. Finally, I found it and sat next to a girl and we started chatting as we waited for the lecturer. We had exactly the same program and so we stuck together all through that day and it was the start of a close friendship that endures up till now. In time, we found we had the same ideas, affinities and temperament. She was Christian like me and that tied us even more closely though, at the time, religion was not as divisive an issue as it is today. We studied

together, visited each other's home and had many discussions on the Egyptian woman and her oppression in our society. She lived with her parents in Heliopolis just like I lived with mine in Daher. She was a lively girl and, like me, something of a rebel. Well, as much as one could be in those days of restricted freedom and the strict separation of the sexes. Still we were interested in boys and were not above flirting with them light-heartedly and secretly going to parties, each providing the alibi for the other. Eventually we met two boys and became attached and went to the odd cinema as a foursome, sitting at the last row of the upper tier and exchanging a furtive kiss now and then.

"It was a year before the revolution and the country was in upheaval, what with the '48 war with Israel and Egypt's humiliating defeat, the student body was in turmoil with almost daily street demonstrations. Our two boys were involved in student activism and it was the students at the time that constituted the most vociferous part of the opposition to the regime. We went with them regularly to secret meetings where the agitators planned their moves and the excitement of the illicit exhilarated us. In those meetings we met a dashing, handsome young man called William. He was not a student. He was much older than most of us and helped us organize and coordinate the moves of different cells of dissenters. We met him again and again in those meetings of student agitators. He was always there, planning the demonstrations and inciting the students to protest against this and that injustice and recruiting them to his cause. He was said to be a communist and this had terrible connotations the worst of which was its atheism. However I found that most of what he said was logical and I liked his idealism, which, in any case, is the virtue of youth.

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

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

"She also thought their child's birth would bring them even closer together but the opposite happened. She was restricted much more in her movements having to take care of the baby boy and they were together much less than before. She could no longer go with him to his political meetings which interested her and they saw each other fleetingly late at night and early in the mornings before he left the house. Meanwhile the revolution had taken place, first with Mohamed Naguib at the helm, then Abdel Nasser. William hoped that a new political tolerance would come about, the old corruption would be

eliminated and social justice would prevail but an implacable dictatorship was established instead. A couple of years later, Abdel Nasser's attempted assassination occurred in Alexandria, which was blamed on the Moslem Brotherhood and the communists. The situation became precarious for, amongst others, all known and reputed communists. Rania begged William to give up his political activities but he seemed to revel in danger travelling up and down the country promoting his party and beliefs.

"At about that time, Rania started suspecting that William was having affairs with other women. He had the reputation of a womanizer even when they were courting but he seemed so in love with her that she disregarded the rumors. There was nothing specific to make her think he was having extra-marital dalliances but she felt it in her bones. There were frequent all-night absences, a falling off of his sexual desire for her and sometimes he arrived very late at night with the barely perceptible smells of another woman on him. However, she usually convinced herself that her nose was playing tricks on her because he was kind with her and tender with the child and she ascribed her suspicions to boredom and a warped imagination.

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

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

"Rania had not seen her husband since his arrest. She went to the high-security prison in Tourah repeatedly but was not allowed to see him. Persons condemned to death have no rights. They are at the mercy and whims of the prison Governor. She went and asked to see him. She had to bribe her way at every step. She finally reached the God-General dressed in the black police uniform with swords and stars on the shoulders

showing his rank. He told her to sit down and wait on a chair in his office lounge. He was a large, plump man in his fifties with a moustache. Not ugly; on the contrary; he had a swarthy, pleasant-looking but arrogant face. He was conscious of his power inside and out of the prison. A bully. She could tell by the way he treated his underlings. He kept her waiting from nine till four in the afternoon. They were alone in his office.

“Do you know,’ he told her, ‘that you are not allowed to see your husband?’ Seven hours for this information. ‘Your Excellency, he will be executed in a month. We have lived fifteen years together. We have a son. Am I not allowed to see him to bid him farewell, to show him I care, that I love him, that I am heartbroken?’ ‘I did not make the rules,’ he said, ‘I follow them.’ ‘Please your Excellency, I beg you, can I not see him now for just a moment?’ He went behind her chair. He caressed her hair and her shoulders and his hands reached her breasts. ‘Tomorrow is Friday. Things are more relaxed around here. Come at this hour when everyone is gone. I shall come especially for you and we’ll see what we can do.’ He smirked. He named his price. She was free to accept or reject it. ‘I shall be here at four,’ she said and left.

“She was there on time the next day. Five pounds at the door to get in. A five pound bribe to be abused. She was taken to his office. He spoke to her familiarly, ‘*Ahlan ya Rania*, welcome.’ He told the soldier, Stay outside and don’t let anyone in. For good measure he locked the door. He pointed to a door. ‘Get in and undress,’ he told her. She entered the room. It was his bedroom for prison emergencies. She took off her clothes quickly. The sooner it is over the better. He came in and ogled at her. He took off his shoes, his trousers and jacket and then his long underwear. He had a huge erection under his shirt. He came to her and pawed her all over and then he made her open her legs and pushed it in. She was not aroused and was not lubricated and his thrusts tore at her genitals. He grunted and ejaculated, got up and dressed. She saw a door leading to a small bathroom. She went in and rinsed herself then dressed and went out. She was led to a filthy visiting room and William was brought in. blindfolded. The covering was removed and the guards did not leave the room. He said, ‘Hello Rania, how is our son?’ He was thin and wasted and seemed to have lost most of his hair in those few months and all of his beauty. ‘He is fine. I sent him to my sister in New York for a while.’ ‘You did well,’ he said. ‘Forgive me; I have been a bad husband and a bad father.’ ‘You have been a wonderful father,’ Rania told him. ‘Superficially, yes. A good father would not have been so irresponsible.’ ‘Are you guilty, William?’ ‘Does it matter, Rania?’ ‘Yes, it matters to me.’ ‘I cannot think straight any more. I really do not know.’ They said a few more words and he was taken away. She passed by the General to thank his hateful mug for his kindness. ‘If you want to see him again, come next Friday,’ he said.

“She went home and washed for hours and sobbed. I am a whore, she kept on thinking. William has made a whore of me. I have no self respect. How will I live the rest of my life? And yet she went back the following Friday and was raped once more so that she could see a husband she no longer loved but for whom she felt a vast, desperate pity. The pity one feels for a good man whose life went awry. For a brave and idealistic man who was too reckless and immature to bear the responsibilities of a family. When they brought him in he was silent. He did not look at her. ‘What’s wrong William?’ she asked. ‘The soldier who brought me here from my prison wing told me, you son of a bitch, your wife is getting fucked by the General. I really don’t care, Rania. I am completely indifferent. If there is a shadow of feeling left in me it is for our son. Take care of him

and don't come here again. They have taken their revenge these dogs a hundredfold. I really want to die and if there is a God up there I shall spit in his face.' Rania did not see him again. The little hope she had for a pardon vanished when his death was announced in the news two weeks later together with two of his companions.

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

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

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

"The next day she went shopping. She bought a large, sharp, pointed butcher's knife and had it wrapped up without touching it. She went to a bookshop and bought a small book on the human body. She was not sure if the heart is on the right or left side of the chest. She did not know its exact position. She went home and strangely she started exercising, then took a shower and watched television. She had not opened the set since William's arrest. The three days passed very slowly. She did not write to her son. She exercised to work off her tensions, her impatience. She felt her lassitude evaporating. Thursday arrived and all day butterflies were fluttering in her stomach. She forced herself to eat so as not to have bad odor in her mouth. She took a bath in the afternoon and made herself up as if she were going to a party. She left the house at nine, taking a large hand bag with the knife inside and a pair of gloves. She changed two buses to get to Shoubra and then she searched for the house. She found it and went upstairs to the flat. She rang the bell. He opened with a smile. '*Ahlan ya Rania.*' 'Good evening your Excellency.' He

was in a civilian suit. ‘Don’t call me Excellency, call me Ibrahim. We shall be good friends. Sit down. Can I make you some tea?’ ‘No thank you your E...., Ibrahim.’ She sat down carefully not touching the furniture. He asked her how she was. How her son was. ‘He is abroad with my sister.’ ‘It is better,’ he said. ‘And you have children, eh...Ibrahim?’ ‘Three. My wife is pregnant on the fourth. Shall we go in?’

“They entered the bedroom and Rania undressed without being ordered. He undressed also completely unlike their intercourse in the prison where he kept his shirt on. He had large meaty breasts and a huge belly that was not quite apparent with his clothes on and massive genitals. He sat on the bed beside her and tried to kiss her. She turned her face. ‘Why, ya Rania?’ he asked. ‘Give me a little time to get used to you,’ she said with a smile. He caressed her and was aroused and they performed a quick painful intercourse. He dozed off for a while and then he woke up. He smiled. Rania took hold of his large flaccid penis and caressed it and moved it up and down. He grinned. ‘You enjoyed it?’ he asked. ‘Yes.’ ‘You want to do it again?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘I do not usually do it twice. I am not as strong as I was,’ he said and smiled. ‘But you excite me, ya Rania.’ He was aroused with her manipulations and he entered her again. The second time around her torture lasted considerably longer. But he ejaculated finally and promptly went to sleep. Rania got up, went to the hall where she had left her bag, put on her gloves and unwrapped her butcher’s knife. She went into the room. He was sound asleep in the perfect position. He was stretched face downward his head slightly to one side, his arms along his head on the pillow, his legs apart and his breath regular. She came close to the bed, to him, calmly located the correct spot, held the knife with both hands and in one sweep, buried it to the hilt in his fleshy, hairy back, piercing him cleanly through the heart. She was sure of it. She had studied well her book of human anatomy. He let out an agonized growl and he slowly attempted to turn but fell back on his face while the blood oozing from his back painted the sheets red. She stood looking at him for a moment and heaved a sigh of relief. She had become a murderess but had regained her self respect. She felt like yelling, like singing out loud.

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

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

pimp has twisted my hand, has slapped me or blackmailed me. My self respect is my freedom and my freedom my self respect.”

Djamila looked at me.

“How did you like the story?” she asked.

“Rania,” I said, “will you marry me?”

She looked at me for a long time, her eyes welling with tears.

“Yes it was me,” she said.

“Will you marry me?”

“I’ll think about it,” she said smiling through her tears.

11-12-2004

LETTERS TO DR. FATTHI

and other Secrets

“Wake up *ya khawaga* Baul. It’s already ten. Dr Fatthi will see you soon.”

“Paul, Amina, Paul. Not Baul.”

She makes an effort. “B...b...Paul.”

She laughs merrily.

“Give us a *bossa*, Amina, a kiss.”

“For shame, behave yourself.”

She bends, nevertheless, over my bed for my ritual awakening. I offer my cheek. She is wary. She knows the routine. As her face approaches I grab her, pull her on the bed and try to kiss her lips. I rarely succeed. She pushes me away and slaps my hands, my body but not a peep. She does not want anyone to know. She stands and pulls the bedcovers off me.

“Now, get up,” she says and hurries out.

She is a lovely girl, this Amina. She brightens my life in this dreary place. Her twinkling, playful eyes, her smile of pure sugar on a large mouth with perfect teeth, her stiff frizzy hair I sometimes caress and sometimes pull lightly, mischievously, to annoy her. Her defense, the little slaps she gives me. She enjoys it as much as I do. And the rest of her, well-built, petite, oozing sensuality as she moves in her white uniform and traditional white clinic slippers. She could not be anything but the lovely light milk-chocolate color she was. A little fairer, a little darker, would have been a loss. She could be anything between twenty and thirty. Coquettishly, she will not tell.

“Stay!” I cry as the door closes.

“*Balash dala’a*,” she shoots back. Stop this dalliance.

I get up, wash, shave and dress. At the refectory I have some tepid tea and the leftover bread and cheese from early breakfast. I am hungry. I do not complain. I hurry to the office for my daily half-hour. I enter it. Spacious, airy with two large, open windows and lazily fluttering curtains matching the beige-colored walls. A garden outside and the chirping of birds. His desk, lovely, old fashioned, meticulously polished with curved legs, clawed at the bottom, resting on a beige moquette. A large mahogany bookcase taking up the whole wall opposite the windows, with impeccably bound volumes that seemed to be there for decorative purposes, never used, and over the desk four, framed, highly official-looking diplomas. How dull, I thought every time I entered. Not a single painting. I sat on one of the two matching, comfortable armchairs.

“How are you?” he asked.

“Quite well, thank you.”

"I can see that. Do you want to leave?"

"No."

"Give it a try."

"Not yet."

We talked a while.

"Listen," he said. "I was thinking you should start writing."

I looked at him. My headshrinker. He was nice, large and substantial; a pleasant face, a seductive smile, grey, balding, still young and vigorous at fifty.

"Write what?"

"Anything. Fiction, an event that marked you, a sexual fantasy, a viewpoint you believe in. It might help."

"You or me?"

"Perhaps both of us."

"So you intend to read what I write?"

"Yes, of course. If you don't mind."

"If I know you shall, I might not be totally frank and uninhibited. Or I might lie."

"Please yourself. I am here to help and you, to be helped."

"Oh God, you know my life inside out. What more do you want? And then, I have been reading lately of the new discoveries. Are you up to date? Psychoanalysis is being outmoded."

He smiled. His smile, benign, charming. His white gown spotless and well pressed. Did he have to wear it? Our mental maladies are neither contagious nor soiled. Perhaps he considered it a necessary scepter of his authority.

"I don't like intelligent patients," he said. "They are complicated and complicating."

"I am not intelligent. These are things I read."

"Such as?"

"That perhaps my depressions are due to an imbalance of the minute amounts of chemicals that regulate our mental functions and dictate our behavior. It is both strange and appalling to think that carbon and phosphorus and calcium, oxidation and chemical combinations determine whether a man will be a criminal, a bully, a genius or a mouse. Whether he shall be gay, in both senses, or dull or schizophrenic. It seems harebrained to have had to decipher Rorschach blots and answer silly questions when all that is wrong with me is a missing chemical or an excess of one."

"Thank you for qualifying my questions as silly," he said smiling.

"I'm sorry. I did not mean to belittle your competence."

"The brain, Paul, is the most complex structure in the universe. It consists of trillions of organic cells, minuscule amounts of chemicals and barely detectable electric currents. We, well, not I but researchers, have only just started understanding and mapping its physical functioning. Freud, Yung and Adler and all the pioneers of psychotherapy built up their theories on the evidence of behavioral manifestations of the human being with what limited medical knowledge they possessed and their tremendous insight. They left us the remarkable legacy of psychoanalysis with which to work and they themselves did manage to help a great number of patients. Science does not stop and, of course, we are daily bombarded with new research, new theories and new drugs. I try to keep up, my friend, even if at times I feel my profession speeding too swiftly past

me. I attend conferences and try to keep abreast but basically I am a middle-of-the-roader. I battle on with the old war-horse psychoanalysis plus the new wonder drugs coming out. I do not usually justify myself to my patients but I feel I have to alleviate your worries and forgive me if I sound schoolmasterish and repeat things you probably already know.”

“So now, you want me to write.”

“Yes. And you know why? Because with you, psychoanalysis has been only marginally successful. I ask you my silly questions, as you call them, and you skim on the surface. You bounce off them and bounce them off you. I cannot get my teeth on anything substantial to build on, to start a discussion, to find a cause, to figure out a remedy. And that is a pity because there is an almost creative beauty, an intellectual challenge, an imaginative expansion in psychoanalysis. One can practically psychoanalyze oneself.”

“Easier said than done. I have been psychoanalyzing myself for years. I know most of my failings but I have yet to cure myself. When the depression strikes, I am lost.”

“Of course. I never meant to imply that one can cure oneself. A depressed person will not be magically cured even if all his problems are suddenly solved because the factors that contributed to the depression have had their physical toll in the brain and they cannot be suddenly undone. A clinical depression is a chemical imbalance of the transmitters in the brain and we have known that from the fifties but it is not just that. There are causes that contribute to that state. Stress is one of them, anxiety, heredity and a whole complex of psychological factors and the development of one’s personality. In fact even at present we are not clear which are the causes and which the effects.”

