

A JOURNEY

THROUGH

THE SHADES OF LOVE

An erotic romance novel

by George Loukas

When I write I don't aim to shock people and I'm surprised when I do. But I don't think that anything that occurs in life should be omitted from art, though the artist should present it in a fashion that is artistic and not ugly. I set out to tell the truth. And sometimes the truth is shocking

Tennessee Williams

C H A P T E R S

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Obsessive, untidy, unpredictable, unplanned. Both disastrous and miraculous. Divine and hellish. That was my life.

Well, not much of it left. But lucky, in the last analysis, for I am still alive, with a little money, in reasonable health, retired, an aspiring author of two unpublished novels, innumerable short stories and a new dominant need to record this strange but finally desolate and petty life of mine.

I am writing for myself. I want to understand my obsessions and the comfort I draw from them. To understand why an avidity for life is nearly always detrimental. Strong emotions, sensuality, unconventional behavior. Why we are urged to live with the insipid Aristotelian maxim of *'pan metron ariston'*, that everything in moderation is excellent?

The past is constantly hounding me. Recurring and persistent. I live in it again and again in the novels and short stories I write. It makes up my dreams and nightmares, reminding me that my civilized, well-kept exterior conceals an adventurer who muddled through life with no purpose or achievement other than a desperate thrashing about for survival. A craving for money and love and the gratification of passions steeped in an amorality whose only excuse was that it was a reaction to the forces that battered me. The past is forever coming back....

almost yesterday

Certain things happened when I was thirteen. My mother denied them vehemently. She has planted doubts in my mind. She ascribed to me too vivid an imagination, too obsessive an interest in sex. It was partly her doing. An unusual uninhibited attitude of her own. A wish, perhaps, to bring a healthy outlook to the mystery of man and woman, to the human body, in the manner of nudists and naturists. Except the setting was different, the times and circumstances. As far back as I remember, she was never furtive with her body, never kept her self meticulously covered, never exhibited a sense of shame for physical nudity and bodily contact.

The inexplicable difficulties of her marriage, inexplicable because, at the time, I barely understood their origins, the surliness of my constantly dissatisfied father, tied us in a bond that was not wholly natural. I loved to look at her from an early age and reveled in her hugs and caresses. Her embraces were my paradise. A mother, after all, is a son's first woman and the relationship, especially with an only child, sometimes errs from the normal to the pathogenic. She was of average height with the shapely femininity of wide hips and ample breasts. Not the African statuette of fertility; something perfect and refined. A brunette with a short practical hairstyle, normal almond shaped brown eyes, wide cheekbones and a smile that, to me, was unbearably sweet and expressive and revealed her thoughts. At least the basic ones of anger, amusement, irony, disbelief, ridicule. Not her inner, inner thoughts about her life, her dreams, her disappointments, her rage, and her need for a man. Because there is no doubt she was a passionate person. Resigned but passionate. Ill-fated but passionate. Her name was Antigone for she was Greek. It should have been Jocasta for much of my childhood, even before I knew the legend, I dreamt of being her Oedipus.

My Maltese father, Emmanuel Zimit, was a queer fish. He was born in the minor port town of Mgharr, on the island of Gozo where the Zimits originated. Short, good looking with pleasant regular features and an air of eagerness and intelligence about him that somehow went awry in later life. When he was eighteen, the Second World War broke out and he signed up in the RAF in Valletta. His good school grades and perfect eyesight were noted and he was trained as a fighter pilot and was shipped, a year later, to Egypt with his squadron during the El Alamein campaign against Rommel. Those three fateful years from 1941 to 1944 dominated his being, his thoughts and memories for the rest of his life and left him with a taste of unfulfilled promise that he believed was his due. Much of the blame for this he ascribed to his wife.

He was originally stationed at a camp near the Almaza airfield just outside Cairo and then moved to the western desert where most of the action took place. After Rommel was trounced, he spent a few months on an airbase near Port Said where he met my mother. By the time I was old enough to be curious about the romance, their life had already soured and I did not manage to learn of its circumstances nor glean any part of its magic. It was a disconcerting subject for both of them. Yet there must have been magic in the love affair of the short but dashing aviator and the beautiful young woman my mother had been.

