

THREE MARRIAGES

A Novel by George Loukas

PROLOGUE

A few months ago we celebrated the third marriage of this tale. The groom was the son of my sister Annie and the bride was my daughter. They were in love for some years and passionate friends for many more. Both my sister Annie and I followed with some amusement the years' long romance. Annie was the only person apart from my wife and her mother who knew that our offspring were first cousins in name only and had no blood affiliation. We kept it a secret because we thought the implied semi-incest fired their passion, plus it had been a secret for so many years that its revelation might have disturbed my daughter. As it happened, we later found out that she suspected it and kept her suspicions secret even from her future husband. When they decided to marry they asked us if we had any religious hang-ups because I, and my sister Annie, were, in name, Christians of the Greek Orthodox Church which would have forbidden this union of first cousins. Of course, we had none. They married in a civil ceremony where few questions of family are asked and we avoided the ridiculous rituals and fairy tales of our religion. Happily our children are as free as we are from any pious spiritual ties. This is all I shall say as an introduction to my story, which humdrum and boring as it may be at times, is an ordinary yet passionate tale of the ups and downs, turns and twists of life. It will be a first-person narration where I was directly involved and a third person account of events which came to my notice and which I followed with discreet avidity for they involved my family and persons I loved dearly.

CHAPTER I : LONDON, THE EARLY YEARS.

When I graduated from the English School Cairo, in Heliopolis, my father sent me to England to continue my studies. That was in the late nineteen fifties after the Suez Crisis. In London I enrolled at a tutorial college to prepare for the Advanced Level GCE exams needed to enter University. I was very happy to find myself in the midst of old school friends and a carefree existence began in that wonderful city, cultural hub of England, of theatres and actors, ballet and opera, National galleries and museums, of music and fashion, of Piccadilly Circus and sleazy Soho, of clean, orderly streets, parks and palaces, and red double-decker buses. Yet, all seemed strangely familiar, unpretentious and hospitable, even the endless roads of exactly similar Victorian houses, and cars running on the wrong side of the street. More particularly, with only minimal effort for studies to exercise my unexceptional intellect, with money coming in for the rent of a bed-sitter, regular meals in the cheaper restaurants or coffee bars and a little leftover for pocket books, the occasional movie or the special treat of a wonderfully acted theatrical play, life was pretty wonderful.

Mine was a relatively Spartan existence though the epithet Spartan is an ungracious adjective to use for my comfortable, carefree life during those years in London. I lived in a pleasant serviced room in Drayton Gardens of South Kensington. The street itself still retained some of the gardens that gave it its name. It was an amalgam of the standard Victorian houses and modern apartment buildings with backyards of well-kept lawns and heroic, tall, time-defying trees. My room, a few steps above street level, had a large panoramic window facing the street with curtains to protect my evening privacy. A bed, two armchairs with a small table, a gas heating stove, a cupboard with drawers and a sink of hot and cold water.

There were other tenants above and below in the basement. All pleasantly polite and practically all single and not much above their thirties. Eventually I befriended a young fellow who was working in a solicitor's office, doing his articles, which I found meant he was learning law through a mixture of study and office practice. I often went up to his room where we talked mainly of girls. My interest was purely academic because I had neither the experience nor guts to go any further than expressing my opinions and pretending I was playing the field. He told me he never went after beautiful girls because they were usually difficult to land and kept his chasing to homely types who were much easier. Nevertheless I never saw or became aware of him bringing a single girl in his room. He could not have been earning much money because on weekends he cooked simple meals in his room and cut his cigarettes in half, which he said was healthier and more cost-effective. The trouble was he needed a mirror to light them because with half a cigarette he often burnt his nose.

Another tenant who intrigued me lived in the basement. He must have been in his early thirties and most of the mornings slept late in his room. He was tall and handsome with

close cropped blond hair and he had a devil-may-care but friendly attitude whenever our paths crossed in the corridor outside my room. When he woke up he usually put on loud music which disturbed no one since the house was mostly empty in the daytime. He had many beautiful women going in and out of his room and often spending the night with him. I asked my thrifty friend Paul about him and he said he was an actor. It stood to reason. His girls, or rather, women were also of the same age group, well dressed, well made up, glamorous even, often in high heels. I saw them from my window as they often used an iron staircase that descended directly from the street to the basement. I presumed they were also actresses or aspiring starlets or even nude models in girlie magazines. They completely outclassed the twenty-year-old secretaries that my friends picked up off the streets or the dancing clubs. But I was puzzled that an actor would be living so frugally in a basement flat. One day as he was entering the house through the main door I asked him if he was an actor. Yes, he said. He was currently playing at the Prince of Wales theatre in *The World of Suzie Wong*. If you come on a weekday, he said, ask for me and I'll get you in free. A week or two later I went to the play, which was a musical about a prostitute in Hong Kong called *Suzie Wong*. He was not much more than an extra, a face in the crowd of British sailors that frequented the bar where Suzie picked up her clients. His only spoken line was when Suzie entered the bar crowded with sailors. It was a shout, Hi Suzie. Not much talent, not much glory, not much money but plenty of desirable young women. A worthwhile compensation.

