

# ***The Ring of Sand***

*By Fu'ad al-Takarli*

trans. S. Vasalou

As I sit behind the wheel and drive, alone, my mind is not on the destination I'm heading in but on the possibility that the fuel might run out and the car suddenly come to a halt without warning. The fuel has never run out, yet I have never ceased to think about the possibility that it might do so; and this is how it happens that something that did not take place becomes an event.

The spacious street connecting the headquarters of the firm with the suspension bridge was wide and empty, and a quivering white sun was filling it and suffusing Baghdad's winter with melody and glow. I felt light and free from all care; for life flows on speedily and possesses a secret beauty, but it is things that gradually spoil – or would it rather be more correct to say that it is life that spoils slowly whereas things preserve a mysterious hidden splendour? Perhaps, perhaps.

The time was after four o'clock in the evening, and I was speedily approaching Kemal Jumblatt Square in al-Jadiriya from the side of al-Risafa, where I would have to turn left in the direction of the bridge, banishing from my mind those piano notes which had been occupying my mind throughout the entire night. The melody repeats itself dozens of time – it repeats itself over and over, until one would almost think it had entered one's body and was coursing with the blood in its veins. Very soon, while we speed ahead towards no particular destination, it will be an unavoidable imperative to consider how those sound waves which show no relent in abrading the walls of the spirit might be successfully silenced. And looking at this entire operation from the outside, one may discover that it betokens a breach of values and moral standards which is impermissible according to the conventions of customary silence holding after midnight in the al-Harithiya neighbourhood and in the house of the chief justice, no less.

I didn't follow the square and turn left, and instead I continued speeding ahead, intoxicated by the melodies coursing through my mind and the cold breeze rushing against my face. This method of forward-directed motion strikes me as a more profitable policy than my mother Sana' and I used to think. No turning to the right, no turning to the left; 'for the path was straight', as they say – they never said it wasn't straight. Never! And with this 'never', she would raise her snow-white hands before her and place them parallel to one another: like this, my son. And for this reason, and because I have not ceased to love her as I have always done, I will now visit al-Ruwaq gallery on al-Sa'dun Street to see the painting exhibition, and the destination shall become known from this moment on.

And yet what does it mean for the painting exhibition to acquire the status of the final destination when it had not previously possessed it? So it is only a step forward then, a closed step; it involves no end, for it merely signified a desire. Like my desire, yesterday and today, to visit my uncle Ra'uf and talk with him. I wanted to see him without quite knowing why. Because with him anything can become out of the ordinary and one's anxiety can lift for a while.

I breezed through long streets with obscure names and went past buildings under construction and other unfamiliar streets, until I finally arrived at that obtuse monument that stands – or perhaps hangs – from its legs in the middle of the square in front of a silent minaret. What an architectural charade!

My resolve to ignore this national deformity was so strong that I inadvertently turned towards the entrance of the 'Alawiya Club; and before realising it, I had already driven into the alley leading to the parking lot. That was truly a strange and aggravating thing. I paused for a few moments on the side of the road, and ignoring the attendant of the parking lot who ran towards me to greet me, I then picked up speed and exited from the

other gate. No danger can befall us as long as we remain vigilant and on our guard.

I was lucky and found a parking spot not too far from the exhibition; and as I got ready to quit my seat and get out of the car – hesitation assailed me. There was something about the climate that did not overall strike me as being strongly conducive to my equanimity; and so I remained in my seat listening to the piano notes that were softly ascending to me from the hidden recesses of my spirit, soaring and cascading, rising and falling.

For years my uncle Ra'uf had listened to me with rapt attention while I would recount to him the strange stories of my childhood. He would slip into the house and huddle himself up in a corner in the sitting room. My mother Sana' regarded him with a subdued reverence; he was her mildly eccentric, humbly resigned older brother, with the mysterious past that was enveloped in shrouds of fear.

I opened the door of the car and walked away, without noticing that I was heading in the opposite direction to the exhibition. He had always been awkward; and when he tried to comfort me, after the death of my mother Sana', the awkwardness was devouring him as he spoke to me in the disjointed whisper with which he anxiously strived to spare me any pain his words might cause me: '...all these things in life have no real relation to us, even though they plunge a knife deep into our flesh. We are merely passing through; like them...like them. They are like us.'

What a way to console a child of nine! Wonderful and incomprehensible; there's nothing quite like it, except perhaps this walk that stands in an antithetical relation to any hope of my successfully arriving at the exhibition.

Its doors were open, and a handful of visitors were scattered throughout the dimly lit hall. I entered with an exuberance that conveyed an ineffable joy to my inner depths. Basically, it is beside the point what the

artist wanted to achieve or what was the extent of his capacities and worth. What we have here is a human being confronting the Absolute who, just like a child, desires to touch it with his own hands. And despite my state of mind – obscure as always – I began to study the paintings with close attention. I knew the painter personally and I had begun following his artistic progress a while back. In all his works, I felt that he spontaneously evoked in me certain obscure thoughts, not entirely unlike my state of mind. For after all, what do we expect from the confrontation between a finite human being and the might of the Absolute if not defeat?

And yet...no. For all that, there's a world of difference between one defeat and another. Here's an artist who collapsed at the doorstep; and there is another who wore the Absolute out before succumbing. He wore out the Absolute means that he almost seized hold of it, or that he in fact succeeded in seizing hold of it. Like Raphael and Cezanne. And why not?

'Good evening.'

And in the painting we can discern and seek to discover the limits of the battle and the elements of force or laxity, of advance and retreat, that characterise it. Therewith, the artist's features and the artistic merits of his person become evident with the highest perspicuity.

'*Good evening* we said.'

For it is not required of him, taking into consideration the comparative strength of the embattled parties, that he should in fact be victorious. We must not believe that victory is possible. This is an illusion which crushes all artistic capabilities. It is possible for us to –

'Good evening. What's this all about?'

She was speaking to me; a girl I don't know.

It struck me that perhaps I was obstructing her view of the painting where I was standing, so I stepped back. She stopped my path and planted herself in front me. We were squeezed inside the northern corner of the exhibition room.

‘I want to speak with you. Don’t pretend you didn’t recognise me.’

I was, in fact, asking myself calmly – have I seen this girl before?

‘You don’t even return a greeting! As if you think that’s a solution. Listen. I saw you by accident, and I only want to have a few words with you, that’s all. And I will say them even though the circumstances aren’t the most appropriate.’

Perhaps she read on my face an expression suggesting stupidity or incomprehension.

‘You – you really didn’t recognise me? I am Salma. Doctor Salma. Amal’s cousin. Has the short hair changed me that much?’

At that moment I realised that something had concealed her identity from me. We were in a part of the gallery where there was just a single painting, so nobody was taking any notice of us. The haircut had pronounced her round cheeks and long neck; the forehead was still wide, and the black eyes just like they’d been before. It looks like she’s telling the truth.

