

**THE FRAGRANCE OF EGYPT
THROUGH FIVE STORIES**

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A THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS IN CAIRO

CHEZ RAYMOND

THE SPORTING LIFE

A CASE OF SELF RESPECT

LETTERS TO DR. FATTHI AND OTHER SECRETS

ALF LEILA OU LEILA FI AL-KAHIRA

(A Thousand and One Nights in Cairo)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let the story decide.

Let the reader.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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