The house was kept spotless by a plump, good natured, cockney woman who hoovered our rooms, made our beds, changed the sheets once a week, and talked to me in a language I did not always understand. There was one communal telephone, as in most rooming houses, with an extension on each floor which any tenant available would answer. If the person requested was not at home a note was left on the mantelpiece informing him of the call.

Chelsea, which in those days was starting to become trendy with a proliferation of coffee bars, clothing shops of the new modish fashions, and a cool clientele of young people was within walking distance. A conventional cinema, the ABC Fulham was fifty yards away on the opposite pavement and the Paris Pullman was a few paces next door. This was a tiny cinema that specialized in the arty and high-brow films of the European nouvelle vague and the classics. *Temptation*, consequently, beckoned on a daily basis. It was a serious rival to duty, conscience and mainly to the afternoon classes at the tutorial college.

Most of my friends were budding Casanovas and this was something of a drawback because of my inexperience and shyness with girls whose local sexual morals had progressed by the early sixties far beyond equivalent notions in our Middle Eastern society where I grew up. Still, I was supremely happy with the freedom, the companionship and limited responsibilities of my student life even with a repressed libido which found its simulated reality and imaginary involvement in the sexual game through the loudmouthed recounting of my buddies' exploits. They had become, in no time, audacious and saucy, and adept at picking up young women on the street, chatting

them up and offering them a coffee. With improbable tales of their worth and exotic oriental origins they arranged appointments, which, hopefully, with a minimum of effort and expense would land them on their bed. I just trailed along and felt part of the game, which I certainly was not. They were not too fussy about the looks of the lassies, my friendly and dedicated “fornicari” or fazed by brush-offs and their success was a product of a thick-skinned adherence to the law of averages. For every five pickups one was sure to fall.

It passed like a dream that first year. The weather did not bother me. Not the gloomy skies, the frequent rainfall nor the freezing cold of January and February. Never had a cough or runny nose in all my years in London. The saying that England has bad weather but a good climate turned out to be true. A-level exams were due at the end of my second year and I chose my three subjects in view of minimal scholarly exertion. I had no ambition to excel in anything and no goals or dreams for the future. The future was too vague and the present totally absorbing. I was inevitably infected by my easy-going years in Egypt and my fellow students at the college were of low caliber and could not outclass me. The college itself was a moneymaking enterprise and the teachers uninspiring and mostly indifferent. I was well suited to that environment and much of the time skipped my afternoon classes to see an interesting film at the Paris Pullman or finish an intriguing novel.

That summer I did not return to Egypt to join my family at our summer place in Alexandria. Much as I loved the sea and, yes, my family that provided the funds for what turned out to be the best and easiest years of my life, I chose to remain in London. Some of my friends returned home for the summer but my Egyptian schoolmate Omar Abdel Moneim decided not to return for fear of being drafted in the army. His mother was English and he was blond and delicately handsome and our friends teased him, perhaps not unrealistically, that he would attract any number of sex-starved Arab boyfriends in the army camps. He could have a ball if only he could switch from hetero to bi. He laughed it off but I believe it worried him and he badgered me to stay and keep him company during summer. The funny thing was that for all his effeminate beauty, Omar was a sex fundamentalist. An obsessive sex nut with a convoluted, irresponsible and selfish love life. He was capable of juggling two or three girlfriends at the same time, made appointments which he missed without qualms and more than once received a well-deserved slap on the face. I had already decided to spend the summer in London and with the temporary thinning out of friends I became close to Omar despite our different characters and interests. Where I daydreamed with books and films and plays he seemed solidly down to earth. I don't even know what sparked his life beyond sex and a desire to get an engineering degree. And yet a sincere affection and sense of companionship developed during meals we had together, walks in the lovely London parks and of course picking up girls. He was puzzled by my reticence to get involved in a relationship and I never expressed the restraining inhibitions of my inexperience and shyness. How would I ever tell Omar that I had never kissed a girl?

CHAPTER II : ANNIE,

Sometime in August disaster struck. I received a letter from my father asking me to enroll my sister Annie at a technical college for interior design and to find her a room near where I lived. A flurry of letters from my side exposing the dangers to my sister's morality and sexual integrity followed. I tried to be as diplomatic as possible. I explained the local scene, the sexual freedom and that a girl was expected to sleep with the boy from the very first date. I did not tell them that I did not relish the role of a keeper of my sister. Or to have a pregnant sister on my hands. I did not tell them that little Annie, who was not so little actually, just a year younger than I, a pretty, well-built girl with large eyes, a large sexy mouth, fine teeth and silky blond hair, was by far more experienced than I, far more audacious, and was rarely without a boyfriend both in and out of school during our summers in Alexandria. All done secretly, discreetly, and without a clue to our trusting parents. I did not tell them that she often tried to fix me up with her girlfriends but was defeated by the syndrome of my abysmal timidity. Yes, she loved me and her love was reciprocated but the thought of being her custodian overwhelmed me. My agonized and undeniably selfish efforts to keep her stuck in Egypt brought no result and I soon started a search for a college and later for a room. With stoicism and gloomy resignation I accepted the inevitable. An intrusion into my carefree existence and the huge responsibility for my sister's wellbeing.