‘I won’t take long, *ustaadh* Hashim, for judging from appearances, it seems that you want to extricate yourself even from the need to talk. At present I don’t want to ask you for anything or give you any advice on your intractable affairs. You must confess that you’ve tired everyone out.’

She had a necklace of pearls around her neck. Farmed pearls without doubt; gone forever is the time of genuine pearls.

‘I only want to do what I consider to be my duty towards Amal, and possibly towards you as well.’

She thought, perhaps, that I had the intention of moving away from her, so she raised her palm between us.

‘Please hear me out. I won’t take long. If you have any respect for yourself – and there’s no doubt in my mind that you do – then don’t persist with this stance any longer. If you’re in a bad fix, then seek someone else’s help – my help or hers. She is a girl with culture and balanced

judgment. Go meet her, *ustaadh* Hashim, it won't do you any harm. She'll surely be understanding, just as you will be towards her. Why do you treat her like this? A year and a half! In God's name! This flouts all human customs, all religions and all traditions. Can't you see that?

The loud voice in which she pronounced the final paragraphs of her speech made several people come to a stop near us. In the meantime, my right leg, which I had been leaning upon throughout this period, grew tired, and I transferred the weight of my body to my left leg. It is an absolute imperative for anyone with a body like mine to pay attention to the muscular state of his legs and to balance out the pressure he places upon them. Perhaps she was carried away in her utterance without intending it; for sometimes it happens that the music of one's words impacts upon one's spirit and one's nerves, and produces an automatic excitation in them with regrettable consequences. A quasi-mathematical question which has not yet been properly studied as it ought.

'Why don't you reply? Why won't you say anything?'

Here she is, for example, becoming increasingly agitated as a result of the way her own nerves are reacting to her own words. That's really all there is to the matter; for nobody has acted or spoken apart from her. But when we hear our voices trembling, we fancy we must get angry, for the trembling of the voice is one of the signs of anger! On the basis of the redness that I observed starting to colour the whites of her eyes, I anticipated that in the next few minutes Doctor Salma would be losing her self-command; and this meant that a rapidly diminishing margin of time remained for me to save myself. The fact of the matter was that the mechanistic feelings or excitations which were arising in great profusion within my spirit as a result of this unexpected meeting – they above all – made me strive for an escape. Yet I didn't have the slightest intention of using underhanded means in order to effect my flight, and I only wished, in all sincerity, to have a final close look at a painting hanging just behind her.

This is how things occurred; so I advanced towards her, she being at the apogee of vociferation and mechanistic anger, and there she was, thinking I was assaulting her.

Many are those who become confused when trying to distinguish between what took place and whether it took place, between what we believed had taken place and didn't take place and between what didn't take place and we believed had taken place or we had wanted to have taken place; and I too belong to this large category of human beings. Yet what bound me in tangles and overpowered me as I drove through Abu Nu'as Street, watching the sun sorrowfully subsiding into its dark retreat there on the other side of the river, was this abundant outpouring of emotions (or perhaps excitations or internal waves or irrational discharges or...) which calmly burst forth from some place (if indeed one may speak of a place) in the depths of my innermost self as I listened with objectivity to the interference this girl was inflicting upon the structure of my temporary presence at the painting exhibition. I was now shivering behind the wheel; febrile, I was following the road with almost unseeing eyes. There's no particular destination towards which I'm heading, that is an irrefragable truth. There's no particular destination towards which I'm heading, save that I'm prey to these shivers, beclouded and enveloped in instinctual reactions.

What did this idiotic woman have to do with me? And on what hidden nerve of mine did she tread with her vociferations and her image? And why am I like this? Why am I like this? And the black fountainhead continues to flow...flow with tender fondness, meandering without end or destination throughout the length of my tense body.

I've never seen her before; there's nothing to necessitate that I should have seen her before. She's a nosy person whom I did not like and will not like. But I haven't seen her before; and in reality, I do not know her. I certainly don't know her; and that's something I will proceed to



clarify without delay. For what happens is that sometimes we identify ourselves with an event that didn't take place; and at other times we stand aloof from an event that did take place. And all this is merely a matter of confused perspectives. And because of the fact that I do not know her and have not seen her before, she struck me on a sensitive spot; to this one must add that bloody haircut she'd given herself. But when one's perspective is purified, this puts things the right way up again; and I'll say this to him, and perhaps he'll understand me. He'll understand me, there's no doubt about that; for understanding is not just about a linguistic exchange. In its proper, human sense, understanding is about a connection that occurs between two existences. He sees me before him the way I am at this moment, and he picks up from me signs which I myself cannot see – a fluttering eye, fingers that clench, glances that wander; and when, at a given moment, he sees me in a particular abstruse state, he relies on the previous occasions on which he's seen me in order to find the answers and he understands things that others fail to understand. And then, at the end of all this, speech comes to consummate understanding. He'll understand me.

The street on which al-Nu'man Hospital was located in al-A'zamiya was choked with traffic and stifled in dust and dull darkness. I came upon it all of a sudden, and at its other end I could see the Royal Cemetery, which the setting sun had shrouded in dusky red colours from every side. The moment I entered, after complex manoeuvres, into the midst of the sinuous alleys tucked away to the right of the cemetery, the strange feeling which the visitor of the exhibition had aroused in me immediately underwent a change. And now, standing weary and vexed and worn out before the door of the house where my uncle lives, knocking over and over without receiving response, I had been seized by anxiety on his account and I had begun to wonder where he could possibly have gone at this hour, so late in the day, when I heard his faint broken voice rising behind me:

‘Hashim – hello, welcome. What good wind has brought you to visit me?’

His white beard was giving off a kind of radiance in the darkness of the street, and he was beaming with pleasure.

‘Good evening, uncle. I’ve been knocking on the door for quite a while without getting an answer. Perhaps you were taking a walk along the river.’

‘Exactly right, I was taking a walk there. Welcome, welcome. Take the key and open the door. I can’t quite see the keyhole.’

I opened the door and we entered his large cold room, and he switched on the electric light.

‘Abu al-‘Ala’ went out with his family several hours ago. He bought an old car a few weeks ago, and they’ve made a habit of going on a daily outing. It’s a used car of course.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘Yes, they course around the streets of Baghdad aimlessly every day. Make yourself at home, sit down. I’ll make tea. Will you have tea with me?’

‘With great pleasure.’

‘Take it easy, my son. You are tired, not so?’

I didn’t reply. Slowly he walked over to another part of the room and began to prepare our tea. One of the windows of his room overlooked an alley leading on to the al-A’zamiya coastal road and opened out to the sunset sky. Between the clouds and the black walls, I saw a red spot gleaming and flashing without apparent reason, as if beckoning to me from afar, as if greeting me shyly. As if – by God! And why must this be?