“So the mental and the physical intimately react one on the other?”

“Absolutely. And that’s why the treatment of depression is a combination of medication and psychotherapy.”

“In my case, according to you, medication is working well whereas psychoanalysis is peripheral.”

“You do not open up. Luckily in clinical depressions psychoanalysis is not that vital.”

“I cannot open my psyche to you. You are a friend. You know my other friends, my wife.”

“But I am a doctor, Paul. A confessor. I told you this at the very beginning. I do not talk about my patients even to Nazli. Even when she asks.”

I looked at him. Much as I liked him, he could either be my friend or my doctor. Not both. That would have been too difficult. So far, with my evasiveness I had kept him as a friend. Now with this writing he was asking from me, perhaps, he would become my doctor. I could not decide which was best.

He broke the brief silence.

“When all is said and done,” he said, “you are much, much better. Almost fit, I should say. Those new antidepressants I have been prescribing are remarkable. We have left Dr Freud in our wake. I am surprised you do not want to leave the clinic.”

“A few days more. Or perhaps a few weeks.”

“It’s costing you a lot of money. Or your wife in any case.”

“She has enough and much of it is mine. Was mine. It’s money well spent. She’s happy. I’m happy. Away from each other.”

“Write to me about it.”

“A letter a day to keep the doctor away?”

“Just so.”

“I may be forfeiting a friend.”

“Not necessarily. Besides being your doctor, I shall always be your friend.”

We talked a few minutes longer. Nothing earth-shaking. His message was that I was well enough to leave the clinic. I got up to leave. Other patients were waiting in line.

“Give my love to Nazli,” I said.

“She sends you hers, I forgot to tell you.”

“At home, who psychoanalyzes whom?”

He laughed.

“Oh definitely, at home, I am the nut.”

I left the office and walked to the lobby of the clinic saying good morning to the nurses and orderlies and a few patients walking by in their pajamas and fancy *robes de chambre*. They seemed fine but one can never tell. I seemed fine, too.

I passed Amina. She ignored me.

“Please, Miss,” I called.

She stopped and smiled. She expected a little teasing.

“Thank you,” I told her.

“What for?” she asked.

“For the lovely smile.”

She pretended to be exasperated and moved on.

“Oh, Miss?”

She stopped again.

“Is *set* Marian awake?”

“Not yet. You know she wakes up just before lunchtime.”

She moved off again hurriedly and I left the clinic through the main entrance and into the large garden. Abdou, the gardener, in his filthy galabieh was spraying torrents of water on the green lawn with a huge black hose, splashing about on his bare feet. Resilient Egyptian roses and marguerites seemed to survive the flood. Little sparrows quenched their thirst and took their daily bath in puddles in far corners. So did my shoes on the limestone tiled pathway to the garden gate.

“*Sabah el Kheir, ya Abdou*, good morning, I shall use your bike for a while.”

He smiled with pleasure at the honor.

“By all means, *ya Bey*.”

I took the bicycle and cycled slowly off. Helwan was changing. Like the rest of Egypt. Not for the better. Not for us privileged people. I knew the tiny town well. My father rented a house here, long ago, so that my mother, who had severe lumbago pains, would take daily baths at the Cabritage, a sulphurous spa with a horrid, putrid smell extending far beyond the immediate vicinity of the sanitarium. The town was quiet and drowsy in those days and when a car passed by occasionally, people stood and stared. A place of small, neat villas, by no means luxurious, where better-off retirees chose to spend their last peaceful days on this earth. It was now almost bulging at the seams, steadily becoming more and more crowded, dirty and grimy.

A few miles south, at Tibbin, a new industrial area was being developed with the National Iron and Steel works, a coke manufacturing plant which processed coal powder

from Poland and Russia, steel pipe factories, a motor car assembly plant and other huge projects which were meant to turn Egypt into a self-sufficient industrial power. The black and yellow haze of pollution moved with the wind, sometimes to the desert and sometimes choking Helwan. Rows and rows of ungainly, cheap apartment buildings were built on the fringes of the town, in the desert, looking more like prison gulags than residential houses. With balconies chock-full of washed laundry, the sanitary pipes leaking staining the walls and sewerage forming puddles and tiny ponds between one building and the next. Graffiti was scratched and smeared with paint on every wall with *Allahu Akbar* proliferating and entrances and staircases broken and dilapidated as if on purpose, inspired, it seemed, by a perverse desire to match the interiors of the building with the depressing exteriors. Not a single tree planted, or a garden or a lawn planned for the unfortunate children that were produced in droves to a life of predictable misery. Each born with his divine providence, his fate and luck prescribed at birth, as the Muslim religion affirms. God's clemency was their unawareness of anything better.

I cycled to the railway station which was in the town center. The station a typical colonial relic. So nice to see. There must be hundreds of identical stations in small towns in Africa and India. I do not condone colonialism. I do not know enough about it. I do not know what it meant for the progress and self-respect of the natives. Surely Gandhi did and Saad Zaghloul and the natives who hated their foreign overlords. One can perhaps draw conclusions from that. I just knew the British officers, my father befriended long ago, and I was in awe of them, at the time. So handsome and friendly and condescending to a tiny chap. I lost much of this awe during my studies in England.

I bought Time and Newsweek for the news of the week and the time on my hands. I bought a packet of cigarettes for Abdou. I bought foreign Kit Kat wafers for Amina. She would not accept them that first time.

"For your children," I told her.

"I don't have any."

"Aren't you married?"

Coquettishly, "None of your business."

"Take them, Amina, to fatten up."

"I am fine as I am."

"You are wonderful, you are a doll but Egyptian men prefer fat women. *Simina ou beda*, fat and white."

"I am not white."

"That's why I like you." (like and love, the same word in Arabic).

"Behave yourself *ya khawaga*."

"Okay but please don't humiliate me. Take the chocolates as a sign of friendship."

It had become a regular ritual and she frowned with contrived vexation every time I presented her the Kit Kats. I went to the pharmacy and bought a box of Czech Gold Coin condoms. Then I cycled to the Chinese Gardens. I sat on a stone bench in the sun. The wonderful gardens were in tatters. The manicured grass lawns sandpapered to the hard dry earth by hordes of football playing schoolchildren, the fine limestone statues broken, disfigured, the large limestone pots, devoid of plants and the flower beds of exotic flowers, extensions of the football pitch. Had I not known it in its prime, perhaps I would not have minded.

I sat there not thinking. The sun was pleasant and made me sleepy. Dr Fatthi says sleep replenishes our serotonin levels. Also minimal thought activity. So, I stayed a while keeping my mind vacant. If I started thinking I would work myself in a bind. Drugs or no drugs. I slept a while lying on the stone bench until a schoolchildren's football team moved in for a little after-school-before-going-home practice. I took the bicycle and pedaled sleepily to the clinic. Abdou was waiting for his bike.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," I told him.

"It's still early," he said.

A lot of grace surviving in old-timers. In the lowly old-timers, I should have said. I gave him the cigarettes.

"*Rabbena y khallik*, God keep you," he muttered.

Lunch was being served as I entered the clinic. I saw Marian sitting in the lounge waiting for me. She smiled, I smiled.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good afternoon," she answered.

Her eyes were puffed from sleep. She was given drugs. Sleep was, at the moment, the main part of her therapy. She had combed her hair and put a little makeup on. She had lost some weight and was looking better. Prettier. She was terrible when she came in. Not fat but much plumper than I had ever seen her before. And smashed up.

"How are you?"

"Okay," she said.

"I'll just run and leave these things in my room," I told her.

I was back in a jiffy.

"Shall we go in?" I asked her.

We moved to the dining room and sat at our usual table. Most of the tables were occupied and bits of subdued conversation could be heard here and there but mostly disjointed. It would be the rattle of the cutlery on the plates and the human silence an outsider would notice. The servant brought our servings from the kitchen. I looked at them. I asked him for an empty plate. I removed some of her food and some of mine on the empty plate and asked him to take it away.

"You are merciless," she said with a smile.

"Eat slowly," I told her, "drink some water and it will be all right. I am keeping you company in your hunger."

"Yes," she smiled. "We share the same hunger."

She was supposed to rest after lunch but in the afternoon she knocked at my door and I put aside my reading material and we went down for a little exercise. Dr Fatthi did not want her to tire herself. So we walked in the streets outside the clinic for a little over half an hour in a gentle gait. He usually saw her late afternoon at around seven and we were back on time. I questioned her about these sessions with our friendly doctor but there was no specific direction I could surmise from what she told me. Just talk and talk about recent events in her life. Perhaps he was trying to find a lead, as he did with me, unsuccessfully. I had been reading psychology books for years and had subscribed to a psychiatry periodical which I read avidly but was not always in a position to understand its contents because of the scientific terms and the pharmacology of drugs. Dr Fatthi never failed to express his displeasure.

“Why are you complicating your life?” he used to tell me. “A little knowledge is more dangerous than total ignorance. And the smatterer is, I am sorry to say, foolish.”

“You remind me of our priests,” I told him. “Their motto is, have faith and don’t inquire.”

He laughed.

“The only thing I want to tell you is, don’t ever pretend to be a psychiatrist. It is very dangerous.”

“To whom would I pretend?” I asked.

“To yourself primarily and perhaps to a friend or acquaintance.”

But, by now, it was ingrained, the need to follow closely the progress of psychoanalysis of persons I knew. For the present, Marian’s.

“Are you telling him everything?” I asked.

“No. Some things I would not tell him on pain of death.”

“I sympathize totally.”

By quarter to eight her half-hour session was over and we sat in the lounge. We did not talk much. On purpose. We did not want to be linked. When she came to the clinic, I had not seen her. Dr Fatthi told me, the next day, that Marian a friend of Angela, my wife, was brought to the clinic the night before.

“Do you know her?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” I answered. “She was a colleague of my wife when Angela was in Cairo. What’s wrong?”

“Well, I cannot go into details but I have been treating Marian on and off for some time. In fact your wife introduced us. She sent her to me. Two days ago Marian tried to commit suicide. She jumped out of the window of her bedroom but, miraculously, a ledge broke her fall and she tumbled onto the balcony just below. She is bruised all over but, can you imagine, not a bone was broken. She was in the Greek hospital all day yesterday and she asked to be moved here. When you see her be nice to her but not too nice, if you know what I mean. I want her completely calm. No anxieties, no stress, no emotions.”

I was shaken but kept my mouth shut. I did not see her for the next week because she was under sedation. I did not mention her to Dr Fatthi again. We kept our friendship to ourselves. It was he that told me when to pay her a visit.

Dinner was at eight thirty. Again, the diminution of portions.

“Take it easy,” Marion said, “I’m hungry.”

“So am I,” I told her. “You are doing fine, you are losing weight. You are reverting to the pretty woman I knew. I know Dr Fatthi would say I am causing you stress and anxiety but I don’t care. Finding your old physical comeliness will boost your self-respect. I think that’s important, too.”

From about nine till ten we sat in the lounge watching a film on television with Ismail Yassine. A slapstick comedy. Quite a number of our fellow patients were with us. Glazed eyes and silence, hardly a laugh. At ten, even before the film ended, we were ushered out. Ten-thirty was lights out. Almost a prison. A few subdued goodnights and off I went to the first floor, the men’s section and Marian to the second. I undressed put on my pajamas and started to read in bed but after a short while felt sleepy. I put my tiny alarm clock under my pillow, closed the light and started replenishing my serotonin levels.

It went off at twelve-thirty, quietly, in my ear, under the pillow. I jumped up, took a quick, frantic shower in my tiny bathroom, dried myself, combed my hair, a touch of cologne, put on my *robe de chambre* on my nude body, took my keys, a few condoms, shut the light and, silently, barefoot, slithered along the darkened walls to the staircase. Up one floor, veering to the left, counting, one, two, three, four, five, six doors. An almost inaudible tap and the door opened with a squeak. Damn, we must have it oiled. I keep forgetting. It was dark. I went in. The door squeaked shut.

I took a blind step in the darkness to the warmth of a naked body, almost my size, opulent and soft; to strong, enveloping arms and the rapid tearing off of my gown. To an avid mouth searching mine and a wild tongue. To dexterous, caressing hands and seconds, minutes of breathless fighting kisses and bites. Disoriented difficult movements, intoxicated with passion and the need for constant contact and a stumble to the white, hospital bed. We lay carefully. Another squeaker, this bed of depressions and unhappiness, hardly ever of love. Kisses, caresses, noisy breaths, soft, stifled moans, touching, searching, exposing, prodding, squeezing gently and roughly, tongues like brushes painting body parts, arousing nerve endings, expressing requirements, requests. I entered; started moving in this world beyond our world, fluid, warm, sensual and spiritual, primordial and occult, a world godly and devilish, an instrument of survival. A flash, the Gold Coins! I stopped. Got off the bed with minimal squeaking and searched for my dressing gown in the darkness on the floor, and when I found it, fumbled for the pockets. Marian laughed. She whispered,

“Dr Fatthi would be very upset if he knew how much stress and anxiety your delay is causing me.”

I tiptoed back, in armor, to her open body, to delve inside her, to move, to love her, to ignore the squeaking of the bed and reach our liberating, silent-as-possible groaning orgasm. To rest in a sweat, an embrace, my hand on a plump, full breast; hers holding the bridge of love we shared.

“Do you think hunger is aphrodisiac?” she asked in whisper.

“That’s what they say.”

“It must be. Is that why you are starving me?”

“Yes.”

“Liar. You want me to lose weight.”

“Yes. I want you to be the beautiful girl you were.”

“I was never beautiful.”

“You were; you are beautiful in a strange, special way. And sexy and lively and attractive.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Never stopped. Ever since those kisses at Agami.”

“It’s strange how our lives were linked throughout. Crossing again and again and now we are in a loony bin together.”

“Isn’t it wonderful? Aren’t we a little lucky after all?”

I laughed. What irony! Yes, I thought, wonderful and lucky, with our unexpected, furtive happiness in a nuthouse.

“To be together? Oh, yes Marian. I wish you would always look at the bright side and have the courage not throw yourself off balconies.”

“Don’t talk as if you don’t know how it is.”

“I do, my darling. That was a silly thing to say.”

“We shall get better. I already feel less stressed, less depressed. You are my wonder drug.”

“Dr Fatthi said I am well enough to leave. He said I should give it a try.”

She slipped out of my embrace and turned on her back. She was motionless. Eyes open, looking up in the darkness, the abyss of her life. I caressed her thick, black hair.

“What did you answer?” she said, almost loudly.

“What do you think?”

“Don’t torture me.”

“I told him, no. I wasn’t ready. Marian, we shall leave this place together.”

She leapt at me like a tigress, mauled me and devoured me. She was a person, she said it herself, who needed sex, who expressed herself with sex. Most women can take it or leave it, some are indifferent to it but to some it is manna. To Marian it was considerably more. We rested again after our second lovemaking and almost went to sleep in our warm fleshy comfort. But I was careful not to let myself go. We could not afford to be found out. So we talked a while in whispers and I asked her if Dr Fatthi told her what her particular depression is called.

“I think he called it hypomania,” she said. I am not sure.

I left at three-thirty. Collected and wrapped the used condoms, gave Marian a lingering kiss and her sleeping pill she should have taken hours earlier, despite her protestations that she did not need it, that she would now sleep like a log, put on my *robe de chambre* and left through the squeaking door of bliss, along the dark corridor, down the staircase and into my room.

“Get up, get up, get up,” chirped Amina. “How can you sleep so much?”

“I was dreaming of you.”

“Is that why you look so tired?”

“Oh yes. It was wonderful. We played lovely games. Shall I tell you?”

“I don’t want to hear. Now, get up. I have not got all day.”

She comes to my bed and throws back the covers.

“A kiss, Amina, please.”