My parents sent me a certificate of study from the English School and the local matriculation of doubtful value but at least she spoke English and that was enough of a qualification for the Interior Design section of the Hammersmith College of Arts. I was relieved, paid the reasonable fee for the first term and round about the middle of September, before the influx of foreign students, found a lovely big furnished room with a bathroom in Bina Gardens not far from my room. A private bath, my God, unheard of luxury for our student budgets. And to forestall as much as possible her boredom and desperate rendezvous that might lead to amorous adventures, I rented a television set and installed it in her room. She arrived accompanied by our father who handed her, so to speak, to me, stayed two days in a nearby hotel and left. The days were cold and he saw that the only coat I wore was a flimsy raincoat over a pullover. On the day he left he gave me his heavy woolen coat. He was shorter than I and full-bodied with a healthy belly. I thanked him pretending I was pleased though I looked utterly ridiculous in it. No chance that I would ever use it and wondered how to get rid of it. I did not know any needy souls to give it away to and Omar suggested I sell it. A few days later we took the tube to Paddington where an old Jew kept a shop of used clothing. It was musty and dark inside, the only light filtering through the dusty, grimy shop window. A single, very large table was packed haphazardly with ancient suits and trousers, which were creased and smelly and as depressing as the middle-aged shop owner. We showed him the coat. He had the same build as my father and immediately tried it on. He suddenly looked respectable in it. I think I'll keep it for me self, he said. I'll give you fifteen bob. Oh for

heaven's sake, I said. Fifteen bob? Yes, fifteen bob. Eyes indignant and glaring. Take it or leave it. Omar looked at me with a guilty air for he brought me here in good faith. I thought what would I do with it if I lugged it back home? Fifteen bob were six pocket books at two and six each. We took the money and left.

The next few days I consecrated to Annie. We walked around the neighborhood, which was also mine, to show her the shops, supermarkets and restaurants. I showed her my room and my little expanding library, which hardly interested her. I took her to Hammersmith by underground from the Gloucester Rd. tube station, which was close by and had her enroll at the Interior Design section. For the next two evenings I reserved Omar's company and we spent both evenings strolling around Piccadilly Circus and Soho with the fascinating collection of the different breeds of young people and huge variety of oddballs. Omar gave his best performance at teasing and chatting the young women that were there for a good time and incidentally, or perhaps intentionally, impressed and amused Annie. We showed her the famous West End theatres and walked to Trafalgar Square with Nelson's column, the National Gallery, the majestically solid and stolid buildings all round, the milling crowds and the night-owl pigeons that in the well-lit square kept human hours.

A week later Annie was fully acclimatized. She gave her room's aspect a feminine touch by hanging a few painting reproductions on the wall and bought a colorful bed cover for the double bed. On the mantelpiece over a fireplace that had a gas heater she arranged a few bibelots and trinkets bought on the cheap, and her bathroom acquired soaps, shampoos, face creams, body lotions and washing powder for her underwear. She began her courses at Hammersmith early October and seemed to have made a few acquaintances of both sexes. What surprised and amused her were the variety of accents with which English was spoken. There were a few upper-class la-di-dah students, others with clear BBC pronunciation but also a few cockneys and north of England accents which she tried to imitate to me for laughs. I had also started my sporadic attendance at the tutorial college but invariably spent an hour in the evening with her for company and a little television.

Omar dropped by quite often and Annie was very much taken by him. I was not too happy about that because I did not want her to get hurt. Of course she knew him from school but I told her here in London he had turned into an obsessive philanderer and she said she did not blame him. Girls must be after him like mad. He is almost as good looking as a beautiful girl, she said. And did you notice, he has hardly any facial hair. I wonder if he's bisexual. Well, he never made a pass at me, Annie, I said, but bear in mind what I told you. It was a fair warning. The rest was up to her. They had become familiar and friendly by now and Omar was very physical when he was with her. Innocently physical supposedly, but physical nonetheless. He caressed her hair, massaged her shoulders, kissed her fondly on the cheeks in my presence after a joke or a good laugh or an outburst of enthusiasm and once as she was washing some coffee cups in the bathroom he followed her put his arms around her and I saw him kissing her

neck from behind. I heard Annie giggle and I had the urge to go and stop the game but decided it was better for someone to be like her than to be like me.

On Sundays we fell into the habit of visiting an old relative of ours who lived in London since the end of the War. A spinster from my grandmother's side of the family originating from Cyprus. Before and during the War she lived in Egypt and left for London just after the end of hostilities in the difficult post-war years of rationing and the return to normality. Being a Cypriot she had a British passport and I did not know the reason for her departure from Egypt to live in London totally isolated from her relatives. I had her address all along but during my first year in London I did not venture to meet her. I thought that now it would be a good idea to look her up with Annie who inquired about her and hoped that it might give her one more thing to keep her busy and out of harm's way. She lived in Russell Square near the British Museum area, which at one time was the meeting point of the Bloomsbury group of intellectuals of the 1920s and 30s comprising of Clive and Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry, the novelist E.M. Forster, Lytton Strachey and the famous economist John Maynard Keynes. Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley and T.S. Eliot were also associated with this group, which in the early 1930s ceased to exist. Russell Square was now a reduced and underprivileged area.

