

ESCAPE FROM EGYPT

A Novel

by George Loukas

CHAPTERS:

FARID

DJAMILA

SAMIR

ANTOUN

ROSIE

FARID

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For the quickies or the few pounds? I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps she has a man, I ventured.

Yes, but so what?

Well, every rule has an exception.

Shit. Does it have to be Djamila?

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

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

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

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

Madame Mona, I think of you all the time.

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

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

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

About golf?

Yes, and anything else you think might interest me.

A smile.

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

She laughed again.

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

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

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

Like exercising your body regularly?

She laughed heartily. Something like that, she said.

Tony came up to us.

Mother, stop flirting with Freddy.

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

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

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

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

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

Will you have a coffee, Freddy?

No need.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But you have the club.

Yes, thank God for that.

And a girl?

No.

No? Why not?

Many reasons.

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

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

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

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

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

Tony came up to us.

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

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

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

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

Okay.

Promise?

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

Yes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What? No more Speedy Gonzales?

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

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

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

What about Djamila, I asked.

Djamila who? You can have her.

But will she have me?

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

I put the envelope in my pocket.

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

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

Is it as bad as that? he said laughing.

I don't know what's inside either.

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

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

Hello, Monette. This is Farid, I said.

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

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

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

But Tony gave me your envelope with the phone number.

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

No nothing.

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

At the atelier?

Yes, my dear.

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

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

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

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

She put her arm in mine.

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

No.

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

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

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

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

Yes.

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you, Tony, so do I.

She laughed. Do you know why he did it?

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

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

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

Djamila?

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

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

But?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am Djamila, she said with a smile.

I know. And I am Farid.

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

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

So you like Yousef Chahine?

Yes.

Why?

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

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

And he has talent.

Yes. And guts.

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

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

Yes, she said and smiled.

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

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

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

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

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

Why can't it last? I asked.

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

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

But we have snatched it.

Yes. So wait and see...

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

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

For the same reason?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She's educated, too.

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

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

Yes please.

It is partly my life story too.

So much the better.

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

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

He managed to rent a 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 reserve. He was like a zombie. I wondered if he was tortured but it was generally accepted that the British do not torture people. It was a heartbreak, of course, but a minor one because a year of not seeing someone kills something in you, not while he is absent, but when you see him again.

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

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

Wasn't I pretty? she asked.

Yes, very.

So let me go on...

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

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