In those mad days of war and upheaval, of troops coming and going, of hunger, need, and uncertainty, the fissuring of a conservative society and laxity of

morals, my mother fell pregnant. They married as they had originally intended but in somewhat of a hurry because he was to be moved again to Italy with his squadron. In the autumn of 1945, he returned to Port Said, to his wife and year-old son he had not seen, to plan and pull together the disconnected bits of his life. There were three options open to him. Continue his military career in England. Join his father's thriving tobacconist business in Valetta or try to settle with his wife in Port Said.

My mother vetoed out of hand the military career. She could not envisage herself the wife of a military officer in England, moving from camp to draughty camp and socializing with other British officers' wives. They traveled with me, soon after, to Valletta to reconnoiter the prospects there but my grandfather had another son in the business and the welcome was short lived. In Port Said, my mother was already working at a dressmaker's atelier and she convinced father to return and try to find a job there. It was their love that mattered. Or so they thought. They did not know that love, in the end, never matters all that much. It clouds one's thoughts and contributes to wrong decisions.

images

We walked to the railway station to fetch Vassiliki. Mother invited her for a short stay with us to enjoy a few days by the sea. Our less than wealthy families exchanged these small courtesies. Whenever she had business in Cairo, mother stayed at her cousin Ioanna's home and she invited Vassiliki, her daughter, as a sort of repayment. Ioanna was a widow. Her Greek husband passed away some years ago and she remained a sleeping partner in the small business he owned with another two associates and some money was coming in every month.

I had not seen Vassiliki in four years. I did not revisit Cairo since the few days we were guests at aunt Ioanna's. Vassiliki was thirteen at the time, a tall quiet, very pretty girl. I was one year her senior, not overly sociable and we had little in common. However, we did play cards and backgammon to break the monotony; went for short walks and chores for our parents and I did fall in love with her. I fell in love very often in those days. Silently, timidly, choking my sentiments, afraid to let the slightest hint escape. Baby love, perhaps, but no less soul wrenching for that.

The station was a half-hour stroll through the Port Said of my memories and ever-present nostalgia. A small, pleasing city, clean, calm and uncrowded. Of wide pavements and heavy colonial-arabesque buildings whose upper storeys overlapped the pavement, were supported by massive columns and provided permanent shade and a refreshing coolness in the sultry summer sun. It was my hometown and I felt comfortable in it. I had known little else and though I knew, one day, I would fly away, I also knew I would never be able to relinquish its claim on my heart. Port Said had character. It had a stamp on it that was different from Cairo and Alexandria and the lesser cities of that time which were little more than large villages. That it has lost much of that in later years with the population explosion, the hopeless overcrowding of people, buildings and cars, pollution and dirt, was inevitable in that poor part of the world.

Opposite the station was a beautiful middle-sized mosque with a high, slim minaret on the side, widening gracefully at the top like the glans of a phallus. There was an opening on the side and all around it a narrow balcony, where the muezzin clambered five times a day to call the faithful to prayer. Technology has annulled this quaint practice. Two black, large megaphone cones, incongruous and ugly, are now strapped on opposite sides and have relieved the progressive sheikhs from the arduous climb. Now, with an unearthly screech one hears the ear-drilling *Allahu Akbar*. I still remember the days of the muezzin and the strange feelings his distant chant aroused. He walked around the narrow balcony, raised his hands behind his ears and called for prayer, '...to attest and confirm that Mohammad is the Prophet of God...' It was extraordinary how this fanatic five-times-a-day, every day call, never became routine and ignored. However much I loved Port Said, this call to prayer reasserted again and again, in my mind, that this was not my world. I had roots there but roots that could not grasp and feed on the dry desert sand and would wither and not hold me there for long. There was the certainty that one day I would leave.

On Fridays, an hour or so before noon, the whole square was covered with straw mats and the men drifted in; limbs washed, face, neck and ears; removed their shoes to one side and sat, quietly, cross-legged on the mats. The sheikhs arrived soon after, microphones put in place, and the prayers would begin. That

strange ritual of standing, bowing, kneeling and the thumping of foreheads on the ground, forever facing Mecca. The prayer was mobile but silent with lips moving in mute recitation, punctuated every now and then, at the same instant, by a joint audible uttering of *Allahu Akbar*. I was always moved by it. It was not loud. A sort of surrender to God, a complaint, a grievance for their hardships. Of hope, of mercy. It came out with a deep, deep sigh from the soul and a sort of temporary desperation before they resumed their lives of penury, of hustling, lying, cheating, working, trying by any means to survive.