Aunt Agatha lived in a tiny basement apartment in a London Council building. A small woman in her sixties with a miserable pension which she supplemented by addressing envelopes for publicity brochures from long lists of names and addresses at a pathetically meagre rate per thousand envelopes. She also did some typing for assorted clients. Small, gaunt, a little bent with gray, short hair which gave one the impression that she cut it herself to save the fee of a hairdresser. She had an unattractive and yet not unpleasant face with a large nose and thick sensual lips and her teeth seemed intact. I had heard stories in Cairo that she was not altogether sane. Not raving mad but the loneliness of her existence eventually took its toll. At one time she repeatedly wrote letters to the BBC complaining that the radio announcer, for she did not own a television set, harassed her, insulted her and made indecent proposals. She was, of course, ignored. The truth is that during our time with her we saw no indication of mental abnormality. She was thrilled to see us and pathetically, almost begging, insisted to have us every Sunday for lunch. We were a heaven-sent antidote to her unbearable loneliness. She cooked a decent meal, always with meat and fruit and what, with a smile, she called champagne which was a bottle of fizzy alcoholic cider. Quite delicious at that. We usually arrived with Annie at one and had to literally tear ourselves away against her protestation at around four. I could not take a minute more in that depressing hole.

During one of our lunches, while she was pottering in her minuscule kitchen I picked a book that was lying on her bedside table and found in it a deliciously sultry and sensual picture of Dorothy Dandridge. I did not tell Annie. I did not want to shock and alarm her but that picture started me thinking that Aunt Agatha was lesbian. In any case, it was too late to matter. The suffering of that part of her life was almost over. Eventually I began skipping those Sunday reunions. Not altogether, but at first on alternate Sundays

and then two out of every three and after a time much more often. Annie kept up the visits. She was more compassionate than I and less selfish but I found Omar's company more congenial. We roamed the deserted Sunday streets of London looking at other basement flats and more than a few times we found those cheap basement flats were shared by two or three or more working girls. Omar called and asked for an imaginary address and started a conversation which led to an invitation for coffee, many laughs and jokes, a pleasant afternoon for all and, on leaving, a date with a girl or two, which Omar followed up or simply forgot about.

CHAPTER III : DIANA, AN ITRODUCTION.

Annie rarely went to a restaurant. Usually she had a midday meal at the Hammersmith cafeteria which was cheap and wholesome. At night she made do with some fruit that kept her slim and healthy. On Saturdays we sometimes had lunch together at a nearby restaurant but not often, in which case she cooked some eggs or a steak in a frying pan on the gas ring in her room. One Saturday she called me on the phone and asked me to bring some fish and chips for three. Why three, I asked. I have a friend coming. Who? We'll see if you remember her. I said, let me bring some Indian food, but she felt like eating fish. I said, okay, it was a longer trek but the menu was cheaper. Round about one I went on foot to Earl's Court to a fish and chips shop I knew. Gloucester Road and South Kensington had become too high-class for the lowly fish and chips. They had Italian restaurants with all sorts of spaghetti, pasta and pizzas and other sophisticated dishes, they had Indian restaurants and a Spanish restaurant that served dishes with fried bananas, but no fish and chips. I bought a good helping for each and left wondering if my clothes and hair stank of fried fish and would the mystery visitor notice it. I knocked at the door, Annie opened and I kissed her. A young English girl got up from her armchair smiling. She came to me and we shook hands, both of us looking at each other with intense scrutiny. Do I know you? I asked. Obviously not, she said, I am Diana. And do you know me, then? Well, yes, she answered, for you were Annie's brother at school, how could I forget? I still am her brother, I joked feebly but we laughed. So you must have been at the English School in Cairo. But were you friends with Annie? You must have been much younger. Same form, dear boy, same age, too. I left in '56 with the Suez Crisis, with the embassy people. My father worked there. But we kept in touch with Annie and it's quite wonderful to be together again.

I was still holding the fish and chips package with my left hand because a smiling Annie had forgotten her duties of a hostess. But she suddenly woke up and took it to the bathroom which, doubled on occasion as a kitchen. Diana and I sat down and Annie produced a bottle of wine and poured a little for each in the ordinary glasses she used at table. White wine for the fish, she said with a smile as she joined us. I looked at Diana. So young looking, almost like an adolescent of sixteen, thin, with nice legs, and as far as I could surmise under her sweater, breasts barely developed. She was a pretty English face but English without the ice, with warmth and a lovely ready smile. She noticed that as she talked with Annie I was gauging her pluses and minuses, looking at her blue eyes, contrasting her thin lipped mouth with Annie's full, sexy lips, their noses, hers thin and slightly upturned to the strong Greek one, the complexions, one Mediterranean, the other milky white and the hair blond and short to Annie's chestnut-colored and long pulled back in a ponytail. Well? She said. Well, what? Did you remember me? No, I said. I was just thinking how pretty you are. I blushed at my sudden audacity and Annie came to the rescue. Don't make any plans, George. Diana has a boyfriend and it's serious. She went to the bathroom and returned with three plates, knives and forks and the fish and

chips. There were no large platters for the fish and we served ourselves out of the paper wrapping. It was still warm and delicious.