‘Tea will be ready in a moment. Why don’t you sit down?’

Then he made his way towards me and came to stand by my side, wordlessly following my gaze. After a few moments, he whispered:

‘You know – I...I turned eighty years old a while back! Eighty!’

I turned toward him in astonishment; he was smiling:

‘I hadn’t imagined I would reach this age. My father – your grandfather, may God rest his soul – passed away before he reached seventy. He was in excellent health, but he died before reaching seventy.’

‘Eighty! Seventy! Do these numbers have any meaning, uncle?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know. I truly don’t know.’

‘I’m now thirty-one years old; the same age as my mother Sana’ when she passed away.’

There was a slight confusion in his manner as he poured the boiling water into the kettle of tea. He turned towards me:

‘What? Your mother? Yes indeed; Sana’, God rest her soul.’

Then he turned his attention back to preparing the tea. He was stooping, short. He spoke up:

‘Is...how is your father?’

‘I don’t know. We haven’t spoken in three months. Or perhaps four – I can’t quite remember.’

‘A most extraordinary thing. And Qadiriya?’

‘Aunt Qadiriya? Oh no. She’s a sensitive soul, and she’s doing well.’

‘And you – what happened to you? You seem worn out...or...or are you also upset?’

‘I don’t think so. Nothing important really. I ran into a girl I don’t know who asked me to – but tell me the truth, uncle, is it true that you used to write poetry while you were an officer in the Ottoman army?’

He raised his head and stopped pouring the tea for a few moments. His face was drawn in visible surprise as he turned towards me for a second time, smiling as if in embarrassment.

‘In Turkish – in Turkish.’

Then he calmly resumed his task.

‘My mother Sana’ told me about it. She was really proud of you. By God –how often she talked to me about you! I remember all the things she said. I will never forget them. She said that a certain young woman back

then used to peer through the shuttered windows and watch you as you came and went in your handsome military clothes in the Bab al-Shaykh quarter. She spoke with admiration about your handsome looks and grave dignity.'

'Women! What strange stories they like to tell!'

Then he approached carrying a small tray on which were balanced two cups of clear red tea.

'Yes...yes. I graduated from the military academy before I was hardly twenty, fluent in Turkish and able to speak French. They taught us languages alongside the military classes. I'd mastered Turkish at all levels – reading, writing and speaking. As for French – no; not like Turkish. As soon as I arrived at Istanbul I began to forget it.'

'Why did you go to Istanbul?'

'I don't know. Everybody used to go there...But I believe they called me up at the time. The government called me up.'

'Why? Why did they ask you to present yourself?'

'I don't know. I don't know.'

'My mother Sana' says that you used to write rousing poems against the Sultan and that you were a member of a secret organisation, and that they summoned you for an inquest and then threw you into prison and tried to kill you by slipping poison into your food, but you realised what was happening and...you saved yourself. Are these stories true, uncle?'

He was regarding me with a curious, quizzical expression, his thick eyebrows knitted. It was as if he was listening to an extraordinary account about some person whom he didn't quite recognise. He took another sip from his cup. He looked to the window giving on the setting sky, then got up and slowly made his way towards it. He was wearing a dirty, dark military coat. He stood still before the window, drinking from his cup in silence. It struck me that the way he appeared from behind had a certain affinity with the disorder reigning within me. His coat was tattered and

soiled with dust in several places, and falling white hair was strewn freely over the shoulders. I was, like it, tattered in my depths, shaken, disgusted with all things; I wanted to talk to him about what had happened to me in the painting exhibition, and instead what had leapt to my mouth were these stories of my mother Sana' from beyond the grave. It seemed to me that he was upset. He continued to stand quietly for several minutes, finishing his cup of tea, and then he turned around and resumed his place.

'Three months...you haven't spoken to your father – and you're his only son!'

I didn't take this to be a question, so I remained silent.

'I – I used to visit you when your house used to be here, I mean on the al-A'zamiya coastal road. But now the distance is long and arduous for me. I've begun to tire when I walk too long.'

'If you rang me up, I'd come around with my car to bring you there.'

'That's true, that's true. With your car of course. You said – three months – you haven't spoken to your father?'

'Yes. Possibly four.'

He put the cup of tea back in its place and then stretched himself out on the wide chair, covering his legs with his coat. He asked me:

'Shall I pour you another cup of tea?'

I thanked him for his offer and handed him the empty cup. He was busy lifting the kettle and handling the cups and spoons; but an unsettled question continued to float between us without answer.

'You know, uncle, you know full well that he hates me just as he –'

He raised his hand towards me; it was trembling visibly. That gesture of his silenced me. He whispered:

'He is your father. Your *father*.'

From an almost imperceptible quiver in his voice, it seemed to me that he realised what I had wanted to say:

‘You’re – I feel you’re tired, like me, and in need of someone to be with you – by your side; and I’m now over eighty, and I wanted you to help me find the address of the nursing home so that I could go spend my final days there – perhaps the Almighty may show me mercy there and let me pass away without disturbing anybody. But you...I don’t know.’

And he shook his head, he shook his head. I didn’t want to be saddened:

‘Why do you talk this way, uncle?’

‘It doesn’t matter why, but every time I see you I want to ask you – you know, an elucidation or what do they call it – an explanation of what you’re doing, of what you’ve done, of the way you’re acting. But I forget; forgetfulness is a strange ailment. Has anything new happened to you today?’

‘They sent me some woman claiming she’s her cousin.’

‘I see.’

‘Whom I don’t know.’

‘I see.’

‘In reality, I saw her once or twice in their house. So what? But she —’

At that moment a diabolical anger seized me like a fire blazing in my very flesh. I remained without speaking, indifferent to his silent anticipation. Then I got up with an awkward movement and went to stand once more near the window. These are all things he understands, yet he only measures them with the yardstick of sham trifles; I don’t know why I don’t just busy myself with my own business instead, and go somewhere far away from here and from this wretched old man whom I’m forcing to walk beside me at the end of his days. And in the twinkle of an eye, standing before the black window, the picture before me had changed and I’d gone many years back in time. We were...my mother Sana’ and I were sitting once watching the sunset on the balcony of our beautiful house on the

bank of the wide whispering river when she saw him walking quietly along, far away in the distance, almost at the edge of the horizon, and recognised him. 'That's your uncle Ra'uf, I'd recognise him among a million; they said...he was an inextinguishable firebrand, and he alarmed the authorities and the Sultan with his activities inside the Ottoman army and with his poetry and his daring, so they set up a trap and he fell in it, and then they put him in prison and tried to assassinate him by giving him poison, only he realised this and stopped himself in time and began shouting and crying for help, and then he threw himself out of a high window into the sea and although he saved his life, as they say, his spirit was extinguished and that fire of his went out, and he returned to Baghdad halfway between sanity and madness, halfway between being alive and well and being like a dead man whom death had not quite undone...' This is how he lived among his kin and this is how I saw him when I was a child, and I came to love his withdrawn inwardness, his shyness, his fear of the world, and his compassionate heart. He was sitting with his head bent, idly playing with his fingers, giving me time to recover my lost equanimity; feeling feeble in spirit, I was regarding him meditatively and wondering what riddles lay enfolded within him, rekindling the close connection between him and to his younger sister...my mother Sana'.