She bends and I tumble her on the bed. I try to kiss her lips. She turns her face and my kiss lands on her cheek. She carries out her ritual little slaps and gets up. With the effort her uniform gathers high over her knees. Two shapely, milk-chocolate legs make me ogle. She is annoyed.

“Behave yourself, Paul. Somebody might come in.”

“Hey! You have my name right, finally. And no *khawaga* to it.”

“You are behaving like a schoolboy.”

“That’s why I’m here. I’m a little cuckoo.”

She laughs. I jump up and give her the Kit Kats. She takes them.

“I don’t eat them,” she says, “I give them away.”

“I give them with my love. You give my love away?”

“Yes.”

“Shame on you.”

She laughs throatily, deliciously.

I stare at her. She looks back. We look intently at each other for a few seconds then she moves to the door.

“I have not got all day,” she says. “I have work to do.”

I wash, shave, dress, have breakfast and return to my room. No cycling today. No Dr Fatthi either. There is a small desk in my room. I sit down with a few sheets of paper. I start writing.

Respected Master,
Guardian of our Souls and Sanity,
Dr Fatthi,

At best, my letters shall be the ramblings of a demented mind, full of clues. At worst, a rational accounting, devoid of any. I cannot decide which is best. Perhaps both are useful and, in any case, I am not disciplined enough to stick solely to the second. But let us start with Freud’s favored method. Childhood memories.

I don’t recall exactly when my condition started but it was early on when I was five or six. A timid and frightened boy through most of my childhood. Why this should be so when I was raised in a normal household with no hereditary problems, with a kindly and placid mother and a dynamic extroverted father is a mystery of the human brain. For years, I had terrible nightmares and was afraid to go back to sleep. Sometimes I would scream and cry and rush in my parents’ bedroom. On one occasion I barged in as they were making love and my anxieties had one more item added to their list. (A clue? Do you want a description? Imagine: it is still perfectly clear in my mind.) I remember being taken regularly to a pediatrician to be stripped and put under a fortifying ray lamp of some sort just in case my malady was the result of abnormal physical weakness for I was very thin and high strung. Luckily, child psychiatrists did not proliferate in those days or else I would have made the rounds of their clinics as well.

My first days at school were tragic. I cried for days and my mother had to stay in class, in the kindergarten, for the first few days after which she moved to the playground, sitting on a bench I could see from the class window. I do not remember having played with other children or made any friends in those early school days. Later on things smoothed out and primary and secondary school were more or less normal. I was a mediocre student a mediocre athlete, pliable and friendly with my classmates but one thing I never overcame was my shyness and timidity.

Later when I was studying abroad the problem started emerging but in a milder version. Just a few depressions in those five years which, nevertheless, would last for a couple of months. I would isolate myself, move to remote neighborhoods and keep out of sight and out of touch. I would walk the streets, sometimes all night, and wonder why people were talking so much to one another. What did they have to say? Why did I not have the same need to blab, to communicate? I never thought to seek psychiatric help. Eventually my friends would track me down and with their help I would return to normality. I owe a lot to the three or four good friends from school that happened to be studying with me in England and were always there to help whenever they sensed trouble.

They went to extraordinary, almost comic, lengths to bring me to their carefree student lifestyle of parties and girls and sex because, though I was a good-looking young man, I was unable to work up a relationship with a girl. Ramsey, a real lady killer, behind

whom trailed any number of lovelorn damsels, convinced one of them to break me in and provide suitable instruction in the arts of love with the approach of a geisha: gently, politely, taking it easy. The appointed girl, for whom lovemaking was as uncomplicated as having breakfast and quite a bit more pleasurable, was fond of me. We had met on several occasions before D-day. I suppose she was intrigued by my diffident indifference and nonchalantly agreed to do this favor for our Don Juan. I was almost bullied into her arms and at the age of nineteen lost my virginity. (Do you need details? I could not get an erection the first night. Another clue: it happened again with a girl I fell in love with. Her, I lost. She was not as patient or as persistent as Coral.) I still, fondly, remember sweet Coral with her pretty face, generous heart and hospitable body.

In Egypt where I returned to live and work I had my ups and downs. My condition when it recurred became increasingly severe especially after I was married. My wife entrusted me to a psychiatrist who was a friend of hers (Guess who?) and he has since taken me under his wing. I spent many glum and unhappy days in his clinic in Helwan outside Cairo and I have been chewing pills non-stop ever since.

TO BE CONTINUED (...it was terribly boring writing it! I suppose, reading it, as well.)

I had lunch with Marian. We are both getting very hungry and very sexy. It seems it is true after all. Hunger is aphrodisiac. She cannot take her eyes off me and when I look at her she smiles with such melancholy. I am her wonder drug because she is in love with me. I am both her medicine and her affliction. I wonder what she is thinking. That we are happy? That she is getting better? Wondering how long it will last, this happiness? A month? Two months? It cannot go on forever. We shall have to leave the clinic. And then what? Both our lives in a mess. She is still looking at me. I look away. I am afraid people will start to notice and then I smile. I have noticed that only healthy people are curious. Disturbed ones are self-centered; they are not interested in their surroundings.

When Dr Fatthi announced Marian's arrival and asked me if I knew her, I said, "Yes, quite well," and asked him casually if I could see her.

"Not for a few days," he told me. She would be put under complete sedation for forty-eight hours. He explained that people often think that a clinical depression is simply a state of apathy. On the contrary it is a state of hyperactivity, decreased need for sleep, high blood pressure and heart rate. It is an overwhelming fire which will not subside and burns you from the inside. So the classic initial treatment is prolonged narcosis: drug induced sleep that is gradually reduced day by day. I saw her a week later in the early evening when Dr Fatthi allowed the visit. I went in and she smiled.

She said, "Finally!" and started crying.

I went to her and held her hand because a nurse was in the room tidying her medicine cabinet. I did not know what to say. What does one say in such situations? Why are you crying? Why did you do it? You look fine? She looked terrible. One eye blue and recovering, the side of her face scarred with crusted blood, part of her hair above her ear shaved with stitches showing, her nose thankfully intact, one arm bound with cotton bandages and plaster, in a sling, and her knee trussed in the same manner. Worst of all she had put on weight and her face was unnaturally puffed. When the nurse finally left I hugged her and the desperation of her hug, the strength of her good arm around me, the sobs, moved me.

“We shall be all right,” I told her, “we shall be together.”
She calmed down, she smiled. “Yes,” she said.
I caressed her head, her shoulder; I squeezed the bandage of her arm and smiled.
“How are you feeling?” I asked.
“Like shit. Much better since you entered.”
I sat on the bed. I kissed her cheek and then her mouth.
“Come tonight,” she told me. “I shall pretend I take my pills but won’t. I’ll take them later.”
“Marian...,” I started to protest.
“Do I look horrible?”
“No, no. You look fine.”
She smiled.
“We won’t switch on the lights.”
“Marian, Dr Fatthi...”
“Please... I need you.”
I crept up after lights-out. I was not quite sure of her room. I opened a door next to hers. Darkness, not a sound. I shut it quietly. The next one was hers. I remembered the squeak from before. Her bedside lamp was on, covered with a newspaper. She was propped up on two pillows, waiting. I went up to her and sat on the bed.
“Thank you,” she said.
I kissed her on her cheek and she turned her face to find my mouth. We kissed. Her tongue searched my mouth.
“Take off your clothes,” she told me.
I was already aroused. I had been continent for so long.
“Now help me take off mine.”
I removed the sling supporting her arm and slowly pulled her nightgown up and carefully eased it over her head and along her bandaged arm.
“It doesn’t hurt much,” she said, “Nothing is broken. Just a hematoma.”
She lifted her torso and I slid her panties off. Her body, chubbier than I had ever seen it before, was radiating heat waves. I felt it on my face, my hands. I felt her desire in her kisses, in the movements of her active hand. I climbed beside her on the bed and caressed her luscious breasts, the enlarged tummy, the fattened legs. She was lying supine because of her injured arm, holding me tight with the other. She took my hand and placed it on her moist genitals.
“Feel how much I want you,” she said.
My face was aflame, my longing was choking me. I felt, I kissed, I bit, I licked, hysterically as if I was drowning and her body was my oxygen, my breath, my resurrection. My panic excited her.
“Come in me, my love. Come in,” she pleaded.
“I haven’t got any condoms,” I said.
“It’s all right. It’s all right today, it’s safe, but get some.”
We made love twice, rapidly, feverishly, emotionally, a little frightened because it was the first time, because we were violent and the bed was noisy, almost moving on its wheels, forgetting that our neighbors were probably knocked out cold with sedating pills for the night. We did not talk much in the interval, we just held each other. The wellbeing

and contentment was a potent medicine. Did Dr Fatthi know it? Would he have prescribed it?

“I had to jump out of a window to get into your arms again,” Marian said caressing my face.

“Luck is blind and fate sometimes demented,” I agreed.

We kissed softly, tenderly, many times. Yes luck was on our side, at the moment. There was no guarantee it would not veer suddenly away. We kissed again to get our fill in case it did. After a while I helped her put on her clothes, brought a glass of water for her sleeping pill and crept to my room.

Almost a whole month had gone by since that first wonderful reunion. Marian was recovering, slowly but steadily, with psychotherapy, antidepressants, sleep, hunger and our lovemaking.

Dr Fatthi would not see me after I wrote the first letter. A few days later I asked him why he was giving me the cold shoulder and he said that I did not need him just now and would I please get on with the letters. He was putting some gentle pressure on me by making me feel I was wasting time and money. Of course I could not leave Marian. I did not know how my departure would affect her. How it would affect me. So I decided to apply myself a little more dynamically to my letter writing.

Dear guardian of my Sanity,
Dr Fatthi,
Where were we?

Oh yes. I returned to Egypt in the late sixties after five years of marginally successful studies abroad to enter the family business. I often wondered, in those days, if I had the stuff, the backbone to have struck it out on my own in another country. In Canada, for instance, or the US. Many of my friends have made their fortunes there. I chose, however, the easy way out. The settled business, the home, the club, the sports, the ready money. It is another of the many questions of my life that will remain unanswered and troubling because the easy way out turned to be a long and thorny journey. But then, would those relentless depressions not have hounded me even abroad? In any case, when I returned to Egypt I tried to adapt to an uninspiring work routine and to fashion as pleasant an existence as possible. After all, I rationalized, how many people are truly fascinated by the work they are doing? I had made my choice, good or bad, and changing it would have upset my family's equilibrium, not to speak of my own.

During winter, my main recreational activities were centered on the club with its wide variety of sports, the few friends I had, the nights out for companionable dinners and occasional dancing at the stereos when girls were available. In summer things picked up considerably when expatriate friends returned to Cairo to visit their families and spend a few weeks of carefree vacations. A central core always seemed to coalesce with subsequent additions and subtractions of less intimate acquaintances and friends of friends that were always welcome to come and go as they pleased. Our group, in those few weeks of exuberant summer bustle, was like an amorphous blob, that inflated and deflated but with a nucleus well-knit and intact.

Alexandria was our most frequent destination out of Cairo. We settled, for a few days at a time, in the less luxurious hotels of the city and enjoyed the sea on beaches which had not yet become overcrowded and suffocating as they did in later years. In the

evenings, our group habitually drove out west of the city, in jam-packed cars, to Agami to the lone seaside hotel with music and an open-air dancing floor of marble tiles. Agami has since become heartbreakingly suburban with high-rise apartment buildings, traffic jams and pollution. In those days it was practically deserted with just a few bungalows, a few villas, miles and miles of fine, white sand, so white it reflected the sun and caused you to squint and a glorious sea of unbelievably luminous turquoise that turned purple in the distance. In the evenings, the sound of the frothing, phosphorescent waves and the fresh sea breeze after a sweltering day in the sun restored the energy that was sapped in the daytime. This was bolstered by ice-cold beers and whiskies that put us in a jovial mood for cheerful talk, jokes and dancing. The clientele of the Agami Palace were the young, well-off, suntanned progeny of the more sophisticated and educated classes of Egyptian society and were, even then, straining at the leash of society's conventions. They are still straining, forty years on, for the Muslim religion and fanaticism have made a forceful comeback in Egypt and the Arab world. In many ways those days were far more lax. One could still kiss a girl on the mouth while dancing.

In particle physics the nucleus is held together by the strong force. Our group shared this characteristic. Most of us were school friends and university colleagues and once the fusion took place it needed a cyclotron to break it apart. I was hardly the soul of sociability but the nucleus had a solid grip on me through my sense of loyalty and camaraderie and I followed its merry meandering sometimes willingly and sometimes with resignation. There were usually many people in our group I did not know and throughout my life I have had a problem with small talk. I am not a somber person and certainly not a genius who scorns the trivial. On the contrary, I look at this ability, this gift for gracious, light-hearted social interaction with much admiration and feelings of inadequacy. I was both stuck to our group and slightly apart.

That summer in Alexandria a few years after my permanent homecoming, I cannot even place the year exactly though it was to be a signpost in my life, I met Marian. The crowd was large and ever changing and it was not always easy to assimilate all those faces, male and female, gay and chattering. Friends greeted each other animatedly at the beach, persons you would not see again, and others put in an appearance in the evening at Agami, whom you had not seen at the beach. Again, I find it amusing to refer to particle physics, where the electrons revolve so rapidly around the nucleus that they cannot be pinpointed at any given moment and can only be described as a vertiginous cloud. That was how I pictured our group. Apart from the core, the rest were a cloud. Most of the core I knew well and the few I did not were becoming familiar. Marian was part of the cloud. I had not seen before. She had been introduced in the group by a girl of the core who was becoming familiar. Her name was Angela and not only was she of the core but was at its very center. She was thin, fair and pretty with a well proportioned body and a lovely pair of legs. She had a sparkling personality full of energy and vivaciousness and was an indefatigable talker. She had just finished an MBA with highest honors at university and was looking around for a job. I figured she would not be searching for long because she was charming, amusing, intelligent and easily the most popular person in our midst. Marian was much younger than us. We were, most of us, in our middle-twenties or beyond. Marian was eighteen or nineteen. She was a tall, buxom girl with black hair, regular features and a comeliness that defied a rather pronounced bone structure of face and body. You could not say at first glance that she was pretty. Her

attractiveness reached you through familiarity and, with it, a sexiness not in the least bit contrived.

Marian was with us in Alexandria for just a few days. She was quiet and reserved and out of her familiar milieu, as I was in many ways, and because of that I made the effort, in the merry-go-round atmosphere at the beach, to talk to her in my disjointed and awkward manner. She responded with alacrity and I suspect with some relief at not being left silent and detached on the sidelines. I found out a few things about her. Her mother and Angela's mother were friends and Angela took a friendly interest in her and often invited her to join in the various activities and parties that were an ongoing part of her life. She had finished secondary school a year back and was also looking for a job somewhat casually because she did not need to work. She inherited from her father an entire building in Heliopolis and sufficient wealth. She must have felt at a disadvantage in our midst where almost everyone had attended university and had acquired in those four or five years of studies that special assurance that comes with a college degree as well as an informal and relaxed attitude in social intercourse. She had no interest in further studies, which, she believed, would not be much use in marriage and the raising of children. 'I suppose you are right,' I said, though I absolutely disagreed. Was marriage, then, her only goal? At that time, I hardly thought of marriage. It was something that would happen someday, almost by accident, almost of its own accord. Marian left us suddenly that summer as her mother was taken ill.

TO BE CONTINUED (this is getting tiresome and does not seem of much use either to you or to me.)