It's our national food, Diana said. I missed it in Egypt and during the year I spent in France. I live with my mum in Fulham, which is slightly run down these days but it has two excellent fish and chips shops and this fully compensates. We ate with gusto and drank our wine and the conversation flowed easily. Diana lived for three years in Egypt. Her father was an employee at the British embassy and during that time she attended the English School. I had not the faintest recollection of her perhaps because at that time, before Suez, the school had quite a number of English pupils. Besides the English families occupied one way or another in Cairo, the English army officers based on the Canal Zone sent their children as boarders to our school. Surely with reduced fees or even totally free on scholarship. It was a good way to keep the British public school atmosphere in Egypt, to preserve and keep alive the English language, both its usage, idioms and pronunciation, which otherwise despite the teaching through books tends to be incomplete. She left when diplomatic relations between England and Egypt were severed during the Crisis and all English nationals expelled. Diana's father was transferred to the Paris embassy but Diana went to England with her mother to their small Fulham flat to continue her schooling. After her G.C.E. exams, five subjects at the Ordinary Level, she went to her father in Paris to polish up her French.

I enrolled in a type of tutorial college such as one finds here, probably like the one you go to, George. I did french language and literature. There were a few other English students and there I met Reginald. We started going out together and he was a very enterprising sort of character. He gathered all of us English speakers and we chipped in some money and rented a tiny flat at the Quartier Latin. We called it simply the English Student Club. Well it grew because many other people joined and Reginald was always organizing events such as poetry reading, debates, talks on various subjects, parties and musical events. We became a couple although physically we were so different. He is tall and just a little plump with wavy shoulder-length, reddish brown hair and a loud voice. He's not handsome but because of his bubbly personality one does not even notice it. And he is an intellectual. He writes poetry, writes short stories, plays the guitar and sings. He asked me to marry him and I shall probably be going back to Paris to do so. At the moment he is looking for a job because he likes it there and hopes that we shall live in Paris after we'll be married. Otherwise we shall have to return to England. The lunch was pleasant with small talk, reminiscences and laughter. I sort of liked Diana. Her youthful looks and sociable temperament. I thought, in other circumstances, I might have tried to keep in touch with her but now she had her oversized Reginald and I was redundant. I had not yet learned the abysmal complexities of human nature.

CHAPTER IV : ANNIE & OMAR.

The following Saturday I did a spot of studying because exams were not all that far off and despite my aimlessness for the future I thought I owed it to my family to get into some college or other. In any case, I had to do that if I was to remain in London, a city I felt at home in. I went to Annie's place thinking of asking her to join me for an Indian meal. I knocked at her door but there was no answer though I distinctly heard some movement inside her room. I knocked again and again to complete silence. I was sure she was inside with someone. Who? I went downstairs and sat on the steps leading to the street. I waited over an hour and at times I thought I was ridiculous and was about to leave. In any case I would ask her about this mystery when I saw her, but would she tell the truth? I stayed on another hour with people coming and going from the building and giving me suspicious looks. Was the mystery person one of those people who had come out? Should I go again and knock at her door? I was about to do so when to my utter surprise Omar steps out. He was a little shocked to see me sitting on the steps. What are you doing here? he asked. Waiting for you to finish so I can take Annie for lunch. Attack is the best defense. Okay she is free now, he said. Listen, Omar, once not long ago I told you that in our part of the world virginity is important if a girl is to be married and you show your loyalty and friendship by sleeping with my sister? Virginity? he cried derisively. Wake up, George, Annie is not a virgin. Well, obviously she isn't now, I said angrily. She isn't and wasn't the first time I made love to her. And don't talk to me of loyalty and friendship when I get a clear welcoming signal from her. The world is changing, George, and the western morals are fast moving eastwards. Better find a way to get rid of your own inhibitions. Moreover I will not stand to be told with whom I am or am not allowed to make love to. He was angry and I was utterly confused. I hope you used a condom, I finally mumbled. I wouldn't know what to do if she got pregnant. He smiled. I always carry two of them in my wallet for emergencies. And was that an emergency? Hardly, he said and his smile widened. See you later, George.