'Pardon me, I'd like to have another cup of tea. Could I?'

He turned to the small table and began to wash the cups in a deep bowl.

'And why not? Of course you can. I'll join you myself.'

'Tell me uncle, why are they so keen to quarrel? This girl almost stirred up a scandal. Can this be allowed?'

'You know better than me. Everything is allowed. Why wouldn't it be allowed? You yourself - hold the cup firmly now.'

She had been in front me, a few hours ago, at the exhibition, with her boisterous colours and her music, speaking with a mixture of fear,

boldness and pleading urgency; as if there was something else that she secretly wanted from me, which was the thing that disquieted me and made me lose my balance.

‘If you’d like me to make you some dinner after the tea, don’t think twice about asking. I can easily do that, and you’ll like what I’ll cook you.’

‘Oh no, my dear uncle. Thank you. By God – how happy I feel being here with you! Thanks a million.’

He was smiling in that way of his, a smile which combined submissiveness, shyness and affection and was wide enough for the entire world.

‘Forgive me, Hashim, for insisting on the need to show concern for your father. The way I was brought up, from the beginning and throughout my life, a father was always given a great degree of respect, reverence and...and authority. Yes, I will say this to you – authority.’

‘We can discuss this word later.’

‘Possibly, possibly. But the question is, let’s leave your father aside, it is – I’ll ask you plainly, are you capable of...of seeing – yes – seeing yourself clearly, seeing yourself from within – perfectly clear?’

The night on the river was just as I’d known it during the years of my childhood, like fragrant and viscous black silk; and I was standing against the car, on a patch of land that stretched into the water near our old house, facing the moist cold wind and listening to the eternal purling of the water, the purling of childhood – that childhood which I had lost suddenly and without warning. Our days together had been under threat from the very beginning; we had felt, she and I, a certain danger lurking in a dark corner of the world, preparing itself like a beast of prey to pounce on our beautiful hours. I looked out towards that direction, the direction I know well. I didn’t see anything that reminded me of anything; the way we used to sit, in the early afternoon, before his return from the court, listening with ardent longing and fear to the heart-rending songs of Muhammad



'Abd al-Wahhab that reached us from an unknown place – a café or recording shop, it would all be brought to an end as we expected, by his ill-omened arrival.

And now, what had come to settle in the depths of a creature as exquisitely delicate and gentle, as frail, and submissive, and affectionate, and vulnerable, as my mother Sana', to make her unexpectedly stand up and confront him four times a month or more, answering his shouts with even louder shouts, his anger with an anger even fiercer and more violent, and his repugnant words with a disdainful silence? But afterwards, when she comes looking for me with her unsteady footsteps and she finds me – or doesn't find me – hiding in a corner of the house, she takes me in her arms and holds me tightly against her lean body, it all passes over to me, her shivering, her hidden terror, the dampness of her streaming sweat, and her despair.

I felt a sudden wave of exhaustion overtaking me, so I walked over slowly and took my seat behind the wheel, closing the door of the car behind me. The lights were sparse on the other distant side of the river, and the heavy mass of darkness was crouching over the listlessly flowing waters. I had left the house very early this morning and had thrown myself into my work with great gusto at the architectural office, and it hadn't occurred to me to give any attention to this bulky body which my spirit carries with it wherever it goes – does it need to be fed? Is it comfortable? Which of its needs must be met? These are things that confront us all the time, and we never ask for a reason or raise our voice in complaint. We are bound to our body by force. There are times when we do not want it, when we cannot bear to look at it, when we cannot endure its caprices and its recalcitrant flights, when we don't know what to do with its disappointments and its relapses and its many kinds of foulness; yet we continue to shut our eyes; and the spirit (or - or what is it?) continues to glory in the rare moments of rapture it affords and to strive feverishly to protect and nourish and clean

it, forgetting all about the pains it causes and the terrible annihilation that lies in store for it.

On that arduous night – oh, what a night that was! - When they began...when they began their accursed shouting in the neighbouring room, I froze in the darkness under the covers, too scared to even breathe. I wanted to pray to somebody in this universe, I wanted, with fervent reverence, to pray; for I knew that I was an innocent small child. As if those qualities conferred upon me the privilege of being heard and having my call answered.

I opened the window of the car and the whisperings of the river wafted in to me. This deaf, soft music gladdened my spirit and gave me a sense of tranquillity. I turned to look again towards that direction I know well; and once again I saw nothing of anything. But the house is there, still where it was, its enchanting wide balcony always overlooking the horizon opening across the river and the spot which the sun has chosen as the place of its descent. We sit close to each other in front of the clear window enjoying the view of the queen of the river as she carries out majestically the daily rites of occultation. These were her words, she whispered them one evening as she hugged me gently. ‘Let us look...let us look at the queen, that is the queen, that is the queen preparing herself to disappear’. What bliss and joy filled me as I heard her say these words. Then I turned around to face her, dwelling with my gaze upon the purity of her lovely face and crying out as if I was reciting – my God – as if I was reciting...

I turned the key in the ignition, and the car jolted into life, its frame shaking. I remained motionless, my hands on the wheel, my gaze lost in the darkness before me. I was worn out, and I was getting more and more exhausted as time passed and the body remained unfed. I turned the wheel, it responded to my arm, and I sped off in my car cleaving the roads and the darkness.

I crossed the iron bridge. Does the number of thoughts decrease or does it stay the same when the stomach is empty? That is not the question; or perhaps a question framed that way is itself an answer; an answer to a question that wasn't asked. This is how we spin our guileful ruses and follow the twists and turns of questions and answers in order to reach the restaurant *Faruq* in the shortest time possible. Or is it within our capacity to go to great pains and say that we reached the restaurant in the shortest time that wasn't possible?

The matter admits of possibility, legal experts would say; and this is a pronouncement we are obliged to respect despite its patent imbecility.

I entered the restaurant and I was engulfed by the smell, the dim light and the obscure smiles; and as I was making my way to a far corner, it annoyed me to find myself experiencing a sense of pleasure. Then I was approached by the manager, who I know has secret relations with them and with others, he came to me himself with a twisting gait to respond to my requests and to then suggest some dishes with an air of specious gentleness. And for all his professional mask, he couldn't help giving certain signs – perhaps they traced themselves out on his masked face unconsciously – which showed that he knew or had heard about the bloody details; but on the other hand, none of this concerns him too greatly as long as I'm ordering a full meal and relieving myself of its exorbitant price with a good tip thrown into the bargain.