The next day I could not be bothered to spend it in my room writing. I took Abdou's bicycle and cycled to the other end of Helwan where there is a natural fountain that gushes warm water with a foul smell of rotten eggs and tastes about as revolting. I remembered it from the old days when it was at the edge of the desert and people came to it to drink the water for its medicinal properties. Now the expanding town had surrounded it with buildings and roads. A fence had been constructed around the fountain and a small entrance fee was required to enter the enclosure. It was still there, just as it was thirty years ago, a square stone edifice with taps on the four sides with the water pouring into four stone basins in an eternal flow. It was smack in the middle of the roughly rectangular area enclosed by the fence. All around were green wooden benches, their paint faded and flaking, where two or three elderly *effendis* were napping in the warmth of the sun, the peace and the gurgling of the running water. I sat on a bench and turned my face to the sun inviting a tan. I thought of Dr Fatthi. I was concealing as much as I was revealing both in psychoanalysis and in my letters. And, in any case, I did not reveal all that much in my first two letters. I was being unfair and devious. Why had I agreed to play this game if I could not play it honestly? I remembered that year in Alexandria. Nothing much happened. But many seeds were planted.

I swam with Marian on the second or third day to a tiny rocky island some way off the shore. We climbed on the jagged rocks careful not to puncture our feet and rested and talked for a while before returning. She was a good swimmer. Strong arms, strong legs and powerful shoulders for a girl. But also lovely breasts straining at her costume and eyes that were a dark blue I had not noticed before. Her black hair was wet and stringy and left her face stark and unadorned. And yet an awareness of beauty did come

through. Not overwhelming, just an allusion. Vague and confusing, inviting you to examine it.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You have blue eyes!”

She smiled in her pleasant, still reserved mode.

“Yes, they are a secret blue. Not many people notice them.”

In the evening we met at the Agami Palace. She had a car and was, like me, conscripted to carry members of the group that did not have one, from Alex to Agami. She was attractively dressed, rosy and tanned from the sun and lightly made up. She looked pretty and with the makeup quite a few years older. Her décolletage accentuated her generous breasts and I thought that she would not be on the sidelines much longer. There were about twenty persons in our group and the males predominated, boisterous and in high spirits. We ordered drinks and the dancing started right off. Some of the boys were already paired but their girls also took turns with the unattached males. Angela was in top form. She was the star of the group and did not stop dancing, laughing, talking and had a repartee for every one of us.

“Get up and dance Paul,” she kept on urging me, “don’t be a dry old stick.”

Marian sat next to me and we started many little conversations which were abruptly cut off when she was asked to dance again and again as I had predicted. Angela kept pestering me to dance and I got up for a walk on the beach. I walked on the sand along the sea with the tumbling, frothy waves which seemed to glow in the darkness. That wonderful oxygenated breeze could revive a corpse, even a dry old stick like me. I returned a while later and Marian asked me where I had been.

“For a walk,” I said. “Would you like to dance?”

“Yes.”

She smiled. She had been expecting it.

“I don’t dance very well,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter.”

On the dance floor I held her tightly. She came right up to me. She was a tall girl and her full body as it stuck to mine felt fleshy and sensual. Her complexion was smooth and her thick, black hair which had been done in a curly cascade tickled my face and smelled of shampoo. As we danced a romantic slow we squeezed her breasts between us to, I imagined, a mutual contentment. She turned to look at me and smiled often.

I said, “I hope they keep up the slows because the cha-cha’s and the mambos are beyond me.”

“I hope so too,” she answered with a smile.

She kept on turning her face to look at me. The following dance was once again a slow.

“Good,” she said as soon as it started.

I looked at her and she looked at me boldly. She was asking for something. Asking without words and I knew what it was. I kissed her on her mouth and our tongues started to tangle, to interlace, to taste, to explore without the slightest hesitation. The dance floor was crowded and we were lost in its midst. Lost in a world which was not love because it could not be. Not so soon. Rather, a world of shared attraction and tenderness and sex that did not need words. Not one word of endearment was exchanged. The pleasure and the bond of the kiss was enough. A few more slows followed without a

break and we kept on moving dreamily to the music, much of the time with mouths locked on each other.

When the music changed and we sat at our table no one asked Marian for a dance. It was funny. It was as if she was out of bounds. As if she was there just for me. And we did dance again and kiss dreamily until about one when the party broke up. We said “good night” with a smile and, “see you tomorrow”. The next day Angela told me she left in a rush early in the morning because her mother was taken ill. We, the core of the group, stayed in Alexandria another two days and when we returned to Cairo our summer routine of nightly outings to stereos and nightclubs continued for another two weeks with escalating exhaustion for me as I had to work from eight till five, six days a week. I had practically stopped all sporting activities at the club and what kept me awake and available in the evenings were the innumerable double cups of Turkish coffee I consumed. I asked Angela about Marian and she told me that her mother had undergone a serious operation and was unavailable for the time being.

Eventually the cyclotron of time broke up the nucleus of the group as most of the expatriates repatriated to their adopted lands. The cloud of electron hangers-on without a nucleus to attract them left its orbit and was lost in space. I kept in touch with Angela following the dispersal of our group and after I caught up with my sleep, after I started once again playing squash, tennis and swimming my laps at the club, I invited her out for dinner.

I think I went to sleep in the sun but not for long. I left and walked drowsily, dragging in tow Abdou’s bicycle a short distance further down the road to look at a swimming pool I remembered from the old days. It was empty, dilapidated and seemed abandoned. In those days during the summer months, young people from Cairo frequented it on the weekends and I loved to just sit and watch the fun and the noise, the high spirits and splashing that went on. Why was everything falling apart? The government intent on industrialization neglected the recreational needs of the people. The need to create a happy, pleasant environment for them.

I cycled to town for my usual shopping: a magazine, Abdou’s cigarettes and Amina’s Kit Kats that she gave away. Helwan was crowded and hectic and the poverty and rubbish strewn in the streets disheartening. Small shops with shoddy goods, hand carts with fruit and vegetables of poor quality, the populace raggedly dressed, schoolchildren returning from school in dirty off-white uniforms and worn out, unpolished shoes, starving, cowering dogs and a few horse drawn carriage with all three units, horse, vehicle and driver in an equal state of privation. The population explosion was accelerating. The fatalistic Islamic motto, each one is born with his fortune and everything is written at one’s birth was proving disastrous.

Had lunch with Marian. She commented on my sun burnt face. She wants to cycle with me. “Ask Dr Fatthi,” I suggest. She seems so much better, has lost weight, the pudginess of her face almost gone. She is looking pretty again. Younger and happier. The hunger is subsiding. Our bodies are getting used to the fewer calories. Dr Fatthi is happy with her progress. He does not know that we use a private medication he has not prescribed. It is a hunger that is not subsiding; a hunger that may be the main part of her therapy.

After lunch, a little reading, a nap, Marian’s knock at my door in the afternoon, a long pleasant walk in the quieter, dirt free part of Helwan before her session with Dr

Fatthi. Small talk, smiles, holding hands, little hugs, anticipating our midnight joust, our vital, earthy drug, putting out of mind that it will soon have to end.

Next morning, a wake-up kiss at ten, breakfast, back to my room to write a letter.

Dr Fatthi,

It was three years after my return to Cairo that I met Angela. As soon as I was back I started working at my father's printing company. It was a relatively large concern and we printed, amongst other things, the Greek daily newspaper. We had about thirty people working for us and I had to learn the business fast because my father was unwell and intended to retire in Greece. In those three years I not only worked hard but managed to fashion a reasonable life for myself. Oh, the depressions kept hitting me but they were not debilitating. I think my membership at the club helped and certainly the sports which I assiduously practiced. Of course, I had not yet realized the seriousness of my situation. In the meantime, my father left Egypt and I was on my own, which despite my increased responsibilities, nevertheless, meant a more relaxed environment for me because we did not always see eye to eye on a great many issues both at work and our private lives. He was constantly after me to get married and kept proposing this and that girl from a good family. I found those old fashioned arrangements inconceivable and his barrage of proposals was met with a barrage of refusals. He even managed to make unpalatable girls I might have chosen if I were left alone.

In my previous letter I wrote that after our summer group disbanded, I invited Angela to dinner. We had fun because she always seemed to be in high spirits. That first date was followed by other cinema dates and dinners and nighttime drives in the still leisurely roads of Cairo and its suburbs and a steady, mutually satisfying relationship was born. Obviously she was unattached just then which was lucky because she was not the type of girl to stay single for very long. We flirted and courted for a year and some months; made love and fell in love. It was the happiest time I spent with her in our life together. I can say that not once during that year was I visited by even a hint of a depression. If I had, she might not have married me. I was not terribly sociable but I am sure she had plans in her mind to change me. Did she not know that people rarely change and that relationships climb to an apex and dip to an endurable habit or an unendurable hell? Let me warn you right now, I shall probably be throwing much, if not most, of the blame on Angela but, I am sure, a psychoanalyst of the caliber of Dr Fatthi will form his own equitable estimation; his own point of view.

In the first few months of my involvement with Angela she was hired in the biggest private Import-Export firm in Egypt. It was in the early days of the *Infatah*, the loosening of government restrictions to the private sector in both industry and commerce. Helmi, a Copt, the major shareholder of the firm was a top businessman with considerable connections to the higher echelons of government, especially the Ministry of Commerce. He was familiar with the ins and outs of government procedure and manipulated the bureaucracy with well placed gifts to persons big and small. He was, within a short period of time, controlling a major part of the agricultural exports and industrial imports of Egypt. Nothing much to look at, in his early fifties, pot bellied and balding, he had devilish, intelligent eyes giving off sparks behind thick spectacles. He hired Angela as his personal executive secretary and, as I expected, she very soon became the star of his organization. She had the same gift, the same facility of maneuver, of

getting things done in the ponderous government machinery. Her salary was doubled and tripled in a very short time and was soon in need of her own personal secretary. She hired Marian. I saw Marian on and off during those first few years but I was Angela's man and our meetings were proper, friendly and formal.

I married Angela quite suddenly after a quarrel and the first depression I had in quite a while. A short, tortured one, needless to say. The thought of losing her was impossible to contemplate. I recovered very quickly when I made up my mind to marry her. I proposed; she said, yes, and we married within a week. Marian was at the wedding and the reception looking alone and forlorn. She kept staring at me and I felt like telling her wake up, kiddo, romantic heartbreaks are outmoded, if that's your problem. Go find yourself a man.

We settled in my family's flat where I lived alone ever since my parents moved permanently to Greece and our first few years were pleasant enough not without some painful adjustments, nor devoid of difficulties. The features in our character that brought us together now tended to create tensions and quarrels. She was sociable and needed movement and social interaction, parties and gatherings. I was progressively becoming reclusive. She loved to rub shoulders with people of wealth and power whereas I felt devalued and diminished by the rich and famous. Perhaps it was partly her doing, her constant praise of so and so who had a villa in Paris, who made a fortune, who became a minister. Perhaps also the fact that she was earning more money than me. At the beginning, we had terrible squabbles when I refused to go to parties and shouting matches that left her sobbing and left me sick and depressed. She started going out on her own. I did not protest. It was the only way we could stay together. If it were not for the good sex we shared, our marriage would have dissolved early on.

Two little girls were born in quick succession and we were lucky to find a dependable elderly lady, who settled with us in the house, to take care of them. Angela did not have much time to spare and I must not give the impression that she was a bad mother but her dynamism, her work and social whirl of dinners and cocktail parties kept her busy and away from home almost every evening. The day she did not go out she was moody and bad tempered. Our relationship under the circumstances wilted and even the sex lost its meaning and magic. We hardly talked in a companionable manner as husband and wife and were increasingly alienated.

She became very close with Marian, drew her in her social circle and they started traveling three or four times a year to London for shopping. I wondered if they went to dancing clubs to meet men and have affairs. I wondered if they had steady boyfriends they met every few months. Marian was turning to be a rival of sorts and my initial liking for her and complacency for her close ties with Angela turned to irritation and antipathy. Angela constantly asked her to join us in our family excursions to Alexandria, the Red Sea and Marsa Matrouh and traveled with us in our car. We picked her up from her home in Heliopolis. She was never on time and we had to wait for her, children and all, by the half-hour below her flat in the car. She was fussy and difficult about the hotel rooms, the restaurants and beaches. She was constantly on the lookout for men dispensing with the seaside to swim in the hotel swimming pools on the off chance of a casual flirtation. I did not know what her love life was like but it did not seem terribly chaste. So what kind of an influence did she have on Angela?

TO BE CONTINUED (Not a word from you Dr Fatthi! How's my style?)

I did not write for the next few days. I was not summoned to Dr Fatthi either. I met him in a corridor and he smiled and said,

“Your style is fine. Keep writing though I believe you have recovered.”

I started cycling with Marian. She was given lighter sedation and was sleeping less by now. Dr Fatthi gave her permission to do some cycling with me but not too strenuously. We woke up at about the same time and had a late breakfast together. She wore a pair of jeans looking, once again, pretty and sexy and we walked to a bicycle shop not far off and hired two bicycles and roamed in the calmer parts of Helwan. I showed her the sights, for all they were worth, and the house we had rented in my childhood many years ago.

“Why, it’s a ruin,” she exclaimed.

“Yes. It was not like that thirty-five years ago,” I said. “It was owned by an elderly French couple and in the garden, which was large and well kept, they raised pigeons, chickens, ducks and rabbits. A veritable menagerie that occupied me all morning. They used to fill a ditch they had dug up with water every day and it was a thrill to see the ducks and little ducklings swim round and round. Their obvious delight almost equaled mine.”

We meandered happily for a while and when Marian started feeling tired we returned to the clinic. After lunch she went to her room for a nap and I wrote my sequel.

Dr Fatthi,

That first time I came to the clinic, I never told you the true cause. You were right to accuse me of being surreptitious and secretive. Our marriage was not yet finished though it was dragging pitifully along. Any sort of meaningful communication had ceased between Angela and me. It was the children that kept us together. They were three and two years old at the time. Separation would have meant separation from the children for me. It was an unbearable thought.

One day I received a phone call from Helmi’s wife.

“I want to see you,” she said.

“What for?” I asked.

“We cannot talk about it over the phone,” she replied.

In the afternoon I passed by and picked her up in my car from her swanky building in Giza by the Nile. She was a good looking woman, at least a decade older than us but well preserved and always elegantly dressed. I had been at their house on several occasions with Angela and she was always the perfect hostess, convivial and flirty. She entered the car and after the social civilities apologized for inconveniencing me and apologized in advance for what she was about to tell me.

“It hurts me,” she said, “as much as it will probably hurt you.”

I could not imagine what she was talking about.

“My husband,” she said, “is having an affair with your wife.”

I was speechless. Helmi was not, to my mind, the kind of a man to attract Angela. To attract any woman, for that matter. But then I was a man. How could I know how a woman thinks and feels? What would attract her to a man? Money? Power? He was short, plump, pot bellied, with a shiny balding pate and ugly, though not unpleasant to look at. And then every ugly person seems has a redeeming feature. He had a charming smile and

those devilishly intelligent eyes. Still, I could not understand it because on top of everything he was at least fifteen, twenty years older than Angela and he did not have the reputation of a womanizer.

“Are you sure?” I muttered.

“If I were not absolutely sure I would not have called you. They are together at this very moment in a flat he keeps for his extramarital activities.”

We were driving around aimlessly from one street to the next. I could not collect my thoughts.

“What do you propose to do about it?” she asked.

“I really don’t know. I have to think. I am awfully confused.”

“Whatever you decide, please be discreet. I would also rather you did not tell Angela of our meeting.”

But I did tell Angela of our meeting. How else would I have broken the news? How would I say I found out? She flew first into a rage and then into hysterics.

“That bloody, frustrated bitch calling you up to load you with lies. You had no right to meet her behind my back. Don’t you see her obvious ploy? She needs a man. She needs to be fucked that frustrated bitch and she thinks you are the perfect candidate. I could tell she was sweet on you. All those seductive smiles she gives you. You should have kissed her, you ninny. You should have suggested an appointment for a lay. Told her it would be your revenge. You would have seen the response and realized that she is making it all up to get you. I shall never forgive you for this treachery.”

And on and on and on.