He left and I went up and knocked at Annie's door. She looked beautiful and sprightly in a pair of jeans and a blue pullover. There was an air of happiness and inner peace in her look. Someone once told me that men athletes are discouraged from lovemaking before competitions because the act drains their energy whereas women athletes are encouraged to have sex. With the sexual act their body gets ready for reproduction and the hormones that come into play invigorate it. I thought of that when I saw Annie though, to tell the truth, Omar hardly looked exhausted, just more gorgeous than ever. Was it an indication of bisexuality? I said nothing of my encounter with him to Annie. I took her round the corner to the Star of India where we had a huge dish of curry and yellow rice and two lagers. She was gay and did not stop talking about her friends at school and the work she was doing there. I asked her if she met any interesting boys at Hammersmith and she said, no. No one as interesting as Omar. The emptiness, the sense of loss I felt with Omar's encounter, the feeling that Annie's loss of virginity was

my loss, dissipated. I began thinking, after all, why not? Why shouldn't Annie have sex with someone she was in love with, for I was sure she was in love with Omar or at least she liked him enough to accept sharing him with his other random girls?

Life went on, happily, haphazardly, the same as ever. I saw much less of Omar than in the summer months because my other friends were around and I kept in touch with all of them. By the end of the school year I stopped attending the tutorial college almost entirely. I considered it a waste of time and started going to the Fulham public library to read, in that quiet and studious ambiance, my subjects on my own. For lunch I invariably gravitated to one or the other fish and chips shops and ate the food on a quiet street corner out of the paper wrapping with my fingers. It was a delicious meal and furthermore I read somewhere that the phosphorus in the fish enhances brain power and in that domain I needed all I could get. Well, the exams came and went with a little worry and a little agony and all I had to do was wait for the results. Annie left for Egypt and I decided to spend the second consecutive summer in London.

CHAPTER V : A BOTCHED BEGINNING.

I received an unexpected telephone call from Diana who asked me if I would like to accompany her to the Picasso exhibition at the Tate Gallery. I said, willingly, and we met at South Kensington Station, took the tube to Parliament and a bus, along the Thames, to the Tate. The day was warm and she looked lovely and fresh in a summery dress, looking all of fifteen, budding breasts and all. Hair well done, a minimum of makeup, flat shoes and lovely legs. She was affectionate and we spent an hour or so joking and giggling, and perhaps annoying the other visitors, over the horrors of Picasso. She was of the same opinion, that is, a philistine in my mold. I asked her why she had not left for Paris and she said, tell you later, but I got an inkling of cancelled plans when she remarked somewhat contemptuously that Reginald would have loved the exhibition. We walked part of the way back and entered a cinema and then took the tube to South Ken for a snack at Barino's before she boarded the number fourteen bus to Fulham. She had started working at an import-export business where French was a requirement and seemed happy with her job. So weekdays were out and we made a late afternoon date for the following Saturday.

When we met we had a cappuccino at a coffee bar and instead of going to a movie I asked her to come home to see my room and to be able to talk. All week I was working up my courage to at least start something with Diana, if only a kiss. I imagined but was not certain that she understood my predicament of timidity and inexperience. In any case, in my cramped little room we sat on my bed, half lying down, and talked. She told me that Reginald wrote to her a letter breaking off their engagement because he fell in love with another girl. At first I was shocked and terribly upset, she said. But within a week I understood so many things about him, about us. My pride was hurt but I was not heartbroken because I did not love him. I thought that perhaps, after all, I was lucky. He had undoubtedly a strong personality and he dominated me just like he ruled over all of us at the English Students' Club. He had energy, I have to give him that much, and organized everything and saw to it that the events were a success. But with a cool mind and not a little resentment I quickly realized that he managed to create a persona that was in fact false. He was not the intellectual he projected, his poetry was trashy and so were his short stories. They were devoid of any true emotions or feelings. His guitar playing was just strumming the same notes over and over again covered by a loud, harsh voice totally lacking melody or subtle timing. My God, how could I have been so blind not to see all those things at the time? He was not even a good lover. He was selfish and only cared for big, fat Reggie. I hate myself for my infatuation and succumbing to him. Sometimes I despise myself as much as I despise him.

I caressed her hair but could not get myself to kiss her. She was a lovely girl and it was the right moment and I was paralyzed. I didn't know how to kiss. I would make a fool of myself. Would I be able to put my tongue in her mouth? She would know at once I was utterly inexperienced. A disgraceful situation for a nineteen year old. She was

experienced, had made love to a man, held his penis, maybe even sucked him. I did not even know what the female genitalia looked like. My mind was feverish. She leaned her head on my shoulder and I just held her unable to take it half a step further. We talked of many things but the right moment had passed. The next Saturday she invited me for dinner at her house. I was to meet her mother. Listen, she said, please don't think we are trying to trap you. Trap me? I said. I would have never thought that. I am hardly a marriage prospect. I have just finished my "A" levels. Yes, she said, I know, and, in any case, after old Reggie I shall think it twice over before I decide to get married. My mother expressed a wish to meet you because I told her so many nice things about you. I laughed. Please tell me some of those nice things because, for the life of me, I cannot think of a single one. She laughed, too. There you have it. The first one is your modesty. The second, your politeness and consideration. Thirdly, that you are good looking in a gentle and moral way. You are not a lady killer like Omar. Oh? You know Omar? I asked. Yes, I met him once at Annie's. He's very good-looking but he's what I call a lady killer because he has no respect for women and treats the civilly but cavalierly and casually as if old Omar, his sexual relief and pleasure come first. I warned Annie about him, she claims she is aware and prudent. I hope so. I hope so too, I said.