I was annoyed, then, because I felt pleased, because the flaccid bulky body had found itself in the necessary place where drink and good food was to be had. And what irritated me even further was the discovery that the serious discourse that had preceded, concerning the spirit and the alarming inner problems that are an indissoluble feature of its subsistence in the perishable body, did not prevent me from applying myself with a truly deplorable enthusiasm to the piled-up dishes that were placed before me on the table with the utmost care, so that I lost consciousness for half an hour

or perhaps more. I was devouring things which I couldn't even exactly identify. Devouring – what a precise term to express that customary savage activity!

Then I leaned back in my chair, nearly breathless, feeling, in some obscure and indefinable part of myself, that I'm happy and that I'm almost approaching the state of complete satisfaction.

The lamps that were hung all around the restaurant were covered in ornate coloured paper that half concealed, half revealed the light, and people were whispering amongst themselves gaily, without there being any obvious reason why they should be whispering. I fancied I saw the members of one particular group, who seemed to be riding high on merriment, stealing glances at me from time to time. I couldn't make out their features, and afterwards I wasn't certain that my imagination hadn't deceived me.

The manager came up to me again, this time with his recommendations concerning desert. I watched him as he made his way through the tables with the exaggerated sway of a balancing act, all smiles. I thought he was feigning the smile, but when he arrived and stood before me, I saw that the smile was filling his mouth, his face and his eyes. He wasn't feigning; for the sheer amount of customers in the restaurants is enough to make one want, not only to smile, but to fall on the floor laughing. There is no feigning involved then; everything is as it should be, and there's no deception and no blemishes.

I explained to him that the deserts didn't interest me, making a pretence of believing that he had been serious in offering them to me and that his proposal had not contained any surreptitious elements to be guarded against – for it might harbour an undisclosed intention to mock my appearance, and my body in particular. He didn't retreat, but indeed displayed an even greater happiness at my refusal and advised me not to

miss the first-rate Turkish coffee. I accepted, not without reluctance, and I asked him jokingly:

‘Wouldn’t you rather I paid and left?’

‘By no means. It is always an honour to be at your service, *ustaadh* Hashim. We rarely have customers like you.’

Very well, here’s something I hadn’t expected. For a few moments I was overcome by confusion. This is praise of a special sort, and it’s best not to press too hard in trying to fathom it. I thanked him with a nod of the head and preserved my silence. And as I drank the badly made coffee, I thought back to my uncle Ra’uf. His dinner couldn’t have been richer and more diverse!

I was mocking; I was of course mocking my uncle’s wretchedness and his penurious state. A mockery that was base, malicious, and vile and could not be tolerated. It could not be tolerated at all, absolutely not at all. She used to secretly offer him money, which he would always turn down. Money that had come to her by chance. He would turn it down. She was well aware that it was he who had brought her up and looked after her after her mother died and her father neglected her. He had been a mother and a father and a brother to her. I’d heard that he had served her with complete humility and devotion. The massive fortune her mother had bequeathed her was not for him to partake of, he knew that; and he knew that he would live and die in poverty just as his mother had done before him. His father too used to treat him like a servant, and he accepted it all without complaint. Having already lost himself, the only thing he cared about was not to lose them as well.

And here I am now, sitting before the empty plates drinking my bad black coffee, and amusing myself by taking mocking pot-shots at this man – at his brokenness, at his ceaseless humility, at his devotion and self-denial; and I have the heart to scoff at his food, the food he would have made for me leavened with his sweat and his extraordinary love.

That is not an *event*, certainly not; it is an echo, arriving reboant from afar, from some unseen spot within the self. And oh, what a self, this! My mood roiled, I got up to leave, indifferent to those looks which now I see, now I do not. I wasn't mistaken about that merry group. I recognised some of the faces as I swept quickly past them. Had my mood been calmer, I would have planted myself before them and I would have pointed confidently to every familiar face and called out their names for all to hear. The hushed conversations and furtive glances won't hurt me, in any case, for I understand things about them that they fail to understand; only the situation, or shall we say the series of situations which create a complicated set of circumstances, surrounds you and obliges you to move alongside life and not in its midst.

I was surprised to find drops of thickly falling rain moistening my face and clothes as I plunged out the door of the restaurant, oblivious to everything around me. I broke into a run, for I can't bear rain, however much I love the smell of the wet ground and the leaves of the trees. I paused under a wizened old nabk tree which seemed to me as though it was shivering from pleasure at the wonderful kisses of the rain. I started running again towards my car, while breathing in deeply that intoxicating smell. I dived inside in a hurry and with a sense of regret and I started up the engine while casting a glance at the fuel gauge. This would be a decidedly bad time indeed for the fuel to run out!

The restaurant *Faruq*, thanks to whose employees I had stuffed my belly with the most delectable food, was not located very far from our house in al-Harithiya, and so when I arrived a few minutes later before the big iron gate, the rain was still pouring down. I stopped the car and left the engine running as I got out in a run, shielding my head with a newspaper I'd grabbed from the seat next to me. My circumstances did not permit me to notice that the lights at the gate, which usually remain switched on until my return, were off. This sign had not previously held any meaning and it

was not possible for me to devise a meaning for it now. Now of all times. And so I went up to the gate and gave it a push with my free hand, only to discover that it would not budge, indeed that it resisted adamantly. I stopped short in astonishment and groped around with my hand to find out what was preventing it from opening, and I found a large iron chain running through the gate with a big lock at the end. So it had been closed by design. Confusion got the better of me for a few moments, as I felt incapable of arriving at a rational explanation for this state of affairs. Then it occurred to me that it might all simply be a big mistake and a complete accident, and that it need not involve any premeditation, or design. I pressed the doorbell and the sound of its jarring ring reached my ears from inside the house. Only a few seconds had elapsed from the moment I pressed the doorbell and its jarring ring had pealed out before the lights of the iron gate that was locked in my face were switched on. Only a few seconds, which was all I needed to understand straight away that there was a reason behind all this. And I was right; for the reason appeared at the internal door making its way under the lights through the rain, its head held high and wearing a collarless white galabiya crossed over with blue stripes all the way down. He was short, with greying hair and a mien of grave dignity (though not under the rain), and he was putting on his gold-rimmed glasses as he advanced towards me with the slowness of someone about to be martyred. He came to a standstill with his hands clasped behind his back and raised his eyes to look at me. There hadn't been a day in his life when he'd felt happy about my excessive height, and he had never quite gotten himself to accept it. From his point of view, it constituted an incomprehensible natural aberration.