I did not believe her. I was just devastated. I thought, my goodness, these things happen in novels and films. In other families, perhaps. Not us. Not for a moment did I think when I married Angela that I would find myself in such a situation. I lapsed instantly into a depression such as I never had before. I moved out of our bedroom into a spare room and stayed there for days, not going to work, hardly sleeping, hardly eating, not caring about anything not even my darling children, until Angela realized that my condition was serious and brought me to the clinic.

Helmi’s wife tried calling me at work and at home but I was not in a state to talk to her. Angela surely made a big fuss with Helmi and he in turn almost certainly quarreled with his wife. So two families’ peace was disrupted by my less than subtle handling of the affair. It was probably not the first time the Helmis were facing this sort of crisis and about a year later I learnt that they had separated.

Sometimes, Dr Fatthi, I get philosophical and sensible and marvel at my egoism. Because it was clearly egoism that threw me into that depression. Would a woman look at another man if she were happy with the one she had? Is just one person at fault in such a situation? The answer to both questions is no. There is obviously a flaw in the way we are brought up, in our psychic indoctrination since childhood, in the way our society expects us to behave. Adultery is made to be almost a capital offense. Husbands still murder their wives in many societies if they have a lover and they are morally exonerated by public opinion. Are things not going to change? Is society so sclerotic as to be unable to adapt sensibly to such situations?

I am still tied to Angela however much I hate her sometimes. And then we do share something very precious: our children. They are what kept us together for so long. They are the big victims of this affair. And this is my big impasse. I have often

contemplated suicide and it is only the thought of my two lovely little girls that has put me off.

TO BE CONTINUED (Is it getting interesting?)

As far as I know, Marian's first bout of serious depression came with her mother's death. She had a married sister in Lebanon but lived with her mother in Cairo, whom I met on several occasions with Angela. Her mother, a tall, stout, domineering woman ruled her life. Literally overwhelmed her. She kept Marian on a tight leash and involved herself in the minutest details of her life. Marian submitted to this as if it was the natural course of things. Her father died several years earlier and there was no counterbalancing authority in their household that might have moderated this implacable hold on her. I never managed to warm up to Marian's mother though she was very fond of me. She used to tell Marian, "I pray every night that you find a man like Paul." Her attachment to her mother was obvious when after that one-night flirtation at Agami with its unconsummated promise, she did not give a second thought to romance when her mother's health was at stake. Subsequently, a few years later when her mother was seriously ill, going in and out of hospitals, Marian's panic was palpable and heart-rending and there was not a thing one could do about it. When she died, Marian plunged into depression, stopped going to work, and Angela sent her to Dr Fatthi.

Marian eventually recovered, returned to work as Angela's secretary and, I must say, Angela was a great support to her during that period. They became very close and, as I wrote above, started going to London for shopping sprees together. A few years later, after Angela's affair with Helmi, my depression and our almost total estrangement, Helmi decided to open a branch office in Greece. He charged Angela to go to Athens for the arrangements. She had *carte blanche* to decide everything from A to Z. I do not know if they were still together or if their affair had ended. What is sure is that Angela was too valuable a collaborator to let go even if their sentimental relationship had finished. It was too outstanding a job for Angela to give up, as well. We were still living together for the sake of our children and were civil enough to each other but I continuously felt her contempt because I was very often moody and depressed and unable to take care of my business properly. I stayed away from the office for days and there was the inevitable deterioration that comes when an organization is rudderless. I often had to borrow money from her to pay off urgent debts and, to her credit, she never refused to lend me the money.

Angela left for Greece and I was left behind with the children and Madame Nadia, the lady taking care of them. It was the first of many absences which was to become a new routine in our lives and led to an unexpected rapprochement. She traveled back and forth usually staying away for a month or so and returning for a week to work out business details with Helmi and, of course, to see the children. Marian was promoted to Angela's old position as Helmi's executive secretary and she seemed able to cope with the job. She also had the knack of getting things done efficiently and the ability to maneuver in the government bureaucracies. I doubt she was as good as Angela but her apprenticeship with her must have been very instructive. She did not need to work as she was financially secure but I believe her new responsibilities boosted her self-respect and work was a sort of antidote to loneliness, morbid thoughts and hence depression.

Before Angela left, she asked Marian to keep an eye on the children and to drop in at home now and then to make sure everything was normal. When she told me about this arrangement I was annoyed because for some time I had developed a dislike for Marian. Not a serious aversion. Just the irritation she caused me with her unpunctuality, her fastidiousness, and those trips to London which I thought she encouraged, if not initiated. But I did not say anything. Arguments started so easily with Angela and affected me so badly that I let it go.

She arrived unannounced one late afternoon a few days after Angela left and to tell the truth she did bring a breath of fresh air to our subdued home ambiance. She was merry, lively and affectionate with the children. She played games with them and there was a lot of commotion, running around, shouting and laughter. She stayed about an hour and as she was leaving she asked the children if they wanted her to visit them again and they yelled a resounding “Yeeees.” She turned to me with a smile and said I did not seem to share their enthusiasm. I said of course I did but I could not very well join in the yelling.

“So it’s all right if I come again?” she asked.

“Yes, it would be very kind of you,” I answered.

As we kissed her good-bye at the door she said,

“It isn’t kindness, Paul. I enjoyed myself as much as the children and it was nice seeing you.”

When she came next it was nearly eight thirty and the children were about to go to bed. She apologized for coming so late. She said she had just finished a small chore in town and thought to pass by for five minutes. I extended the children’s bedtime a while longer and the games and uproar and laughter began and their nanny had quite a job collecting them for sleep. Marian got up to leave and I asked her to stay for a drink. I brought two glasses, ice and a bottle of whisky. I poured the drink and we sipped little gulps looking at each other silently, a little awkwardly, not knowing how to start a conversation. She was made up and looked pretty in a dark-brown pantsuit, white shirt and yellow scarf. Her thick, black hair combed to soften her pronounced bone structure.

“How are you?” she asked.

I knew what the question implied. She was aware of my on-and-off depressions.

“Well enough, these days,” I said. “I exist more or less normally. Give and take a few difficulties at work. If this is happiness, I am happy.”

“It is happiness, Paul. We are in the same boat, you and me. Any stretch of normality is a blessing.”

“You seem fine, Marian. I presume everything is well at work.”

“Yes. I have a lot of work, many responsibilities and thank goodness I am coping. I miss Angela so much, though. She was my teacher, perpetually on the go at full steam, a relentless slave driver but also a pillar of support. Do you miss her?”

“Yes, I do. When she is here I sometimes wish we were separated and now that she’s away I miss her. The children, of course, keep asking when she will be back.”

“It’s so sad you are not happy together. She is such a sparkling personality and you are so gentle.”

“That’s the point. We do not fit. We are completely different. And then there’s my illness coming on and off. The last straw was this affair with Helmi.”

“It’s over, Paul, and in the last analysis it’s not so important.”

“No? It’s not important that there are rumors circulating that I am a cuckold?”

“Does that change you as a person?”

“Perhaps not. Does it change the fact that I am being ridiculed, laughed behind my back?”

“Ignore those avid scandalmongers. The ones ridiculing you are the ones that have their own nests soiled. That’s what our society is like these days. You have a treasure in your hands, the mother of your children.”

“I cannot get over this sense of betrayal, however much I was at fault myself.”

“It is so easy Paul to slide into such a situation. Things were not working at home; Angela and Helmi were in daily, intimate contact. Fighting for the same ends: the success of a business that is so profitable to both. A bond, an affinity was bound to grow and of course Helmi undoubtedly courted her. He is not a skirt chaser but on the other hand he is not indifferent to women. And Angela was not just any woman. Who knows what problems he had in his marital life, as well? So they had this affair, which inadvertently broke up two households. He was divorced from his wife and you are living in a joyless compromise with Angela. You will laugh if I tell you that he is making sweet eyes at me.”

“Perhaps it’s your turn to submit to his charms,” I said with a smile.

“Don’t laugh. There is a magnetic field pulling us together. It is inevitable when we are constantly working together. That’s why I sympathize with Angela. He is unattractive physically but does not lack charm. And I have never seen eyes like his. Brimming with intelligence and cunning.”

“So you are half way there.”

“No, no, I hope not. He is way too old for me. I am in love with someone else. I hope that will keep me out of his clutches.”

“Oh boy,” I said, “that’s very intriguing but I shall not be indiscreet and ask any questions.”

She smiled.

“I would not have been able to answer them, in any case.”

“Good. You have set my mind at rest. It would have unsettled me to think that had I asked, you would have answered.”

She laughed and we sipped our drinks. I was beginning to get over my distaste for her. She was fussy and difficult but in a more restrained way so was I.

“Do you see Dr Fatthi?” she asked me.

“Once or twice a month I go to Helwan for a chat. Sometimes he changes my happy pills and sometimes not. We have a friendly-antagonistic relationship and I enjoy the talks. He keeps on telling me to stop trying to be a psychiatrist. And you?”

“Much the same.”

“I thought your case was not as serious.”

“It is more recent but it can get very bad.”

We talked for a while and then she left.

Throughout the next week the children kept asking to see her. I called her up and told her so.

“I am sorry to pester you,” I apologized.

She said she was so happy they liked her and would pass by tomorrow. She came quite early, created the same festive atmosphere, the same ruckus, the same glee and

laughter and an hour later got up to leave much to the children's distress. She asked me to go down with her to help her find a taxi as she had bumped her car and it was being fixed. I told her I would drive her to Heliopolis and after some half-hearted refusals we were on our way. Beneath her house she asked me up for a drink and after some half-hearted demurrals, this time from me, I went up to her flat. This is good, I thought to myself, I am feeling sociable. I wanted to talk with Marian. The last time was so pleasant. In the lift we smiled and she caressed my cheek, my ear and the hair at the back of my head in one rapid movement and then rested her hand on my shoulder like one does to a child when it is well-behaved. She was as tall as me with the high heels she was wearing. She was always well dressed and I think it was a development of those London shopping escapades with Angela who was undoubtedly, to use a modern terminology, a fashion victim. A dark-blue skirt with pleats, matching blazer, a light-blue shirt and a red, silk scarf, also a trademark of Angela's. I smiled at the motherly caress.

"I'm a good boy, it seems?"

"The best," she answered.

We entered her flat. Nothing had changed since I had been there last when her mother was alive. Just a huge new television set and an elaborate record player and recorder with two large speakers. She seemed happy and excited.

"Make yourself at home, Paul," she said airily. "I'll get us a drink. What will it be? Whisky, gin, vodka?"

"Whisky is fine."

She went in the kitchen for ice and from a Chinese bar she brought a bottle of whisky and two glasses. She poured a huge portion each and sat down next to me on a comfortable couch.

"Are you out to get me drunk?" I asked.

"Yes," she said with a smile.

We sipped a few mouthfuls and then another few. We nearly finished the first shot with inconsequential chit-chat. Again, the self-consciousness of starting a real conversation. I was already slightly dizzy. I was thinking, what shall I say, what shall I say, and because I was curious and the whisky had gone to my head, I asked a most indiscreet question.

"How's your love life? Apart from Helmi, that is."

We were both smiling because she figured I was needling her.

"Oh, fuck Helmi."

"Okay, fuck Helmi. He fucked Angela so let's leave him alone with his memories."

"Don't be so crude and cynical, Paul, it doesn't suit you."

"Oh yes, I forgot. I'm the good boy."

"The best," she said and picked my hand and kissed it.

"Are you getting drunk?" I asked.

"A little. Here let me refresh our drinks."

"I'll not be able to drive back home."

"Not to worry, plenty of beds in this house. Mine's a double. Do you doubt my hospitality?"

"Cut the *double entendres*. Let's get serious. Answer my question."

“Well, you know how things are in Cairo. Very provincial and all. Not a very wide choice of beaux, either. A few flirts, a few flings, always keeping in mind one’s reputation. I don’t want to be branded a slut in our narrow-minded Greek community. That’s why I loved London. I had the freedom to do whatever I wanted and no one the wiser.”

“I suppose Angela enjoyed the same freedom as well.”

“You must not blame Angela. You were not really a couple when we started going to London.”

“It still annoyed me terribly. And anyway, she was being unfaithful to Helmi.”

“Oh Paul, neither you nor I can know what their relationship was or what she really felt for him.”

“In any case it does not do her credit.”

“Oh please be fair. I expected you to be more broad minded and generous.”

“Complacent, you mean? Like *cornuto-contento*?”

“No, Paul. No. A better judge of human behavior.”

“So now I’m a bad boy.”

She took my hand, kissed it and held it in her hands.

“You are the best, Paul. You have been through a lot. One day you’ll understand.”

We were sipping the whisky steadily and Marion kept refilling the glasses.

“I’m really feeling stifled,” she said lifting her skirt over her knees drawing my gaze to them again and again.

“You have not answered my question.”

“Well, lately I have been going out with Spiro Athanasiades. The son of the rich Athanasiades. He seems to like me. I don’t know if he’s serious, though. People are warning me that he is no good. Just a rich, spoiled playboy like his father. Like father, like son, as the saying goes. He is good looking and I like good looking men. I’m giving it a chance.”

“As long as you don’t get hurt. But didn’t you say you were in love with him?”

“Did I?”

“That he kept you out of Helmi’s clutches?”

She laughed and kissed my hand again.

“That’s why I love you,” she said. “You are naïve and sharp at the same time.”

“Will you stop kissing my hand,” I said. “I am not a father confessor I am just interested in your love affairs.”

She kissed my hand once more looking at me, smiling.

“No he’s not the man I love.”

“Oh dear, and about the man you love your mouth is sealed?”

“Drink up, Paul. The whisky loosens tongues.”

She got up.

“I am getting very warm,” she said. “I’ll just change into something comfortable.”

She went to her bedroom and I stretched on the sofa. My head was spinning. The whole room seemed to be spinning when I closed my eyes. I ought to stop drinking, I thought, if I expected to get home safely. I got up unsteadily and opened the TV. A blare of noise came out and I shut it quickly. I took an ice cube and smeared it all over my face. It cooled me down a little. I felt slightly better. She came in wearing a light gray, silk *robe de chambre*. She sat on the floor next to my legs. She picked my hand, kissed it and

laid her head on my knees. I caressed her hair slowly over and over again. I felt her breasts, her full luscious breasts pressed on my legs. She stretched her hand to the table, picked up my drink, gave it to me and brought hers to her mouth.

“Cheers Paul, here’s to love.”

“Cheers Marian. Whose love to whom? Baby, we are getting really drunk.”

“That’s what I want, Paul. It will loosen us up.”

It was my turn to kiss her hand. She smiled at me. A smile full of happiness. Was I such a fool I did not understand? So wrapped up in my woes, I did not even suspect?

“Remember Agami?” she said.

“Of course I do. Much water has passed under the bridge since then.”

“That wonderful evening I thought something new, something marvelous was happening to my life. Your kiss, your lovely kisses! You kiss so wonderfully, Paul. Sweetly, gently and passionately at the same time. You kiss with feeling, you make one feel you care. It’s not just sex. It is sex and sensuality with love. Then I had to leave because my mother was very ill. When she was better you were already with Angela. Unfortunately a seed was planted that night and sometimes the seed of love blooms despite the aridity. Because of the aridity. Because it is not reciprocated. Because it is not consummated. For years and years it blossomed. It never faded.”

“You never gave a sign.”

“How could I? You were married to Angela. Even when you were not together sexually I could not show my feelings. I felt I would be betraying her.”

“And now?”

“Now she is away, we are full of whisky and the audacity it provides. Also a little dazed and devoid of inhibitions. Now, at last, I can tell you I love you. I love you Paul. I never stopped. Do you think you can love me a little?”

She got up and sat on my knees.

“I held her head and kissed her.”

“I think I can,” I said.

We kissed tenderly, passionately for endless minutes and I was thoroughly aroused. My knees were numb from her weight and my arousal was squashed and hurting.

“My, you’re heavy,” I said.

“It must be the weight of the *robe de chambre*,” she said smiling.