The flat on Fulham Road was on the second floor of a well-kept but uninspiring red-brown-brick building similar to all the others left and right, whose only difference was the street number, seventy-three as opposed the seventy-one on the left and seventy-five to the right. An iron railing extended on either side of the two entrance steps and looking down one could see the windows of the basement flats, which reminded me of our past peripatetic strolls with Omar in search of young female occupants. I was nearly exactly on time, eight o'clock. Dinner time for the English in full summer daylight. The street door was unlocked and I entered and climbed to the second floor. Diana opened the door and said, Oh, there you are, come in. Mummy, George is here. No kiss, no handshake. The English reserve handshakes only for serious occasions and kissing is, in any case, a recent worldwide cultural development. Oh dear, you shouldn't have, Diana said when I gave her the bottle of wine I brought along. I walked into a small sitting room, simply furnished with a sofa, two armchairs and a Khan el Khalil marquetry table as delicate as Diana. A slender, white-haired woman appeared out of an equally small dining room. She smiled at me and extended her hand. How nice to meet you, she said, with a lovely smile on a face that must have been beautiful long ago. She saw the bottle and also said, you really shouldn't have. Give it to me, dear, I'll open it and we can have a drink before supper. She's nice your mum, I told Diana, what's your father like? Short, plump and English. That's why I'm quite short. English like Reggie half the size? I asked. No, no, quite the contrary. Reserved, few words, dry sense of humor, as piercing a glance as an x-ray but opinions kept in check. And something one would not expect, a football fan. Not a very successful marriage. I think I kept them together. Mrs. Fremantle came in with a tray, bottle and wine glasses. She poured the wine handed us the glasses and sat down. I noticed a white blouse under a dark blue jacket and a long skirt of the same color. Small breasts like Diana and thin legs.

Blue eyes, I said. Very kind of you to pass them on to Diana. She laughed. I also passed on some qualities which are not so nice. I don't believe it, or at least Diana has not exhibited any of them, I said. Don't go washing our dirty linen, mother. I don't want George thinking I'm a shrew. Not a shrew, my dear, just very outspoken when you are annoyed. Diana made a face and her mother said, Oh well, we'd better change the subject then. How do you like London, George? It's a wonderful city and I felt at home here from the very first moment. Do you think you would ever like to settle here? That is a taboo question, mother. Why? She looked at Diana. George might think you are scanning the terrain for a possible match between us. Good Lord, no, she cried. It was an innocent question. Please Diana, let me answer, I intervened. If I married in Egypt or Greece it would be difficult to bring a wife from there. Even if she spoke English it would be hard to adapt and live a normal family life in England. We would never really feel at home and our constant thoughts would be with our families and our old country. The only possible scenario for a life here would be for me to find a job in England and marry an English girl. In which case I would raise children that were more English than Greek and my Greek identity would languish and ebb away. I wouldn't like that. So on the whole, remaining here for good is unlikely. There go my chances, cried Diana in mock despair.

The wine is quite lovely, George, said Mrs. Fremantle. Let us take our drinks and move to the dining room. I have cooked a typically English dish as a change from the spaghettis, pizzas and curries you must be stuffing yourselves with. It's a beef roast with boiled potatoes and plenty of gravy and for dessert a special pudding of Somerset where I come from. Simple and healthy, as you see. Mrs. Fremantle served us and we began eating and to keep the conversation going but also out of curiosity I asked if she enjoyed her years in Cairo. Oh yes, she said. They were the easiest years of my life. I call them the glorious years. Cairo is not the cleanest of places and it is certainly an extraordinarily noisy and crowded city but we lived in Zamalek in a lovely ground floor flat with a garden. I had a servant at home to do the cleaning and trail behind me to hold the parcels when I went shopping for groceries, meat and fruit. It was perfect. We had a gardener as well and Charles had a chauffeur to drive him around because he could not envisage driving in the madhouse streets of Cairo. Another blessing was that our little Diana loved the English School. The school bus picked her up in the morning and brought her back in the afternoon. All in all, three glorious years which were cut short by Suez. Originally, we had an option of staying on a little longer as Charles was not a diplomat and the rotation system was not as rigid. But as usual, politics intrudes to cause havoc with the lives of the simple people. I cried my eyes out when we had to leave. Charles was transferred to Paris but I put my foot down and returned to England so that Diana would finish her G.C.E. I had not the stomach to keep house for Charles in Paris with absolutely no help and not a word of French to my name. As you see, I am getting on in years. Diana, of course, spent a year with her dad and she speaks fluent French. For a spell we thought she would get married but she was lucky and came out of it unscathed. I looked at Diana and she smiled sweetly. Oh Reggie was not that bad, she said. Mrs. Fremantle almost jumped off her seat. Stop it, Diana, are you trying to annoy

me? I saw him just once and when that awful letter of his, breaking the engagement, came, I celebrated. It was badly written, whining and hypocritical. This little girl who is anything but stupid was shocked but thank God she was jarred out of her hypnosis.