'I'd just like to know how long you'll go on showing such scorn for established customs, for people and for moral norms. Do you think you're free to do whatever you wish with impunity without anybody holding you to account?'

The rain was making the white hairs fall forward across my father's pale temple and sprinkling his glasses with small drops, so that I began to wonder whether he could really see me. He shouted:

'Tell me, who do you take yourself to be? Tell me. Tell me right now. Do you think it's all over just because you're acting scared and running away from them? And I – what am I to do at my age? Why must I defend you and cover up after you when it is you, you, who has wronged them, not they?'

His voice was...

...on that arduous night of my life, I wanted to pray with absolute humility when their shouts rose high at a late hour of the night; and I thought, like I did every time, that I would be saved when the queen came to me – 'I said to her: you – you are the queen, my mother Sana', taking me in her arms for us to shiver together and cry with the same tears. But on that truly arduous night, she did not come to me – the queen did not come, and that voice of his continued to cleave the night for some time; and then suddenly he was giving his last shout and crying out for help, calling out for assistance, stung by a great anger, and I got up from my bed trembling and rushed to them, and there she was, lying on the floor, her hair loose around her, and there was he above her head, beating his breast and shouting; and it was a truly arduous night, when the queen did not speak to me afterwards ever again and I wasn't able to even touch her at the time.

'– I went. Then that other woman got in touch, God damn her. It is me they're putting on trial, not you. Do you understand what I mean?'

'Open the door, father, and let me come in before you get sick.'

'The devil take you and sickness a hundred times over. He talks as if he fears for my life when he –'

He was fumbling with the big lock.



‘ – is hastening my death. Out of spite against his father, nothing else. There’s no other reason. We raise our children and put ourselves through the mill, just to be humiliated afterwards by these despicable foul brats. (Then he pulled away the iron chain and it trailed out into the air and fell with a deaf clangour at his feet.)

‘I’m warning you. I don’t want you in my house if things go on like this. Go find yourself another place to live. That’s the last thing I’ll say to you. You remember it. You remember it well.’

I was heading for the car to get inside after the gate had been opened, watching him at the same hurry back indoors, his shoulder-blades visible through the wet galabiya. I didn’t feel any pity for him; nor any anger, or repugnance. He is right in part of what he said, and during the time those events unfolded, I don’t seem to have been looking at the world from a sound perspective, but it rather seems I’m like a person whose foot slipped as he was on the way to this world and everything turned topsyturvy and remained that way; he looks out at the universe from an upside down perspective which he takes to be genuine because it reveals – by virtue of his abnormal position – certain deficiencies. But the matter, ultimately, is a doubtful one; and it’s possible that the things that are deficiencies in themselves are complex properties which, in order to be properly rectified, require some profound gift which I may not possess.

I was shaking as I changed clothes in the cold, sumptuously furnished bedroom. I didn’t try to switch on the heater, and I hurried out to the hall and then made my way down to the kitchen. Aunt Qadiriya was there, shaking with emotion in her turn. He wouldn’t change his wet clothes and he’d thrown everything on the floor amid curses and shouts. I reassured that he would later occupy himself with the preservation of his health. She looked sallow, her face drawn. I took her cold hands in mine and I kissed her on the forehead and on her hands. She quickly withdrew them and embraced me sobbing with agitation. Her affections had always

been in conflict between her brother and me – I who had become like a son to her after the death of my mother Sana'; and her desire was to reconcile opposites without any fire breaking out or any strife blazing.

She grasped me firmly by the arm and made me sit on the chair in front of her, and I gathered there were certain things she wanted me to tell me. My father's nerves have been on edge since the night before yesterday when he heard that his name had been removed from the roster of judges nominated for promotion to membership of the Supreme Court. He keeled over when he heard the news and he put it down to the scandal, whose echoes are still resounding throughout the whole blasted society in Baghdad; and there's absolutely no use trying to persuade him of the contrary; and since yesterday night he's been prowling around the house and he's been wanting to see me and he's been smoking non-stop. The telephone calls haven't ceased. All of them asking about me. Men and women alike; he answered all of them till he felt his head would burst.

'And you, how are you, my dear aunt and mother Qadiriya?'

'Don't talk to me this way, my son. I'm suffering just as much as your father.'

'But he'll be included in the next roster. Rest assured. Why all the worry?'

'Are you mocking us, Hashim, my dear boy? We don't deserve this from you. You're all we have in life. Who do we have apart from you, your father and I?'

'Yes. Yes; but I'm not mocking you, aunt Qadiriya. Never. I'm only sorry that I upset you. You in particular.'

'I don't count for anything my son, I don't count for anything. It's you that matters. You're the sole object of concern for the entire family.'

One of her long white braids was lying in front, and she took hold of it and placed it again behind her back.

‘The family’s hopes are pinned on you, Hashim, and God has given you everything – money and good looks and a lucrative profession; what more do you want?’

Her words surprised me.

‘Do you really consider me lucky – I who lost my mother when I was nine? I saw her lying dead before me! All because of him.’

Consternation appeared in her eyes and her face grew even more sallow; she motioned to me to be quiet.

‘No. No my son, don’t talk this way, God preserve you. Don’t talk this way. Death is in God’s hands and it was her fate to die on that day.’

‘She was 31 years old and she died from a rupture in the brain. Why did that happen? Tell me why. You know the reason, all of us do.’

‘It was her lot to die young, it was her lot. But she died happy and with a sense of peace, because she’d left you a vast fortune. She used to say, I don’t want him to live like my brother Ra’uf. God bless her a thousand times. And here you are, in need of nobody, independent from your father, and indeed even helping him out at times, isn’t that so? All this is due to God’s mercy.’

‘Right. Right.’

I was struck, without any apparent reason, by the strangeness of what she was saying. She had not spoken to me like this before. Not at all. But the essential thing continues to lie concealed in the words that she hasn’t yet spoken. So here I am, faced with words that haven’t been uttered which agitate me and arouse in me a feeling of strangeness.

She was looking at my face intently, not without an unwonted boldness.

‘You do not give any consideration to all this, my dear son, even though you’ve been a serious person throughout your life and you’ve always taken careful stock of things. I’m not asking you about this money you’ve spent; it’s your money, you do with it what you like; but – for

shame, Hashim, this is shameful. Do you remember the day we went to receive your inheritance? How much we cried that day my God, how much we cried!’

At that point I thought that I’d get up and leave, having already heard enough. With an unexpected show of skill, she was chafing against my most sensitive feelings; and I was riveted to my seat as if I wanted her to go on inflicting injuries and causing pain.