She got off my lap and took off her robe. She was naked underneath. She sat on me again and we kissed on and on breathlessly, passionately. I fondled and kissed her succulent breasts and caressed her belly, legs and back. She was fiery and tender. Tender and happy to have recovered her love that went astray, to have overcome loyalties and inhibitions, to be entering a new happiness that was hers to pluck.

“Am I still heavy?” she asked after a while.

“You are light as a feather,” I said laughing.

“Yes, but you are constricted. You need to expand.”

She got up again, pulled me by the hand and swaying a little from the dizziness of the alcohol and the drunkenness of love, she undressed me, held me, caressed me and pulled me to her bedroom, to her spacious, hospitable, double bed, to her warm, passionate, hospitable body and overwhelming love.

Dear Dr Fatthi,

I was unaware when Angela's affair with Helmi started. It seems to be true that the deceived husband is the last to learn. I was also unaware when it ended. Because I know it did end. She started going on shopping sprees to London with Marian and I also know, though without precise details, that they painted the town red. I mean, they had sexual escapades. Possibly bestowing Helmi with the taint of a deceived lover, depending on whether their affair was over before or after those successive trips. It is interesting to reflect on which is worse, being a deceived husband or a deceived lover. You smile? I forgive your glacial neutrality. It is as it should be. You cannot suffer and grieve with every one of your patients. That is why I do not want to consider you a friend. I want simply to be your patient. I shall thus be set free to be honest. Something I could not be while I was your friend. It was a wise decision, those letters you asked of me. I salute your professionalism.

But I am digressing.

Back to Angela.

Her affair with Helmi ended but their business relationship held well. Money is more binding than love, or the lack of it, it seems. She is still his most valued collaborator. He swears by her name. So two years after my shock of finding out about the affair, two years of Angela's trips to London with Marian, two years of my own life in limbo, Helmi decided to open a branch office in Greece and of course it was Angela who assumed the task. Oh, she did a fine job. There was no doubt that she would, in the first place. Except that she more or less left Egypt behind. During those two years before Greece we were almost strangers to each other. After that big one, I was in and out of minor depressions and was struggling to keep my business afloat with diminishing success. It had taken a downturn that needed a Helmi or an Angela to put right. I was not up to it. I started borrowing money from Angela to keep the printing office going and I was worried how it would all end. Then Greece came into the picture.

At the beginning, for more than a year, she would spend a month or two in Athens and come to Cairo for consultations with Helmi. I was left with the children and their nanny, Madame Nadia. It was with relief that I heard the news about the Greek venture. I thought finally I would have some peace. By that I mean I would not have Angela coming home ignoring me, without a simple greeting and the least snatch of conversation and worst of all to have that contemptuous look thrown at me when our paths crossed. But, strangely, the house seemed empty without her. I missed her nearly as much as the children and when at the end of the first month we went all of us, nanny included, to bring her home from the airport our happiness, her happiness surprised me.

We talked of our little nothings and she talked of Athens, of her work, of the flat she had rented in Kolonaki, a fashionable part of the city which was also close to her office, of her mother who was so happy to have her near her. It was a festive atmosphere that day and when the children went to sleep much later than usual and I retired to my room, she came in and kissed me and we made love silently, passionately without talk, without endearments. It was not repeated during the week she stayed with us but was more civil and jolly with me and more affectionate with the children than I could remember. Why this should be so I can only presume. It was probably because in Athens she did not get to know or establish a relationship with another man. She worked long hours to make a success of the business venture that was solely her responsibility and had

not much time to spare. Moreover the presence of her mother may have been another hindering factor. My mother-in-law was of the conservative old school and disapproved of extramarital affairs. She thought the family was sacred and the woman should stick to her husband however flawed he might be.

The same scenario was repeated in her subsequent visits. We were friendly and we always made love that first day of her arrival. Sometimes we made love again one other time. She told me that I should start thinking of selling my business to settle in Athens because she could not live much longer isolated from the children. Her branch office was working beyond expectations and she would likely be stationed permanently there. She was searching for a larger flat that would accommodate the whole family plus our elderly nanny, Madame Nadia.

A year went by and despite my efforts I was unable to sell my business. The offers were derisory and even Angela told me not to sell at those prices and that the prospective buyers were out for a kill. She said if I would sign a power of attorney to her she would canvass her business acquaintances and would surely come up with a more reasonable offer. I did as she asked and a few months later the business was sold lock, stock and barrel together with its debts. She put the money into her account so as to be able, piecemeal, to transfer it to Greece through Helmi. Well, that was one major worry gone but things have a way of turning against me.

I am such a cry-baby, aren't I? But you, of all people, would know that an uneventful, static life can be absolutely devastating!

I had nothing to occupy me. I started taking the children to the club in the mornings with Madame Nadia. They were now five and four years of age. I bought each a bicycle and they amused themselves in the children's playground. I usually went off to play a game of squash or tennis and then showered and returned to stay with them for another couple of hours until it was time to return home. It was peaceful enough but I had a terrible feeling of redundancy and worthlessness. It weighed on me and depressed me.

A few months later Angela arrived from Greece and told us she bought a new flat, furnished it, and would take the children and Madame Nadia with her. She thought it best that I should stay a month or so longer in Cairo until they settled in. It would be too much of a hassle to have me there in their midst from the start. I agreed because, to tell the truth, I was worried that the change would unsettle me and my depressions were always round the corner ready to strike at the slightest mental perturbation. I was apprehensive that I would not be able to adapt to our new life in Athens. But that decision proved disastrous. I missed the children dreadfully and my loneliness was extreme. I started getting panic fits and could not take my breath. Panic not from any sudden fright. Panic from sober thought. I could not figure where I was heading, where it would all end. Panic from the confusion of my life. Panic from the vast loneliness that choked me. I roamed the streets for hours to tire myself out but nothing seemed to help once I was back in my empty home. My condition got worse and worse and I phoned Angela and told her I would come to your clinic or else I would probably kill myself.

And here I am.

END OF LETTERS.

Since I never mentioned to Dr Fatthi my love affair with Marian, I did not tell him that after Angela's initial return from Greece and the unexpected resumption of our

sexual relations, I kept on seeing Marian after Angela left. I did not tell Marian what had happened with Angela either and lived this parallel love life with the two women for a few months. It was a strange and happy time for me. I think I was in love with Marian. Well, perhaps not as much in love as she was with me but I did love her and our sex was pretty wonderful. I did not speculate how long it would last or how it would end. I was living for the here and now, which, in any case, did not last very long. I suppose I should have expected it, since they were close friends, that at some point Angela would tell her that our relations had improved and we were making love again. And when she did, Marian cut our love affair short. I called her up to tell her Angela had left and she laughed.

“You little sneak,” she said, “I should be angry with you but heaven knows why I am not. I found out your prurient secret. I am sorry, I can not go on.”

“But I love you Marian,” I pleaded.

“So do I. I love you too, Paul, but I have my loyalties to consider.”

“And your inhibitions,” I added.

“Yes,” she said.

“Won’t a little whisky melt them down?” I asked.

“Things have changed, Paul. I love you, baby, but it’s good-bye.”

She clicked off the phone.

Marian began seeing Spiro Athanasiades regularly after we broke up. I learnt this from Angela in one of those idle, gossipy conversations we started having as our conjugal life took a more friendly and companionable turn. One or two months later, when Angela happened to be in Cairo, we were invited at a reception given by Athanasiades Sr., Spiro’s father, in one of the more fashionable hotels in Cairo. I do not recall the occasion for the gathering but I clearly remember the setting. At the entrance of the hall stood the hosts graciously welcoming their guests, the big man himself, short, chubby not particularly good-looking but pleasant, brimming with the self-confidence of the fortune he had amassed. Next to him, to his right Spiro, tall and handsome full of smiles and little jocular remarks for each one of us. The dissimilarity of father and son was striking and I often marveled at the miracles of nature. To his right, again, a step behind was Marian. Her attitude was almost that of a soldier on duty; an *aide-de-camp* to a general. She was silent, subdued and utterly cowed. In awe, almost intimidated. I could not start to speculate how she had reached that point of submission. Did he treat her harshly? Was she putting on an act of the demure, modest little girl? Did his money dazzle her to that point? Was she hoping he would consider her for marriage? She kissed Angela and me with tight little smiles and did not return the complicit look I gave her. I felt sorry for her and her new distorted, repressed personality.

Dr Fatthi summoned me for a talk. As I was going to him I passed from the lobby and saw Helmi sitting in an armchair. I tried to avoid passing in front of him but he spied me and jumped up.

“Paul,” he cried. “I did not know you were still here. I thought you would be in Greece by now.”

“Hallo, Helmi,” I said. “I’m here for an extended holiday. It is nice and peaceful and I am in love with a nurse. I buy her Kit Kats and she kisses me every morning.”

He laughed and peered at me with his piercing stare trying to figure my frame of mind.

“What brings you here?” I asked.

“Marian, of course,” he answered. “I came to see how she is getting on.”

“Miss her at the office?”

“More than that, it is a personal interest.”

“How kind of you,” I said.

He did not miss the irony but ignored it.

“So how is she?”

“Well enough as far as I can tell. For more details ask Dr Fatthi.”

“No, no. I just came to see her personally,” he explained hurriedly. “Angela is well, by the way. We are in constant touch.”

“Over the phone, it is permissible,” I said.

He laughed innocently.

“I’ll be seeing you, Helmi. I have to go.”

Dr Fatthi smiled when I entered the office.

“You must be wondering why I have not talked to you for a while,” he said. “It’s because you are well. I read your letters with great interest. There are quite a lot of insights I have gleaned from them but we shall not talk about them. No need to do so now. We shall keep them for future reference.”

I smiled.

“So you expect me to be back soon?” I said.

“No, no. Not at all. In fact you can leave the clinic right now.”

“I’d rather stay a little longer, if you have no objection,” I said.

“Please yourself,” he replied.

Later I asked Marian about Helmi.

“I hate him,” I told her. “He is so unctuous he repels me. I don’t know how you can stand him. I don’t know how Angela ever managed to make love to him.”

“I suppose I am used to him after those three or four years I have been working in his office. He is not all that bad. He seems to genuinely care for me. And after all, who else do I have in this world? When we get out of here you shall go to Greece to your wife and children. I shall be going back to work. It is my only salvation.”

“Dr Fatthi called me for a chat this morning.”

“Oh? What did he have to say?”

“Once again, that I am well, that I could leave this very minute. I told him I wanted to stay a while longer.”

“Thank you, Paul. I am really grateful to you, you know. Fatthi says I am almost recovered as well. So it won’t be long.”

“If it weren’t for the children I would stay with you.”

She looked at me with a slight smile.

“Life is full of useless ifs. Let’s not talk about it.”

With the letters over, I started browsing my psychology periodicals that Dr Fatthi, more than once, told me to throw away. I found something interesting though by no means complete or comprehensible. It defined Hypomania thus:

Hypomania, as the name suggests, is a state of mind or behavior that is ‘below’ (hypo) mania. In other words, a person in a hypo manic state often displays behavior that

has all the earmarks of a full-blown mania (e.g. marked elevation of mood that is characterized by euphoria, overactivity, disinhibition, impulsivity, a decreased need for sleep and hyper sexuality), but these symptoms, though disruptive and seemingly out of character, are not so pronounced as to be considered a diagnosable manic episode. Another important point is that hypomania is a diagnostic category that includes both anxiety and depression.

Marian said that Dr Fatthi mentioned that medical term to her. I asked her once or twice what had caused her to attempt suicide but she refused to talk about it despite our intimacy. I did not press her. As our time at the clinic was drawing to an end our bonding seemed to strengthen. Marian began brooding, had fits of melancholia and I was afraid she would regress to her previous state. I kept telling her that when we would leave the clinic I would stay a while with her in Heliopolis and even when I left for Greece, Angela and I were planning to keep our flat and our servant so I would be returning every so often to Cairo to see her. This, apart from the fact that Angela would be shuttling regularly back and forth from Athens to Cairo due to her job. This seemed to boost her morale but I could sense her sadness during our nighttime lovemaking. Apart for an almost insatiable desire for intercourse she would cling to me and kiss me incessantly, tell me she loved me madly and would not let me leave her room. I usually stayed till dawn and Amina's sharp eyes did not miss my increasing fatigue. What kept me on my feet were the long, lethargic after-lunch siestas I resorted to.

On the last evening after a fiery love session she started crying. I told her that, as promised, I would go to her house for a few days, that far from it being our last evening together it was the start of our adjustment to life. She had to go back to work and I had to start thinking of doing something useful with my life. If I did not my depressions would recur again and again. And if our love had become an addiction in this closeted loony bin, we would have to wean ourselves from it gradually and try to live normally and put this mad desire in a more mundane context.

"You have been so good to me, Paul," she said. "I sometimes think I do not deserve your kindness and concern."

"Don't be silly, my dear. I do love you. As you once said, we are in the same boat and this has brought us very close."

"When we go outside you might hear some terrible rumors about me," she said. "They are true, Paul. I love you and I would feel a traitor if I lied to you and told you they were not."

"What are you talking about?"

"I cannot tell you. I did not even tell Dr Fatthi."

"But I might hear the rumors. Isn't it better to hear the story from you?"

"You might not want to see me again."

"How can you possibly say such a thing? Is that what caused you to jump from the balcony?"

"Yes."

"So get it off your chest Marian. People go to church and confess. The Christian religion amongst the many stupidities it propagates did one thing correctly. It instituted the practice of the confession. It is the Dr Fatthi of the faithful. When they are burdened with something serious, they go to their priest and confess. However bad the crime, the priest usually gives them absolution and they go away relieved, happy and forget about it.

I cannot imagine what is so terrible that you cannot tell me. Getting it out will help. It will relieve you, if not totally, at least to some extent.”

She cuddled up to me and kissed me. She held my penis and tried to arouse me.

“Please tell me,” I insisted.

“After we make love,” she pleaded in a playful baby voice. “It might be the last time.”

“Won’t you want me after that?”

She laughed and then burst into tears.

“You know what I mean.”

“First you tell, Marian. Then we make love.”

She wiped the tears with the bed sheet and was silent for a while collecting herself. I had never seen her so volatile.

“Good bye, Paul,” she said. “I love you.”

“Hello, my darling Marian, nice to see you again. I love you too. Our parting was not very long, was it?”

She laughed, took a deep breath and began her story.

“When we stopped seeing each other because of the resumption of your relations with Angela, I started seeing Spiro quite regularly. He was after me for some time and I did go out with him before and after we were together but I had never slept with him. He was constantly trying to bed me down but I had you and at least in some things I have principles. He was a regular Mr. Charming while he was courting me and at some point when we two broke up I went to his flat and we made love. For a couple of months our relation moved smoothly along and he seemed very fond of me. I liked him too, despite constant advice from friends to keep clear of him because he was a frivolous, vain person and a womanizer like his dad. To me he seemed polite and caring and even infatuated.

“During those first few months I had the fantasy that he might get used to me, that he might even love me and decide to marry me. That did not last very long. I soon had word from mutual acquaintances that he was seeing other women as well. His attitude, too, after the initial honeymoon period changed and he saw me progressively less frequently. He seemed to summon me just to go to bed with him at his flat. We stopped going out together in the Greek circles, where he circulated. But I still had hopes. You know how it is, in sentimental matters one loses one’s sense of reality. Self-delusion sets in and one makes all sorts of excuses to himself for the unacceptable behavior of his companion. He was rude and harsh and indifferent outside the bedroom and it was I that kept phoning him on flimsy excuses just to keep in touch and to see him again. The only times he called me were to make an appointment for sex at his flat.

“As things deteriorated I suffered severe emotional disturbance. Stress and anxiety were the order of the day and I even had panic attacks. I kept thinking of him. He had become the illusory focus of my life. Was it love for this man? Was it the disappointment of failed aspirations and the ruined prospect of becoming Mrs. Athanasiades? Probably. Obviously. I was not strong enough to reason logically and to accept that the dream was over. I would go from a state of depression to a false euphoria and back again. I could not sleep properly. I started overeating and putting on weight. Surprisingly, despite my insomnias, at work I was restless, in perpetual motion, and Helmi would tell me to relax, to take it easy. He sensed something was wrong with me but did not know what.