The sheikhs had their turn next with their beloved microphones spewing words at ear-splitting decibels in an interminable, rushing and unstoppable jabber, which I did not fully understand but whose sound alone revolted me. A sound of ignorance, fanaticism, narrow mindedness, of God and Satan, paradise and hell, of what God said, his rewards and terrible punishments.

I loved the mosque and its typically Islamic architecture. The exquisitely latticed wooden windows. Its carved wooden doors. The graceful mingling of the angular and smoothly round Arabic script on its walls, strange and moving because it is art that conveys a message, and is part of our human heritage and culture. Like the many grand cathedrals of Europe, monuments to the mystery of our existence.

an inevitable idyll

When I saw Vassiliki, my heart skipped a beat. She had grown spectacularly in those four years. Tall, beautiful and cool. Thankfully, not taller than me for I had stretched as well. She had chestnut colored hair and a pair of large eyes that asked questions as we embraced. In a white shirt and a tight reddish-brown skirt, one could see her body was not yet perfect, not yet fully developed but with the promise there. Blooming, not yet in final bloom. The hips wide, the legs long and shapely, the breasts assertive. A smile cool, serious and reserved and a constant sense of appraisal in her eyes. A girl-woman; the dual characteristics intermingling; now one emerging, now the other. Polite and affectionate with my chattering mother and with stealthy, speculative glances for me. Carrying Vassiliki's suitcase, we left the noisy, cavernous station with its frenetic, disorderly activity and the ponderous arrivals and departures of old steam trains and modern diesels. In the busy, untidy square outside hailed a horse drawn carriage and clippety-clopped to our house in the calm streets of Port Said.

At home, we settled her as well as we could in our small apartment. For lack of space, Vassiliki was to share my room. I ceded my bed and half my cupboard space and a camp bed was installed for me. The instructions, given with a smile by my mother, were that at no time was the bedroom door to be shut when both Vassiliki and I were inside together. Especially so at night.

"Anyway, she is almost a sister to you," was the afterthought. "And she is a good and virtuous girl."

Her words came back to me at the station when Vassiliki and I were sneaking glances at each other. She is not like a sister to me, I thought, and what a beautiful girl. I hoped she was not as virtuous as all that.

My mother had, by that time, a tiny dressmaking atelier of her own near our house. She came home at noon and prepared a cold lunch for father and me. In the evening, she cooked something more elaborate but father was usually absent. He was either drinking with friends or spending the evening with his mistress. Things had calmed down by now and facts accepted and tolerated by my mother after years and years of unbearable tension and quarrels. Age is decisive and time, a healer. She was older; jealousy turned to indifference and she no longer cared as long as he provided the little money he did. And what a common, vulgar thing that other woman was. Some things are inexplicable. Oh, they surely have an explanation but I could not think of one. My mother, a goddess by comparison.

We sat down for lunch when father returned from his work. The atmosphere was always frigid when he was around. He greeted Vassiliki politely and the lunch was over quickly with a minimum of stunted small talk. He invited us to visit him at the office for an ice cream, which we did after mother left for work and after a long walk to the beach and the return along the Corniche, the port seafront, passing by the large, bronze statue of De Lesseps. Vassiliki liked Port Said. It was her first visit and the city had many picturesque Islamic style buildings and mosques, which she admired. The headquarters of the international Suez Canal Company was housed in a beautiful marble-clad building on a quayside of the port. It was also of Islamic design with slender marble columns and arches. Most of the employees of the Company and the captains who took charge of the ships for the crossing were foreign and together with the Greeks,

Italians and ubiquitous British garrison soldiers stationed in a camp at Port Fuad made for a colorful, cosmopolitan atmosphere.

At seventeen, Vassiliki seemed to have changed. She had overcome the diffidence that was her trademark four years ago and acquired the coolness and a kind of detachment that remained permanently with her. However, that summer in Port Said, she was outgoing and talkative, at least when we were alone. It was strange how that long walk quickly established a familiarity and comfortable intimacy that, how could have I known it then, tied us for life. We talked, laughed, and learnt a few things about one another.