The wine had loosened us and the conversation flowed easily. After the pudding we moved to the sitting room and Diana showed me the little hole in the fireplace out of which a tiny mouse comes out to pick at the tit bits of bread she put there for it. If I ever get a heart attack you shall be the cause of it, Diana, Mrs. Fremantle said. With this and that, I left the house at around eleven. Mrs. Fremantle told me she was also looking forward to meeting Annie when she arrives in London. I left thanking them and felt I ought to shake hands at least with the mother but since I was not emigrating to America or the North Pole and would be seeing them soon enough with Annie, they did not offer their hand. A handshake was superfluous.

I went out with Diana three or four times after that but the blockage never lifted. When we went to my room I was unable to approach her sexually. With every successive encounter I was frustrated more and more. I wondered what she thought of me. I imagined she would think I was an utter idiot, a ninny, incapable of a simple show of affection, a fleeting kiss on the lips, a little show of emotion and intimation that I liked her beyond the good fellowship, the humdrum conversations we had, the films we saw and the snacks we had in the coffee bars. Couldn't she break the impasse when it dragged for so long? Talk to me about it, ask me point blank why I did not kiss her? Ask me if I did not like her looks, her face, her slender body, ask me even if I was queer. But then, obviously, that is not the role of the woman. The man is the hunter, the stalker, the aggressor, not the woman. Diana was patiently, good-naturedly waiting for it to happen. The emotion, the kiss. But it never did and I could not even tell Omar about my predicament. I was too ashamed. I was afraid that even if he did not laugh to my face, he would consider me a pathetic case, a lost cause. It had become unbearable for me to see her any more. I needed to break clean of that untenable situation. I was sick of my room and dreaded her telephone call. I told Omar I wanted to move and he told me there was a room for rent next to his. He lived in 95, Queensgate not far from Drayton Gardens where I lived. I hurried to his landlady and booked it straight away. It was smaller than mine and more expensive but it had the necessary furnishings and a sink with hot and cold water. The street was classy and wide with tall trees on both pavements, with a large hotel opposite, company offices here and there and a Barclays and Westminster bank at the corner. Two days later I was arranging my clothes in a small cupboard and drawers and stacking my books on a narrow shelf. When I finished I felt a vast relief. No more Diana, no more embarrassment and awkwardness, no more frustration and discomfiture, I had to forget about her.

CHAPTER VI : 95, QUEENSGATE.

Inevitably our lives, mine and Omar's, intertwined much more intimately than before. We were in constant contact. Our comings and goings started intersecting from early morning to late evening via our rooms. We would not leave or enter without knocking next door. The only time we would not answer was if we were not in. The only time he would not answer, if he was in, was if he had a girl inside. The girl traffic was remarkable. He kept his strength through a careful diet and, unlike me, did some primitive cooking in his room on a gas ring and a frying pan. Thick steaks and liver with ready-boiled beetroot or ready-made potato salads he bought at the neighboring supermarket. He had a small refrigerator and a blender where we blended bananas and milk with sugar, for a thick delicious, nutritious energizer. And he did not neglect his vitamins.

One evening, having nothing better to do Omar and I went to a neighborhood cinema, the ABC Fulham. Cinema going was one of my interests and I kept track of the new wave of artistic films that were coming out from France, Italy and Sweden in the early sixties. Omar, on the other hand was as uninterested in the cinema as he was in reading books. Sometimes he came along to keep me company if he had nothing better to do. That day, in the intermission I saw Diana sitting a few rows in front of us with a young man. I prayed she would not turn around to see me but she did. At once she got up and came round to us. She ignored Omar, looked at me in anger and said, in a voice loud enough for all to hear, You should be ashamed of yourself, George. A gentleman would not act as you did. If you did not like me or did not wish to see me any more you should have had the guts to say so and not change rooms so I would be unable to contact you. Did you think I would beg to see you or spend my days sitting at your doorstep? You're even worse than Reginald. She left and went to her young man. I did not utter a word. I just looked at her. I did not say I was sorry. With everyone looking at me I put on a defiant look to preserve my self-respect. Thankfully the lights dimmed and the main feature began soon after. The film was ruined for me. Omar did not comment on the incident but he must have come close to guessing the truth.

Omar was neither secretive nor particularly talkative about his affairs. Sometimes if the affair dragged I would get to meet the girl but sometimes even if it lasted longer than usual I might be deliberately kept in the dark. This was an indication that the affair was more serious than the one-night stands, one-week stands or even one-month stands. He needed to keep the girl, without publicity, all to himself. That was not the case with Carol. The affair dragged because Carol worked in one of the offices nearby and got into the habit of dropping in on us at all times of the day. She was a peculiar mix, a beautiful face on a plump, lumpy body. And a peculiar character, sociable and pleasant and sexually totally uninhibited. She made love with Omar as a matter of course on their first encounter and thereafter stuck to him and for a while at least, until he tired of her, she fulfilled his sexual needs as undoubtedly he fulfilled hers. I often wondered about

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