‘And your father here doesn’t mean wrong when he threatens to drive you out of his house; for he knows better than anyone that you too contributed to its building –from the inheritance she left you, God rest her soul. And you did well when you agreed to let that old house of yours in al-A’zamiya to be sold off. It was about to fall on our heads, I swear, may Muhammad’s people be my witness. But look here, Hashim; everything must be done with reason, with prudence and fair means. What do you want from this world my son? You wished to get married and make a family like everyone else. There’s nothing wrong with that, and she was, God preserve her, a suitable and decent girl; but this pomp on the other hand – there’s no power and no strength save in God.’

I asked her with perfect calmness:

‘What did they want, with all these phone calls? Did they leave a name or – or was there anything they wanted?’

She moved back a little and then remained for a few moments with features rigid. She took my hands in hers and began to massage them gently and softly.

‘No, no, by no means. That’s no harm to you. Don’t let it upset you. I gathered from – from all the noise they made that there’s something cooking for the girl and they want to bring it off.’

‘Something cooking for the girl? What girl?’

‘Amal, my son, Amal. She can’t stay like this. She wants to get married; and perhaps a groom – I don’t know – came to ask for her hand

or – or something else. Who knows? I'm only guessing; everything's possible these days. And what do they want from you? You've done your duty, and more than your duty, furnishing and building and throwing your money right and left, so let them be patient with you then. Let them be patient.'

I was burning with anger, asking myself whether I'd made a mistake coming down to the kitchen to see her and listen to this chatter of hers; and I was angry because I was asking myself; and this is what led me to perceive the vicious circle in which I was moving. I rose from my seat and an anxious look appeared on her face. I asked her:

'Is there anything else you wanted to say?'

She took my hands in hers again and drew them towards her.

'Just let me say one last word, my son. If I've annoyed you with the things I've said, you should know that you've been needing to have someone annoy you in this way. You know full well, and God is my witness, that I have no personal interest in mind and I'm not against you whatever you might do, may God preserve you.'

I thought, as I made my way back to my room, that her prattle had left me no better or worse off in terms of the order reigning in my psychological affairs; but I changed my view after I'd taken just a few steps away from her. I entered the sitting room on the first floor, my floor. I stood at the threshold letting my eyes run over the furniture. This is the reception room. Now, with the stories of my aunt Qadiriya behind me, I see it with different eyes. It was a carved, heavy kind of furniture, dark in colour and fitted with white fabric; it had cost several thousand; and the curtains stifle out the view.

I felt a sense of weariness at the top of my head, seeping downwards toward my shoulders, my chest, my hands, then my legs. I have been weary since the beginning of time, but this weariness is new and of a special sort.

What did this dear aunt want to lay on my shoulders, over and above the burdens which are piled high on my back? I didn't answer my question.

I felt like having a bath, hoping it might make me feel better. I threw my body onto the comfortable wide bed. This too must be added to the tally of my money-squandering. You've got plenty of money, so you can squander it. You throw your money right and left with impunity and without anybody to hold you to account; and most particularly, if you don't know where this money came from and who it was that laboured and toiled by the sweat of his brow to accumulate it, it's all very easy then; in reality, it's pure stupidity. There's something cooking then, she guesses; there's a new marriage cooking. Everything's possible these days; otherwise – why this sudden surge of interest? I felt overwhelmed, dispossessed, paralysed. There's a mound of incomplete actions, broken thoughts and miscarried projects closing off the passages of life in my face. A single explanation for everything that happened would not afford me any security; and every deception is possible except the one that concerns the self. I got up to undress and put on my pyjamas, and then I headed for the bathroom and washed myself quickly. The light was white and strong, and it was reflected back from the blue glass objects of the bathroom in exciting gleams that were pointlessly tiresome to the eyes. To whom may a solitary human being turn for help? The room was cold, so I put on my dressing gown and then I chose a comfortable chair and sat down. I didn't want to sleep. Who is it that can help a lone human being and come to his aid out of pure goodness of heart and affection?

I don't want to sleep tonight. There's something of paramount importance which I don't know that has driven away the sleep from my eyes. Something of paramount importance, no doubt. I got up from my seat, having just remembered. The record of Chopin's *Nocturnes* was still in its place from yesterday night. I moved the needle of the record-player and once again I tried to relax. The melodies spread through the air and

surrounded me in affectionate, intimate, gentle circles. I hadn't felt well yesterday either, but I hadn't felt upset.

I felt as if there was someone speaking to me from behind these melodious notes, as if I wasn't alone or solitary in this dumb universe. Then I felt as if something within me had turned its radiant face towards me and had opened the skylights toward the possibility of rising above things and understanding. I...I'm not incapable of rising above things, no, nor of understanding; and I accepted everything, today, with patience and comprehension. Only I don't desire absolute communication with human beings. Of its nature, my self is scattered, made up of discordant parts; and it has been difficult for me, and it still seems to be, to collect all my thoughts together and to encompass everything. The nature of things in this world is not suited to me, and my true self does not wholly mix with what is around me.

My father hadn't made any statements of great importance; and here he was once again standing before me battling with the wind and the rain and spitting out his rash words which I now discover that I hate as much as I hate him. Hadn't he been the cause? Hadn't he been the cause?

And then they say...fate and luck. What is fate, and what is luck? What clumsy, stupid words! Her fate to die young at 31 years old! Why? And what about his brutal relationship with her then? Hadn't it worked its effect and led that innocent, celestial creature to her death?

Who knows – ah – who knows! Perhaps it was he and his actions, or perhaps it was something all wrong with her blood vessels! Doubt creeps in then; once again, and not for the last time. Who can pronounce with certainty on murky questions like these? The battles and the shouting matches day and night, the wrangling and the mutual hatred, the obstinate pursuit of solitude and isolation, and all those trifling and base human tendencies – could they be found in one person – in a single human being? Or – or does it take two for the shady deal to be concluded?

Here's another specimen where one cannot pronounce with any definiteness whether something is true or false...I rose from my seat to turn Chopin's *Nocturnes* over and raise the volume. I love immersing myself into these tunes, feeling them powerfully submit me to their flood, despite their exquisitely diaphanous nature, indeed sometimes their femininity. And why not? It is not only women that possess femininity. It's all about a certain combination of qualities; great delicacy and gentleness, well-balanced affection and coquetry, meekness and generosity, sovereign beauty and a harmonious mode of being and everything that makes you...that gives you a feeling of boundless contentment.

When I got up, on that brilliant summer night in the garden of the 'Alawiya Club, to collect my prize after I'd completed a straight line on my card the way you're supposed to do in games of Bingo, I saw her also walking up from the opposite direction, a playful breeze flirting with her rich white dress and tightening it against her youthful body. My hope that we'd be sharing the cash prize was not disappointed, and to see her standing by my side, returning my searching gaze and smiling back, was in itself a prize of a special sort. On that night, she represented in her entirety the most magnificent personification of femininity. I offered to cede to her my share of the prize, but she shook her head and thanked me with a smile. Then when I insisted on offering her the gift prize without waiting to play cards, telling her it was a token of admiration, she shook her head again and accepted the gift, thanking me with grace and with a glance that harboured a meaningful smile.