She had just finished her pre-final year St Mary's College, an English school for girls run by nuns. Even at that age, she found the prayers and the nuns' constant allusions to the good God insufferable. They put her off. She was frank about her awakening instincts. She had missed not having boys in the class. She loved parties where she flirted and sometimes kissed with boys, which was all she could do because her mother kept her on a tight leash adhering to the mores of the middle fifties in Egypt. There were many questions we discussed, serious and almost philosophical. About love and sex and how far a girl could go and why was virginity so important? She listened with a smile to my muddled, less than perfect explanations.

She was headstrong and a quiet, considered rebel despite her cool. Despite her apparent gentleness. A leader in her class of oppressed, religiously oriented, and inhibited Egyptian schoolmates. They looked up to her, consulted her on every conceivable problem though rarely followed her normally daring and controversial advice and called her El Raissa Vassi: Vassi the Leader. So Vassi she became for me, too. Vassi in Port Said. Vassi for a lifetime.

In Port Said, I attended the Lycée Français, a coeducational school sponsored by the French government. It was a good school and I was a diligent student. When I graduated that summer, I enrolled in an Italian technical college called Don Bosco to follow courses that started in the fall.

Vassi was curious about the life I led in our small town where Greeks, Italians and Egyptians mingled comfortably. 'Did I have a girlfriend?' Not just now. 'In the past?' Yes, sort of. 'What does that mean?' Well, never an enduring attachment. I liked parties, too, and I, too, kissed a few girls and after such intimacies a tenderness remains and, for a while, one feels emotionally involved until things cool off. 'Did I make love to any one?'

"No."

"Not even a prostitute? Boys your age supposed to have their first experiences with prostitutes."

"Well, I never did. They are usually coarse and unattractive and how can one make love without feeling? Without a kiss, without desire?"

"Many people do it."

"Those who can, do. Those who cannot, do not. When we get home," I told her, "I shall give you a book my mother gave me a few years back with all the information on sex you need. It is for young people like us and it is written in English."

We reached my father's office on the road running parallel to the tall, iron railing that separated the port from the streets and busy life of the city. He worked for a ship chandler's firm. The building was old and weathered. A wide stone staircase, its steps concave with use, led to the upper floors. One felt the mustiness of age and dampness as soon as one entered the spacious entrance lobby and it

extended to the large rooms with worn out, creaking floorboards of the office. It was the afternoon lull and the employees were chatting behind large, ancient desks surrounded by shelves of dusty dossiers with protruding yellowing invoices.

I greeted the people I knew. Two or three were Italian, one was Greek and the rest were Egyptians. They seemed to like me and fussed over me with good-humored, loud voices. We provided the intermission of a boring afternoon. I was asked to introduce my beautiful girlfriend. Vassi blushed and my father came in all smiles. He brought two chairs, installed us on the balcony, and sent out the office boy for two kaimac ices: milk-froth ice cream scented with gum from Chios.

From the balcony, one could see the movement of liners coming in and out of the port and entering the Suez Canal. Often, in my free time, I would go there, take a chair and sit looking at the ships. I knew the flags of every nation that ever sent a ship to our port. Peculiar feelings of romance and adventure, of the need to escape my narrow world flooded my being at their sight. I needed to see the world, to see brown and black and yellow people with slit eyes; to see jungles and animals, deserts and snow, to travel for weeks in the oceans, to take a measure of our earth. I tried to explain all this to Vassi and she listened with her cool smile but she was too down-to-earth to appreciate my longing.

On our way back home, I held her hand. I was elated by our rapid, unexpected intimacy, our easygoing familiarity, a friendship that promised more to come.

Before going to bed that night clad respectably in our night attire, Vassi, in a non-transparent, full-length, cotton-print nightie and, I, in my best pajamas, I opened the drawer where I kept my sex magazines and revolting pornographic pictures, the only kind available in those days, and fished out the sex book I had promised to give her. She spied the small stack of Gala magazines and early edition Playboys with which I relieved my sexual tensions feeling guilty after each and every ejaculation and asked to see them.

“These are not for you,” I told her. Not a very clever or effective prohibition, I must admit. It aroused her interest and set the ball rolling a few days later.