“At our last meeting in his flat, after we had sex, he told me he had met a girl with whom he fell in love and he would see me no more.

“‘You are a lovely girl, Marian,’ he said, ‘but you know how it is. Some things come to an end and life opens up other venues. Falling in love is beyond one’s volition. It just happens. I don’t want you to take it badly. You are still young and beautiful and you will soon find your match. My friend Dinos, you have seen him a few times, he likes you very much and would like to go out with you. We could start going out as two couples. I, with Christina and you and Dinos.’

“I told him: ‘How considerate of you to pass me on to a friend.’

“‘He is a nice chap, Marian. You will have a good time with him. I am only trying to get you together so that you won’t feel lonely.’

“‘My God, Spiro, I am amazed. I did not realize what a nice man you are,’ I told him mockingly. ‘It would have sounded much more sincere if you had made the proposition before you fucked me.’

“He was annoyed and raised his voice.

“‘No need to be incensed, my girl. This is life. You lose some and you win some. It’s not the end of the world.’

“I got dressed and left his flat in a daze. Two or three days later he called me up at work.

“‘Listen,’ he said, ‘I miss you. Come around to my flat this evening. We’ll go out and paint the town red. Dinos will come along. Just the three of us.’

“My first impulse was to refuse. But a flicker of hope confused my logic. I had been so miserable that I was disposed to believe that he really did miss me. Perhaps Christina did not work out. At ten, I was at his luxury flat by the Nile and was met by the two friends in evening dress. Spiro, handsome and elegant and Dino, slightly shorter, darker, with a slim build and a pleasant looking face with spectacles. As we sat for a drink before going down, I looked at him, my proposed future lover. Could I ever be with him in this humiliating manner? I looked at Spiro as well trying to verify if this flicker of hope was just another delusion. He was shifty-eyed and avoided my gaze. He was not a good enough actor. I should have left them then and there but the thought of returning to my empty flat was too depressing.

“We drove in Spiro’s car to the Auberge des Pyramides, all three sitting on the front seat. At the nightclub we were received with welcoming bows and servility as Spiro was a regular and threw his money around. Well, you know the Auberge, it used to be tiptop but has fallen somewhat in class since the luxury hotels, the Hiltons and the Marriotts opened in Cairo. We sat at a table and started drinking whisky from a bottle that materialized apparently on standing orders. We kept on drinking until the show started. A meal was served but Spiro waved it away. ‘We don’t need this shit,’ he said. We kept on drinking and I was getting tipsy on an empty stomach. During the show Spiro waved and smiled to this and that showgirl. Apparently he knew them well.

“When the show finished a girl came and kissed him and they went off together. Dino asked me to dance and I followed him to the dance floor because had we stayed at our table we would have been uneasy and silent. I was neither in the mood to speak nor had anything to tell him. I asked him where Spiro had disappeared to. He said, ‘You saw him leave with the girl, didn’t you? He is probably fucking her. Don’t waste your time with him.’ ‘Should I be wasting it with you?’ I asked. He laughed. ‘Preferably,’ he said

and tried to kiss me. I was tipsy and just about managed to shuffle around on the dance floor. I thought, what the hell, and I kissed him. We danced for a while, kissed a few more times and sat to wait for Spiro. He came about half an hour later smiling and jaunty. I was sure he had made love to the girl.

“We left and drove back to his flat. It was almost two in the morning. Spiro insisted we go up for a drink. At his flat he brought from the icebox a bottle of champagne, put on soft music on the recorder and we started drinking. It was delicious and it mixed with the whisky making me high and randy. Dino sat next to me on the couch and we kissed while Spiro was sat on the other couch, sipping his champagne, listening to the music, looking at us. My mind was foggy and I was wondering how far it would go. It was as if I, too, was a spectator. Dino started undoing my dress. I helped him take it off. I was getting sexually aroused. I had lost all sense of shame or inhibition. He undressed completely, kissed me and took off the remaining of my clothes. The lights were on and Spiro continued sipping his champagne watching our every move. We fooled around and then started making love. When Dino ejaculated, he flopped on the couch and I lay back to rest.

“Spiro left his drink on the table, got up and started undressing. He was aroused. His eyes were shining and his penis erect. He pulled me by the hand to his couch and entered me directly without any foreplay. We made love passionately, wildly, and I told him I loved him. He did not utter a single word of endearment. He just kept thrusting on and on like a machine. It took him a long time to finish probably because he made love to the girl at the Auberge and it was his second go. I had many orgasms by the time we finished. We lay around naked to rest.

“Spiro got up and fetched another bottle saying this called for a celebration. This? What was this, which called for a celebration? The achievement of a two-man-one-woman intercourse? We finished the bottle to the dregs and all three started making love together. Have you seen a porno movie of two men and a woman? It was the same thing. We went through the whole range, length, breadth and scope. We finished the orgy as daylight was breaking in. I pulled myself together and dressed. I had by then sobered up and a wave of disgust and shock overwhelmed me. It was as if I had woken up from a dream and all of a sudden I was furious. Certainly at myself but I was livid with hatred for those two pigs. Dinos and Spiros were snoring. I went to the kitchen and filled two glasses of water and poured them on their faces. They jumped up startled and annoyed.

“‘Are you crazy?’ Spiro shouted.

“‘Listen Spiro,’ I said. ‘You treated me tonight like a prostitute. A prostitute does not do this sort of thing for nothing. She has to be paid. So I, too, must be paid.’ They both burst out laughing loudly, derisively. ‘Shut up, you pigs,’ I cried. ‘I am serious. I am dead serious.’ They stopped laughing. Spiro glared at me. He did not like the tone of my voice. He was never called by his true name before. A pig. My voice was not timid and compliant like he was accustomed to hearing it.

“‘How much do you want?’ he asked contemptuously. ‘Ten, twenty, fifty pounds? I’ll go get them.’ ‘I want a thousand dollars,’ I said. ‘You are completely mad,’ he shouted. ‘For half that amount I could get the most expensive belly dancer. For a thousand dollars I could fuck a top film star.’ ‘Spiro, I am not joking. I am at a point where I feel I have nothing more to lose. I shall make you sorry you ever knew me.’ ‘Go to hell,’ he shouted.

“I walked to the door of the flat, opened it and started screaming with all the strength my voice possessed, ‘Give me my money you bastards. I want my money, you sons of bitches.’ They, both, rushed at me, pulled me inside and shut the door. ‘You are utterly crazy, you bitch,’ Spiro cried. ‘Give me my thousand dollars,’ I insisted. He was now visibly apprehensive. He tried to haggle. ‘I’ll give you a thousand pounds.’ I knew I had flattened them. ‘Dollars, you cheapskate, dollars, or else I shall ruin your reputation to such an extent that the lovely girl who has won your heart, this Christina, will spit on the ground every time she hears your name. Not just her either. The whole Greek community. That goes for you too, you little second fiddle. You scavenger of Spiro’s leftovers.’

“They moved uneasily away from me and huddled together, naked as they were, their penises limp with worry. They spoke to each other in inaudible whispers. Probably trying to figure how to divide the price tag. Who pays what? Then Spiro turned to me and told me, his voice full of venom, ‘You enjoyed it, you bitch. And don’t you deny it. Why do you have to get paid?’ I smiled ironically. ‘If I enjoyed it it’s strictly my affair. You were not trying to give me pleasure or love or tenderness. You used me like an animal, treated me like a whore. Now make it snappy before I start yelling again.’ ‘I’ll get the money,’ Spiro said. ‘Just shut up.’ ‘Make it ten hundred-dollar notes,’ I said. ‘I don’t want to waste my time with you counting change.’

“He went inside the apartment and came out with the ten US banknotes. I took the money and my bag, opened the door of the flat, stepped out in the corridor and slammed it shut with all my strength. I then took the notes and tore them meticulously in tiny bits so that they could not possibly be taped together again. I rang the bell and banged at the door with my shoes. They opened and I threw the shredded money on their worried faces. ‘Take it back, you creeps, I don’t need it,’ I shouted. It littered the corridor outside Spiro’s flat and they fell to their knees, stark naked as they were, spasmodically trying to collect the confetti.”

She chuckled as she remembered the scene.

I was silent for a while thinking it over. Marian was nestled in my arms, I felt her face turn to mine occasionally in the darkness and her hand caressed my body.

“Did you really enjoy it, Marian? The sex, I mean?”

“Did I enjoy it? On a physical level, perhaps I did. Like one enjoys masturbation. But not quite, because masturbation is a solitary act whereas I was interacting with two persons. And again, not quite, because they did not count as persons. They were just two bodies, two penises, two lusts feeding mine, bringing to life fantasies I had, questions I often wondered about. It was sex without feelings, without love or generosity. It was a strange experience and my body pulsed on its own, cooperated with the two penises with a mixture of sensuality and contempt. Even hate. For there was not a jot of affection in this whole affair. I went through it without a struggle, almost willingly, out of curiosity. Don’t forget I was on the verge of depression, which sometimes brings overactivity, physical and sexual, and my inhibitions were submerged in a deluge of alcohol.”

She stopped to think if the explanation was plausible. She was not sure of it herself. I felt she did not fully understand the dynamics of that event. Then, she continued her story.

“I drove to my house very slowly because my mind was racing in a thousand directions and I could not concentrate on my driving. Questions kept hammering my

head, my mind and my soul, without respite. I kept thinking of what happened, of my mother, of my life, of how I had sunk so low. I tried to understand how I reached that stage of depravity. If I would ever recover my self-respect. If I could continue living after that and if it was worth staying alive. It was the most horrible moment of my life. By the time I reached my house the sun was out and the traffic on the streets was thickening. I went in my house almost choking. I could hardly breathe. I tried to calm myself by emptying my mind. By refusing to think. It was a huge effort and mostly unsuccessful.

“I undressed and had a shower to remove the smell of sweat and sperm from my body. I dressed in a pair of jeans, a shirt, clean underwear and put on my shoes. I combed my hair and made up my face lightly. I opened the window and climbed on the rim. There was a balcony on the floor below protruding beyond my window and I figured I must give a good push with my feet to clear it but my shoes slipped as I jumped and I fell vertically down. There was a ledge below our window that broke my fall for a split second. Instinctively I tried to grab it but my body was too heavy and I tumbled down inside the balcony below. I came to my senses at the Greek Hospital. Everybody talked of a miracle. They did not know it was a catastrophe. I thought my only salvation would be Dr Fatthi. I asked to be moved to his clinic. And I knew you were there. I hoped you’d still be there. A month or so ago, Angela had asked Helmi, on the telephone, to place a sum of money on account in your name at the clinic. So here we are but not for long. Our time is up.”

During the recounting she was in my arms, addressing the ceiling. Talking calmly, choosing the correct words, almost without emotion. When she finished she turned, leaned on her elbow and looked at my face in the darkness.

“That’s the story, Paul, my love. Is it hello or good bye?”

“Oh Marian,” I said, “do you really need an answer?”

I kissed her tenderly, passionately and we made love on and off till dawn, slept a little, packed our bags and took a taxi to Heliopolis to her house.

She unpacked her things and we went down for a walk to shop for food. We were back in the real world. It felt strange after our month and a half, together, at the clinic. I held her hand as we walked and she smiled happily, her gloominess suddenly vanished. I thought to myself, but could not possibly tell her, that if we stayed together we just might have regained our complete normality. But that could not be. I had to see my children. I missed them terribly. I thought of them constantly with a tight heart. They, too, needed a father.

Marian went to the kitchen to cook us a meal. I stood and kept her company. She repeatedly turned to smile at me.

“I cook well, Paul,” she said. “I would make a good wife to a good husband. But,” she said and smiled, “a disastrous one to a bad one.”

As we were eating and sipping a little wine she asked why God gave her happiness in tiny snatches.

“I don’t know,” I answered, “but I think that perhaps he compensates in making this happiness very intense.”

“Yes, my darling Paul,” she said. “Oh, yes.”

We then had a siesta but before the siesta we burned all the meal’s calories in fiery lovemaking. The next day we spent together and the third I insisted she set off to work. When she left in the morning, I took my bags to our house in town and returned to

Marian late in the afternoon to spend the night with her. We kept up this routine for two weeks until Angela arrived. Meanwhile, Marian had reintegrated herself at the office and seemed to be happy and normal.

“How’s Helmi?” I asked.

“Very gentle, very solicitous.”

“Very sticky, as well, I presume.”

She laughed.

“Yes, a little.”

When Angela returned I did not see Marian at all. She called me at home when Angela was at the office working with Helmi. I was a little worried about her but apart from saying she missed me so much, she seemed well enough. The fact of Angela’s presence and their friendship precluded any attempt for us to meet. I went to the club in the mornings for a little tennis and swimming and I felt almost normal except for that residual worry for Marian.

My relationship with Angela remained in the more or less standard mode that was established at our reconciliation. The magic, the intensity were gone forever and what remained was companionship and even that was lukewarm for we had traversed the quicksand of life and were bogged down, separated by a distance that could not be adequately bridged. In any case, was that not what the majority of marriages achieve? We made love twice during the week she spent in Cairo and I was constantly fretting I might accidentally call her Marian. But her slight body, her voice, the tense style of her lovemaking kept reminding me that she was not Marian. We talked a little in bed. It was the only time we talked because she rarely returned from work before nine. Sometimes even later when she met old friends for a meal or a drink. In one of those chats, she asked me about Marian. Did we socialize at the clinic?

“You mean with other patients?”

“No, silly. The two of you, together.”

“Not much. She was on a program of sleep therapy and we did not have much of a chance,” I answered casually. “We sometimes went for short walks together.”

“There’s something very strange in this affair,” Angela said, “Marian has repeatedly avoided telling me why she attempted to kill herself. I asked her several times. I am truly concerned. I am worried she might do it again. I read somewhere that if one tries it once, one is liable to try it again. She just says she was depressed. But I suspect there is another reason.”

“I have no idea.”

“You see, she was going out with Spiro Athanasiades and all of a sudden they broke up.”

“Perhaps that’s why. But if you don’t want her to try it again tell Helmi to lay off.”

“That’s none of my business. And anyway, I can’t tell Helmi a thing like that.”

“After all that intimate friendship?”

The past kept intruding in the present and rash irony sometimes preceded caution. Her face hardened and our talk was cut short. We sank another few millimeters deeper in the quicksand of our life.

Angela arranged that I leave with her for Athens at the end of her business week and I left Cairo without seeing my darling Marian. We just said good-bye and cried

furtively over the phone; she, in her office and I at home with the servant sweeping the floor nearby. I promised to return to her as soon as it was feasible. I, at least, had my reward. Two little angels were waiting for me, holding hands, at the Athens airport. They were smiling. I could not believe my eyes. That they were mine. That they had grown so much in just four months. That they were so beautiful. That I was their father. That they loved me.

In Athens I was left to my own devices. I took the children out for walks, borrowed Angela's car and drove them to the seaside, took them to their granny, scoured the 'Golden Opportunity' newspaper for work, watched insipid shows on television and began losing hope that I would ever be useful again to anyone other than the children. It was they that preserved my sanity. Angela had become a workaholic. I hardly saw her on weekdays and on Sunday she read the papers and was stressed because she was not working. Whenever I found a job, it never seemed to her to be worthy of my standing.

"You don't have to work," she kept telling me. "We have enough money. I earn more than we need. I can't have my husband working as a minor employee."

"But Angela," I pleaded, "I have to do something. Even manual labor is better than this lazing about."

"You are shattering my nerves, Paul. Something will turn up eventually."

She left for Cairo two months later and on her return she told me Marian was going out with Helmi.

"Oh my God," I groaned.

"Why do you hate him so much? All this money I am earning is thanks to him."