That first night, I was so utterly happy. I felt something new and thrilling had entered my life. I lay on my uncomfortable camping bed thinking of Vassi, not two steps away, of her beautiful face and delicious smile. Her shapeless nightgown could not conceal the wide hips, dainty ankles and the pointed breasts, which pressed on the cloth even without a bra. I imagined her naked and tried to construct and visualize every feminine feature of her body, her breasts, her tummy, her back tapering to her waist and widening to a perfect backside, her superb legs leading to her genitals. One vision after the other and an arousal that forced me to bend my body to disguise it. Wondering if I would ever glimpse the actuality of my fantasies, which continued until sleep swathed my consciousness. I woke up several times. My bedside lamp was on until very late. Vassi was avidly enriching her knowledge of sex. In the middle fifties, in our conservative Egyptian society, our knowledge and experience of sexual matters was still quite Victorian.

Next day we went to the beach. Mother packed us off early before she went to work. She was taking some very inadequate precautions. We put on our bathing costumes beneath our clothes and held our folded beach umbrella and a bag with two towels and a few sandwiches. No suntan oils, in those days, with sun

block filters but neither a disappearing ozone layer in the sky. We did not have a telephone at home and passed by some friends to let them know we would be at the beach.

On our way there, we met Bippo and he said he would join us in a couple of hours after he finished some business. He needed a nap in the sun, he said, smiling at Vassi.

“I work mostly at night and sleep late in the morning.”

I was dying to know what his business was. Bippo was Italian and we met often in our small city and the small circle of friends that had spontaneously formed through the years in Port Said and organized parties, days at the seaside in summer and small cycling excursions in winter. He was older than most of us eighteen-year olds in the group but seemed to find our company congenial. He dropped out of school before graduating and had always enough money and the generosity to offer us drinks and ice creams whenever we met and an odd meal at a restaurant. It was rumored that he was involved in contraband cigarettes. He was lean but sinewy and there was not a pleasant feature on his face. Not ugly, just unattractive. I often thought that if I were a woman I would not make love to him even if he were the last man on earth. However, I am not a woman and I liked Bippo just as most people did. He was a fanatic spaghetti lover and still lived with his parents where adequate supplies were always available. Everybody knew, for it was a badly kept secret, that he had a *garçonnière* for his sex life. A sex life based exclusively on the exchange of money for flesh with professional ladies.

The beach at Port Said is sandy but neither very wide nor very long. The encroaching city comes to it level to the very edge, unlike the long Corniche thoroughfare at Alexandria, which follows the seashore for miles, at a certain height and affords a fine, panoramic scenery. Here, at the back end of the beach a wall of wooden cabins on stilts blocks the view of the sea and the waves arching and toppling over in perpetual motion, depriving the city of the airiness that an unencumbered seafront would afford.

We penetrated the wall of cabins to the beach, strolled to the spot where our group usually congregated, stuck our umbrella in the sand and stripped to our bathing costumes. The sea was a fine blue and the waves were tumbling and frothing unhurriedly with a lulling susurrus. The day was sunny and calm with a gentle, refreshing breeze. It was as perfect as Vassi, the girl-woman in a one-piece, red bathing suit and a sensuality that kept me staring at her. Her eyes were puffy from reading late into the night.

“Did you finish the book?” I asked.

“Most of it. The most interesting parts. The physical aspects. I left out the babble of morality. We get enough of that from the nuns.”

“Did you learn things you didn’t know?”

“Yes. Mostly about boys. Well, I am a girl and I know my sex. I did not know certain physical details like that the penis gets flushed with blood when it enlarges and gets erect. That the sperm is produced and stored in the testicles. The female ovulation. The most dangerous period for pregnancy. It is very interesting. One thing I did not understand is why a woman has to be a virgin until marriage while a man can have sex before it. It is not clearly spelled out but that is the implication.”

“I suppose, the reason is that the woman may get pregnant and that would be a disaster. Abortions can be performed but they are dangerous, bad for the

health and in many countries unlawful. There is also the moral problem that abortion destroys a life.”

“But there is contraception. A whole chapter of it with many different methods.”

“I am not sure why this is so. It is the morality of our times.”

“Well, I find it hard to understand and it seems to me totally unfair.”

I smiled at her conclusion. It sounded correct. I never thought about it.

“Perhaps you are right,” I admitted.

“A thing that amused me,” she said smiling, “is that the book states that women develop sexually and emotionally much faster than the men. So, as far as sex and emotional maturity is concerned I am probably your superior.”

“That’s good news,” I said with a smile.

We talked and laughed in this vein for about an hour. We could not go for a swim while we were alone because the umbrella and our clothes might disappear but a few friends eventually came along and after introductions, we saddled them with the chore of safekeeping our belongings and waded into the sea. The water was fresh but not cold.

Vassi could hardly swim. She just about managed to keep afloat and I undertook to teach her. It was an artless start of our physical contact. Not that I did not take advantage of it. We were playful, merry and not a little excited at the covert caresses, playful ducking in the water and hugs that became part of the lesson. I held her prone, my hands supporting her legs and chest, straying now and then to her breasts, while she splashed with thrashing legs and rotating arms in a caricature breaststroke and promptly sank when I let go. I told her that perhaps we should start with the crawl but that she ought to get used to submerging her face in the water. Exercises below sea level were improvised, sweetened by out-of-sight, underwater embraces and awkward, water-choked salty kisses and the initial acquaintance of our frisky tongues. Heartened and urged by the readiness of her response, by the cool smile and her searching look into my eyes.

We emerged an hour later with sodden, sea-wrinkled fingers and red, salt-pickled eyes. Vassi’s hair, soaking and stringy, accentuated the delicate beauty of her face, flushed from the sun and maybe from our kissing. We returned home at around four, had a shower, and rested chastely on our beds until mother returned from work to prepare the main, evening meal, which we ate in the absence of father. Thankfully, my parents were at their best behavior. There were no quarrels or loud-voiced exchanges while Vassi was with us. They ignored each other. I wondered how they could share the same bed. But there was no other option in our small flat.

We left again at eight for a movie. Took the ferry to Port Fuad, which was, in those days, the residential area where the foreign, mainly French, employees of the Suez Canal Company lived in relative seclusion and luxury. A district separated from Port Said by the port and the Suez Canal, of quiet, tree-lined, empty streets with comfortable two-storey villas, each with a garden and separate quarters for servants. On the port side of Port Fuad, a number of small clubs were located and nearby a single open-air cinema operated in summer.

The film was of no importance. It was an excuse to sit with Vassi, to hold hands, to chat in a low voice and exchange a hasty kiss, now and then, for a few other spectators were also present and the tolerance of romantic intimacies was limited in those days as it still is in that prudish, religiously oriented part of the

world. We left the cinema a little after eleven and headed for the ferry, which stopped operating at midnight.

The streets were deserted and at every dark corner, I embraced Vassi and we kissed. Our first lovely, above sea level kisses, tongues exploring each other's mouths, hands caressing faces, hair and bodies. She was, as my sex book presaged, at least my equal in maturity, in desire, my equal in her eagerness to learn and experiment. I was experiencing, again, the magic of love, the thrill of shared feelings but in an entirely new way. I did not have to coax, to soothe inhibitions, to overcome my partner's reluctance. I fondled her breasts over her dress, lifted her skirt and caressed her behind over her panties. She felt my hardening penis and put her hand to feel it. I told her she was beautiful and that I was falling in love with her and she was silent. I asked her if she loved me too, and softly she said, yes. However, we did not linger overlong for fear of being surprised by the odd pedestrian and the last ferry had to be boarded.

Mother asked us if we enjoyed the film and we said, yes, and she asked if we were with friends and we said, yes. Small lies to put her to sleep. For a long time in bed, I thought of Vassi and our kissing. It was a wonderful feeling. She was reading her book again. Revising the material. Perhaps, comparing theory with practice. Printed words with the enchantment of the act. I longed to slip into her bed.

Next day it was the beach again. We were alone that morning and asked a neighbor to keep an eye on our things while we swam. Vassi was getting the hang of the breaststroke. Still a little labored and frantic but at least she kept afloat. Our underwater kissing recurring, less frolicsome and more obsessive but our spirits high and merry. The passion was building up. Always demanding a little more. I wondered where we were heading. How fast? There was no restraint, no curbing on her part. Would we go past the inhibitions of our times and of our milieu? Even at nineteen, these questions puzzled and worried me. We were indoctrinated in the concept of chastity and I sensed that we, Vassi and I, might not be able to control a situation that was pushing us on.