"I don't hate him Angela, I despise him."

"You despise everyone who is rich and successful. You have a mean and envious streak in you. You despise all my rich friends who are better than you. And anyway, you were never very fond of Marian. Why the sudden concern?"

"Because the girl is not well. Because I know how it is to be unwell. I know the desperation of a depression. Of loneliness."

"Exactly. This relationship might be good for her."

"With Helmi?"

"Yes, with Helmi."

"You know, Angela, I have often wondered how you could have ever made love to him."

"You are not a woman."

"No, but I have eyes that are the same as yours. Presumably we see an object in the same way. A beautiful woman is a beautiful woman. Ugliness is ugliness. A big belly is a big belly."

"All this is irrelevant. Looks do not matter all that much. Intelligence, personality, success, does. For a woman, wealth and power are the most potent aphrodisiacs."

"Then why did you break up with him? This is something I would love to know."

"And you never will," she shouted in a temper. "Get off my back."

Maria, our eldest daughter came into the room.

"Please stop shouting," she said. "You are frightening Annie."

"Sorry, my darling," I told her. "We'll stop shouting at once. Sorry, Angela. The news upset me terribly."

"What a funny man you are," she said.

On Angela's next trip, the news was worse. Marian and Helmi were to be married in a month's time. Angela would time her next trip to coincide with the wedding. We would travel together because Marian wanted me to give her away at church as she did not have a close male relative. I was very upset but kept it to myself. I did not see much use in another futile argument with Angela. I did sense, however, a subtle change in her attitude though she was reluctant to express herself openly. She told me Marian was not exactly jumping for joy. It seemed as if Helmi was pressuring her to marry sooner than she would have liked. Whatever the case, I could not refuse Marian's request. And then, I thought, perhaps I am making much ado about nothing. Perhaps Marian is marrying her overweight, elderly and balding aphrodisiac and is happy about it.

We left the children with Madame Nadia and traveled to Cairo a week before the wedding was due. Angela was at the office in the daytime and I spent my mornings at the club. I did not get any phone calls from Marian, at home. Her silence troubled me. Two days after our arrival Marian invited us to dinner at her house with Helmi. I was perspiring and almost shaking when we rang the bell. Marian opened and we kissed. I hugged her very tightly and she did the same. Helmi was sitting in the hall in an armchair and he got up to shake my hand. I congratulated him halfheartedly. I was never a good actor. I could not put a warm tone to my voice. Marian was putting on weight and after the happy greeting her bearing was friendly but subdued. It continued to be quiet and restrained throughout dinner. It was not what one would expect from a person about to be married in a few days.

"I cooked the meal myself, for Paul," she announced. "Long ago I told him I was a good cook and would make a good wife."

She smiled at me. I remembered the second part of that sentence. I wondered which one of the two would prevail.

"It's delicious," I said. "Thank you, Marian."

Helmi and Angela talked away. Marian and I were silent. I wanted to say something, anything, to be sociable, to participate in the conversation but my tongue was tied and my mind was blank. I don't think Marian even tried. I, at least, smiled now and then, Marian was incapable even of that.

On the way home, the usual reproaches from Angela.

"You did not talk very much, did you?"

"No."

"It was rude and unfriendly."

"I had nothing to say. Believe me, I tried to think of something but I couldn't."

"Small talk, Paul. Small talk. We are not all of us geniuses like you to grapple with philosophical subjects. Just a polite word now and then would be enough."

I kept quiet. Arguments like these can go on and on if you persist.

"How did Marian look to you?" she asked after a moment.

"Bursting, brimming with happiness."

"Please Paul, I asked you a reasonable question. I expect a civil answer."

"She did not seem very happy, did she?"

"No. I am really worried."

"Helmi doesn't seem to share your concern."

"We do not know what his feelings are. He is in love with her. He is most likely hoping this bad humor will blow over."

“He probably feels it’s his love that counts, not hers.”

It was Angela’s turn to keep quiet because this exchange, too, could go on and on.

“I shall have a serious talk with her tomorrow at work.”

When she returned from work the next day she told me she had talked to Marian.

“And?”

“She told me that she was never in love with Helmi. They have been sleeping together...”

“Oh God!”

“Will you let me finish?”

“Sorry.”

“That despite the fact that she is not in love and that the sexual side does not thrill her, she was getting used to him because he has been kind and caring. She needed someone to take care of her. A companion she could count on. She saw him more as a friend than a lover. He convinced her that they ought to get married and she accepted. However, as soon as they fixed the date of the ceremony, she started having second thoughts that worsened by the day and, right now, she is in a panic because she thinks that accepting his proposal was a huge blunder and it was an illusion to think she could live and be happy with this man. She is in a psychological bind and feels a major depression is building up.”

“So what did you tell her?”

“I told her that since she is convinced it was the wrong decision, she should break it off immediately. She said the wedding is in three days’ time with all the arrangements for church and the reception made and the invitations sent out. How could she possibly cancel it now? I told her it was her life that was at stake. ‘Fuck the arrangements, the receptions and churches. Fuck the guests. Let them think what they want.’ She said it would be a crushing blow to Helmi. I said, ‘Fuck Helmi. Marian,’ I told her, ‘leave the office right now, go to town, book an airplane ticket to Athens, to London, it doesn’t matter where, withdraw a large amount of money from the bank, change it into dollars and tomorrow morning you should be flying away from this mess. And don’t worry; I shall cancel all the arrangements and inform the guests and I shall join you in a week or ten days wherever you might be.’”

I got up and hugged Angela.

I said, “Angela, I admire you. You have guts and you are a true friend. I am proud of you.”

“Wait, don’t get so excited,” she said. “Marian started crying hysterically, sobbing away as if the world was coming to an end. ‘I can’t do it,’ she wailed. ‘I can’t possibly do it. I am too deep in the shit.’ I calmed her down eventually and waited for her decision. ‘I have to go through with it, Angela,’ she told me. ‘If it doesn’t work, I’ll divorce.’ ‘Divorce now, my dear,’ I tried again. ‘You shall be complicating your life with this marriage and you are putting a down payment for many years of unhappiness.’ She kissed me, thanked me and said she would have to face the consequences of her stupidity in an honorable way. She would find a way out later. So the wedding is on, kiddo. Did you send your suit to the cleaners?”

St Constantine’s church is near the city center. It is an old, majestic church positioned in an odd way. Its entrance does not face the street. One comes up the steps to a broad tiled courtyard and is faced with the rear side of the church. To the left is a huge

bell tower that doubles as a priest's office on the ground level. One walks along a considerable semi-circular tiled path to come to a much larger square on the opposite side where the church's main door is situated up large marble stairs. Helmi waited for Marian at the top of the marble staircase of the church building and I waited for her to arrive by car at the street gate. It was funny because I was acquainted with most of the people that came to church and had to greet and shake hands with them, something I did not particularly relish. I must have shaken hands with the whole of the Greek community of Cairo.

Marian arrived more or less on time. She smiled as I opened the door of the car. She seemed normal. I helped her out of the limousine and when she emerged in her white wedding dress, almost my height and beautifully made up, she looked stunning despite the little weight she had put on. Two young girls were there to hold the train of her dress and we moved in a slow stately procession to get to the door of the church. To Helmi. To give her away. Most people were already inside the church and those who were outside along the path, applauded and offered their congratulations and said out loudly, 'What a lovely couple.' Life is so full of ironies! She held me so tight, so close to her, I wanted to tell her it was not seemly. But I could not. She kept turning to smile at me and I told her she was very beautiful.

"Thank you, my darling," she said. "This is the best part of the wedding."

Her reply killed me. We had hardly talked to each other for three months. So I gave her away to Helmi. I had to unfold her hand from my arm because she would not let go and I felt awkward with Helmi standing there, waiting to take over. I gave her away to a man I could not stomach and, I suspected, increasingly neither did she. Then the priest led them, chanting garbled voodoo psalms, inside the church and my role in her life was over.

The wedding reception took place at the Marriott which was not a hundred meters away from our home. Helmi had booked a suite there as well for a two-day stay before leaving for a honeymoon trip to Europe. The reception was lavish, with the cream of the Greek community and many of Helmi's friends and business acquaintances present. I hardly talked to Marian, there, but kept my eye on her. She was merry and circulated, statuesque and beautiful in her wedding dress, talking and laughing with the guests and seemed to be enjoying the hullabaloo. At around two, we stood in line, kissed the newlyweds, wished them happiness and left with most of the guests. As we were walking home Angela turned to me with a smile,

"Whew! It's over," she said. "I hope everything works well for them."

We were asleep when the phone rang. I put on the light and looked at my watch. It was three-thirty. Helmi was on the phone. He asked for Angela. They talked for a moment and Angela started dressing.

"Marian's had a fit," she said. "She tried to throw herself out of the window. I'm going over."

She returned an hour later.

"She has calmed down," she told me. "We gave her a sedative and she went to sleep."

"What happened?" I asked.

“I don’t really know. It was no time for explanations. I found her sobbing wretchedly and I sat with her and caressed her until she calmed down. Poor Helmi! What a wedding night.”

I did not say, “He had it coming,” because, to be fair, it was not solely his fault though the big part of the blame was his. Angela called Helmi in the morning. He told her Marian was calm in a zombie-like state from the sedatives and they met in the lobby at noon. Helmi said he cancelled the trip to Europe and were returning to Marian’s house, where they would live, that same day. We were scheduled to leave for Athens the next day but Helmi asked Angela to postpone our departure a few days in case she was needed. It was a Sunday and we had lunch together at the club and saw some of our friends and late in the afternoon returned home. We hardly talked. We were sober with a sense of crisis. The next day, Monday, Angela went to the office and I ran round the track at the club to relieve my tensions and slacken my racing thoughts. On Tuesday Angela went to the office again and Helmi came a little later. He said Marian seemed better and urged him to go to work.

It was close to twelve noon when a neighbor called Helmi on the phone and said that the smell of gas was seeping from the apartment. They were afraid of a conflagration. He rushed to the house with Angela and after opening doors and windows and waiting anxious minutes for the gas to disperse they penetrated to the bathroom. Marian was lying in the bathtub in a silk nightgown, her hair well combed, beautifully made up and seemed asleep. Her face was calm but she was dead. She had found her peace.

“She even wore a bra,” Angela told me weeping. “She did not want her breasts to sag. She wanted to be beautiful in death. Didn’t she know there would be a postmortem autopsy?”

She was buried the next day. I was unwell and under sedation and my mind in a fog. The service took place at the small church of the cemetery. Not many people attended. A few of her friends, her married sister just arrived from Lebanon, Helmi and a handful of his relatives. Nothing like her wedding three days ago, which was quite a bash. One lone Greek priest, a friend of ours who had been persuaded, almost bullied, by Angela to carry out the funeral rites against the Church’s dogma, which considers suicide a mortal sin and refuses a Christian burial.

Angela wept silently and the young priest’s voice was low and beautiful and the words cogent and distinct, unlike the ordinary, loud and mumbling Greek priests. It enveloped us in its solemnity. It was almost as if he was sharing our pain. A priest of the Coptic Church was also attending but he was mostly silent and a young Arab boy held a receptacle where myrrh was burning on glowing charcoal giving off the sweet scent of incense: the smell of a church. I was too far gone to start inwardly ridiculing the paganism and absurdity of the ritual as I usually do in church and wondered why a young woman had so needlessly left us. Of the enormity of her despair. Of her inability to react firmly but coolly to the often senseless pressures of society and chose the final solution out of a final despair, a final weakness. Helmi, head bent, had covered his eyes with his handkerchief and made as if he was crying. Perhaps he was really crying. Perhaps he was broken but I could not imagine it. When they brought the coffin out to the graveyard and were easing it into her family’s crypt, he let out a cry and tried to follow it inside. To die, to stay with her forever.

“Disgusting, those theatrics,” Angela told me later as we were driving home. “Father John did not want to offer him his condolences. He must have heard that he pressured her and bullied her to marry him.”

“If the church turns its back on charity and forgiveness it might as well shut its doors,” I said.

“Father John is a good man but he’s only human.”

“Aren’t we all? Me, you, Helmi and Marian?”

At home, Angela asked how I was feeling.

“Not too well,” I said.

“I am surprised you took it so badly. I made a reservation for tomorrow’s flight. Are you up to it or shall we postpone it for another day or two?”

“Angela, please don’t be annoyed. I think I need to go to the clinic for a short while. It is best for all of us. I am afraid of slipping into a depression if I come to Greece right away. I don’t want the children to see me in this state.”

“Do what you think best.”

I called Dr Fatthi to tell him of Marian’s suicide. He was shocked and upset. I told him I needed to return to the clinic for a short while and he asked me if that had to do with Marian’s death. I said, “Partly,” because he did not know of our relationship and I did not want him to feel like a deceived husband. He asked me if I would be arriving tomorrow. I said I would rather go right away. It was already late afternoon.

“Your old room is free,” he said. “I shall leave word at the reception that you’ll be arriving and I shall see you tomorrow.”

I needed to leave. Despite her own shock and grief Angela did not understand why I was so utterly broken by Marian’s death and she is not stupid. I was afraid she might start interrogating me. In my state of mind anything could happen. I might come out with the whole story. Not that it mattered any more. It would have just added one more item to the list of mutual grievances and future accusations. I hastily packed a bag and told her Dr Fatthi was waiting for me to give me a new antidepressant.

“Couldn’t it wait till tomorrow?” she asked.

“He said the sooner the better. Sorry Angela. It’s too bad things turned so wrong. I hope I get better soon. I shall miss the girls terribly. I will come home as soon as I can. Kiss Maria and Annie very, very hard for me. By the way, will you continue working for Helmi?”

“Of course,” she answered. “What happened has nothing to do with it. Business is business. He might be a rotten man but he’s a sublime businessman.”

I took a taxi to Helwan. It was dark by the time I arrived at the clinic. Dr Fatthi left some pills for me at the reception with instructions. I went to my room. I unpacked cursorily. Put on my pajamas and I almost burst into tears when I thought that Marian was not upstairs waiting for me. I felt utterly, horribly, despairingly dejected and lonely. I took the pills with some water and after a miserable half-hour felt my eyelids getting heavy and droopy. Pills were to be for some days my only salvation. I slept like a log. I emerged from the fog of my drugged sleep because someone entered the room. Dr Fatthi? Was it already morning? He came round and sat on my bed. Caressed my hair. And then I knew.

“Hello, Amina,” I said.

“Hello, Paul.”

“You say my name so nicely!”

“I have been practicing it. P, p, p, p. Paul, Paul, Paul.”

“Very good.”

It was dark but I could see her smile. It was as sweet as ever.

“I am sorry you are not well but I am so happy to see you again, to have you in the clinic,” she said.

“I am happy to see you too.”

“I was sorry to hear about *set* Marian. May God have mercy on her.”

“It was written, Amina. Everyone has his turn.”

“Shall I open the shutters?”

“Please.”

She got up and opened the shutters and daylight flooded the room. We looked at each other smiling. I saw a lovely, milk-chocolate, familiar face with a seductive smile and twinkling eyes. She saw a sleepy, unshaven countenance with disheveled hair and puffed, gloomy eyes. Opposites are known to attract. Hence the smiles.

“Dr Fatthi will see you when you are ready. He told me not to hurry you up. So take your time.”

“Sit a moment next to me.”

She sat and once again caressed my untidy hair. I was surprised by a tenderness that was not revealed before.

“I missed you,” she said.

“No you didn’t. You missed the Kit Kats.”

“I missed the love that came with the Kit Kats.”

I looked at her and she looked away embarrassed. She suddenly realized she might have gone too far. We sat in silence for a moment.

“Are you going to get up now?” she asked.

“Well, you know what I need for that. Or have you forgotten?”

She laughed.

“I did not forget,” she said.

I turned sideways and offered my cheek for the kiss. She took my face with both her hands tenderly, turned it so that I faced her and kissed me on the lips.

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