We left the beach early that day after eating our sandwiches. We were rosy with sunburn and Vassi was sleepy. She took her sex studies seriously and had been, again, reading late into the night. At home, she took a shower and promptly went to sleep. My mother came in later and started preparing a meal. Vassi was still asleep and I kept her company in the kitchen. She told me she did not want us to come home so early. I understood the implication. I went up to her and hugged her. I kissed her on the mouth. For years, ever since her falling out with father, I took some liberties that were not altogether normal and she did not seem to mind.

"Are you jealous?" I asked her.

"You are a silly boy," she said with a smile.

"You told me Vassiliki is a good girl."

"Yes. But she seems so grown up."

"So?"

"So things might get out of hand."

"Like they did in Malta?"

My mother blushed deeply. She turned to her cooking to conceal her face.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, her back turned to me.

"I remember some strange and exciting things. They come back to me in my dreams. How can I forget?"

“Oh John, will you stop inventing things. And stop this habit of mixing dreams with reality. We were in Malta six years ago. You were hardly thirteen. How much can you possibly remember? You must control your galloping imagination.”

I went and hugged her from behind, my hands crossed on her chest, resting on her breasts. I kissed the back of her neck. She did not push me off. There was an erotic undertone in my affection, in my kissing and petting which was as new as history, a personal and peculiar six-year-old history. Did she feel it? Was her acquiescence an avowal that she enjoyed my fondling? A license for me to go further? Could it be that her inexistent sexual life was troubling her and that her growing son's physical attentions were not distasteful to her?

“Try as you may,” I told her, “you cannot erase that summer from my memory.”

“Go away, John,” she said turning around. She was once again composed and smiling. “Let me cook in peace.”

Oedipus and Jocasta, an anathema. Why does it trouble us? Why does it trouble the world so much as to intrude into mythologies and the writing of tragedies? It is not easy, it is not usual and it needs a whole set of special conditions. Sometimes it happens. Sometimes it is touching and tender. Do we have to tear our eyes out?

Next day, once again, mother packed us off early to the beach but we returned home earlier than usual because we were both tired. We showered in turn and then I left Vassi for a moment and went downstairs to buy some ice cream. When I returned I found her, cross-legged on her bed, leafing through my sex magazines and pornographic pictures. She had fished them out of my drawer. I sat next to her and we looked at them together. Her equanimity surprised me. She examined the pictures calmly, almost scientifically. Pictures of sexual intercourse, of fellatio and cunnilingus, one partner doing it to the other or jointly in the sixty-nine position, women with legs parted showing their genitals, of anal intercourse and a single one of bestiality with a huge dog. Most of the pictures were ancient with plump women and men with handlebar mustaches and enormous cocks but some were recent with the most appalling and unappetizing females.

“The women are not very pretty, are they?” said Vassi.

“No.”

“And some of the men have enormous penises. I never imagined they can reach that size.”

“God has not been fair. Some men are better endowed than others.”

She laughed.

“And so many variations,” she said. “You can do it with the mouth. You can do it from behind and you can do it with a dog. Does a man do it with a bitch?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I never had the urge but I have read of cases of bestiality with ewes and sows in farms and isolated places.”

“Unbelievable!”

“Oh there are many more unbelievable perversions. Necrophilia, for one. Doing it with a dead person.”

“Good God! That must be a male specialty. I cannot imagine a dead man doing it with a live woman.”

I laughed.

“Any others?” she asked.

“Dozens. Take homosexuality, peeping toms, exhibitionists, sadists, masochists, pedophiles, an inexhaustible variety of fetishists and on and on.”

“You are very well informed.”

“Sex interests me.”

“It interests me too. Is that why you keep these pictures?”

“I keep them to relieve myself when I get sexually worked up and frustrated.”

“You mean, to masturbate?”

“Yes.”

She smiled.

“Will you show me?”

I was getting aroused. A shapely leg was uncovered from her shapeless nightdress. The cool smile killed me. The lack of false modesty. More than anything else, her willingness, nay, her eagerness, her need to engage in sex, to learn, to move on. I uncovered her other leg and moved closer to her. Her panties were showing. I caressed her legs. My heartbeat quickened. The feel of her flesh, the display of her body dried my mouth. I separated her legs and touched the soft center of her sex over the cloth many times over. She looked at me intently, a smile lingering. I slipped my hand through the side of the panties and felt the sparse pubic hair and the molding of her genitals. Our silent love play and her acquiescence excited me terribly. My throat felt dry and choking. I tried swallowing several times but there was no saliva and my attempts gave an impression of unease and stage fright. She was tender and caressed my hair.

“You are so sweet,” she told me. She was suddenly my senior. Comforting me. Encouraging me. “I trust you and I do love you, you know.”

My penis was visibly erect and she reached and held it over my trousers.

“Let me look at it,” she said.

I wanted her to look at it. To hold it and move it. To put it in her mouth. I got off the bed and took off my shirt, trousers and underwear. Naked and in gorged erection I went back to Vassi. She held my penis straightaway. No hesitation. She looked at it riveted, and cupped my testicles.

“It’s very nice,” she said. “Not like the monsters in the pictures. It’s so nice to hold. I would not have imagined.”

She held it and squeezed it, testing its texture, its hardness, its feel. She pulled the foreskin back and the smooth, purple glans was exposed. A sensation of nakedness beyond nudity. The longing to be held finally fulfilled. She moved her hand slowly up and down looking at it and looking at me. I sat next to her and kissed her, my tongue deep in her mouth, my roving hands constantly returning from sensual explorations to the goal post between her legs. I lifted her nightie over her head and her lovely breasts, firm, still not fully ripe with rosy nipples, appeared. Another longing had materialized. It shortened my breath. I stared and lightly touched those divine jewels of life and sex and tried to inhale normally. To brazen out her placid smile and her handling of my cock. I touched her breasts as if they were fragile, fondled them, licked the rosy nipples gently and her hand pulled my head on them. I kissed and suckled them in turn many times. I looked at her; her eyes were shut, her hand kept gently pumping. I kissed her and pushed her on her back. A smile lingered on her delicious lips, her eyes glittered and her thick hair seemed to sizzle with static electricity. She lifted herself slightly as I pulled off her panties. Her pubic hair was not yet thick and the lips of her vulva protruded slightly, just barely visible. With a throbbing heart, I stared and stared

at that strange, hair-hidden, fleshy opening. She saw my hypnotized gaze and opened her legs completely. I stopped her goading hand to avoid ejaculating and reclined beside her from my sitting position, kissed and breathlessly my hands roamed on her body. I could not yet penetrate her but I touched her and let her touch me. I was discovering the female anatomy I had been reading about so eagerly and randily for years. The simplicity and functionality was touching and exciting.

A study in contrasts, my Vassi. A seemingly cool person so eager for sex. Her exposed genitals enthralled me. After touching them gently, opening and examining them, I bent and kissed and licked them, stroked her with my tongue. We replicated the exploits of the porn pictures we had just scrutinized. I felt the sweetness of her moist, warm mouth on my penis. We had come a long way in a rush and after the energetic exertions of our mouths and tongues, after the excitement of kissing and tasting the most secret and hidden part of a woman, of Vassi, I felt my orgasm approaching. I pulled out of her mouth, lay by her side and asked her to just move her hand up and down. The sensation was almost unbearable and I started moaning. Instinctively she quickened the pace and with loud groans, I ejaculated and startled Vassi because the first few spurts shot out with force and the sperm landed on her chest and my body.

With some effort, I got up and wiped as much of it as I could with my hands and went to the bathroom to wash it away. A little dribbled on her hand and she smelled and examined it carefully. Then she also ran to the bathroom, her face flushed and glowing, her body naked and gorgeous, and rinsed it away. My orgasm had drained me. It seemed to revitalize Vassi who returned in high spirits, embraced me, kissed me repeatedly and fondled my deflating penis.

“It’s so sweet and soft, now,” she said. “What a magic transformation. I wanted it terribly inside me.”

She teased me with her tongue, licked my lips, bit them, sucked them and put her tongue in my mouth. Her body was glued to mine. I caressed her back and squeezed her behind and felt myself hardening again. However, my mother would be arriving soon and I told Vassi that we should get dressed.

We each had a rapid second shower, collected and stashed away the magazines and the less than erotic but instructive porno pictures, put on pajamas and nighties and stretched on our beds.

“Johnny,” Vassi said, “I think I love you.”

“I thought you already did.”

“Yes, but I feel it more intensely.”

“So do I, my love.”

We were silent for a while and then we fell asleep.

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