Thus we see femininity suddenly rising before us at times, while we hear it at others. There is no great difference, and the only difference lies in the spirit, which may show itself receptive or unreceptive to these impressions. Most of the time, it seems that it's a question of a bilateral equation; for there is no absolute femininity that exists independently in itself without needing anyone to respond to it or to be a second party that



serves to complete it. Without me, for example, what would it have meant – this corporeal formation draped in white cloth, moving sometimes harmoniously and sometimes in disjointed motions? Precisely nothing. The eyes flutter without a reason and the aperture of the mouth opens in what is called a meaningful smile.

The idiocy of all these exaggerations becomes plain for all to see when we try foisting on it aesthetic theorisings; for if it hadn't been necessary for the equation to have two sides, nobody would have begun whispering and asking questions about who he is and what's his job and what family is he from and what kind of money does he have! And there wouldn't have been, to begin with, a second meeting, semi-deliberate and uncontrived, and the glances wouldn't have deepened and filled themselves with all the meanings in the book. That woman had been with them on the second meeting, exactly one week later – seven days, it had been. She'd been sitting at their table, the doctor with the unbecoming haircut. At the time she had braids of thick black hair and she was vying with the best of them in following the proceedings closely and reading into the glances far more than they could carry. And now here she is, accosting people in public places, subjecting them to interrogation and kicking up a brawl and I don't know what else, all for the pleasure of her worthy cousin! Isn't that strange, even in this dark age we're living in?

I stood all tense in front of the closed window that overlooked the back yard. The *Nocturnes* had fallen silent, and my mind rose in upheaval. My uncle Ra'uf had been right when he began to argue with me. It was no longer any use sympathising endlessly and crying on shoulders. But is he capable of understanding that I'm the last person who could understand, the last person who could respond?

She had been with them on that second meeting which had not been a meeting but a series of ocular skirmishes and not-quite-from-up-close inspections; and the other one had gotten up for some reason or other and

left him to delight in the sight of her walking with coquettish delicacy as if picking her way through an invisible china shop. I remember that. She walking as if picking her way through an invisible china shop while the other, the doctor, sitting and observing me with looks of irritating intentness. The whole thing was absurdly childish. And her parents there too, and also the husband of that fiend sitting at her observation post. A conspiratorial meeting of the first degree as they say.

I was facing that bundle of humanity all alone; fending off, at every moment, the impulse to hide myself under the table. I'd assessed the situation beforehand and I'd tried to invite some old women to the Bingo party, relatives of my father from the Saleem family, in the hope that they'd provide me with some cover, but unfortunately they hadn't been unable to make it. I'd wanted to shield myself, even if with just a secondhand fig-leaf, and I hadn't succeeded. Thus passed that summer night in the 'Alawiya Club among the tall eucalyptus trees, the fragrant wafts of wind and the smell of roast, as if it was a preparation for an unknown journey which it hadn't occurred to me, not for a single moment, that I wanted to undertake. And so I hadn't understood a thing; and perhaps still fail to do so.

I turned Chopin's *Nocturnes* over in the record-player and switched it on. This is how I attain a spiritual understanding of music; I make it settle calmly in my blood by repeating it and by submerging myself continuously in it for long periods.

This evening we suddenly came face to face with each other after that long winding history. Perhaps she really did believe I didn't recognise her, that bloody woman. As if a haircut could change anything! She was talking with great fervour and passion, her clear musical voice disturbed every so often by a tremor that betrayed her agitation; and what a strange concern appeared on her face when she thought I didn't recognise her!

My cousin...*ustaadh* Hashim...repugnant to religion...no, indeed, it violates all human traditions – what pompous words! Decked out in her black dress and her purple jacket she was giving plenty of room for manoeuvre to her full bosom so that it wouldn't remain unseen. When I moved towards her – had my intention been to frighten her? Or had I been wholly free from any design? Or had I perhaps combined both – being free from any design with the intention to frighten her?

For a moment she continued to stand resolutely before me, fixing me with a piercing look full of defiance. Then, as I was passing by her side a moment later, a small dimple appeared at the corner of her masterfully embellished mouth, divulging a strange secret. And because secrets, by their very nature, have no fixed boundaries, I was seized by that acute emotional effusion which made me forfeit the beauty of the time of sunset.

I huddled myself up again on the cold chair, gathering up my limbs like a snake's; I lay my head on my arms which were resting against my knees. A huge ball of flesh and nerves and blood: and I was breathing and listening to my breath mingling with the music. For a moment I thought I felt a slight disturbance in my heartbeat. These are the effects of a full stomach; it presses mercilessly upon the lowermost regions of the heart.

This is the soundest explanation at any rate, for the heart does not get disturbed without a reason. The first time it happened on account of that girl whom people described as bashful was ten days or so after the second Bingo game in which she'd walked picking her way through an invisible china shop, when the woman with the haircut had been with her. It was a hot Friday morning, one of those blazing days of August, and I was going into the club – or was I coming out? – when we crossed paths in the entrance area. We exchanged looks. She was alone. I – I didn't smile, nor did I give a greeting of any sort. I was no specialist in these kinds of things. But she, with a soft, almost imperceptible nod of her head, she put a stir into the locks spreading around her young face; and with a smile like a

phantom in colour – she said hello. I felt a disturbance then in my heart, and I responded by nodding my head in turn.

This was an unexpected attack which caught me off guard. It wasn't clear to me what she wanted, and I had to go on in this state of ignorance till the end of the road, without trying to act the part of the competent, smooth and savvy guy; for the society of the seventies, which was entering the throes of a massive miscarriage at that time, was not ready to call a truce with a lonely, isolated person like myself.

And rolled up this way on the comfortable chair, on that cold night, the time already showing past one o'clock in the morning, I asked myself what it was I hoped to gain from drawing clear boundaries around jumbled events and re-arranging the accents of the past, like someone jabbing poisoned pins into his nearly healed wounds. I didn't give myself an answer, because time did not permit. I was partly feeling cold and on edge from this unaccustomed vigil, partly savouring the music, and partly succumbing to an unease because of the custom-defying high volume at which I was playing it, when I heard the sound of urgent knocking on the hallway door. I jumped up from my seat of course and I would have fallen over had I not grabbed hold of the edge of the chair; for my body, abandoned to relaxation, could not respond with due discipline to the commands of reason. I slowly walked over to the door. I thought it would be my father, and I addressed several pleas to God to spare me from evil. It was my aunt Qadiriya, her eyes giving quick flutters, shrouded in a heavy blanket which she had wrapped around her body:

'Hashim, my son.'

'Yes? What is it? What's up?'

'The telephone, don't you hear it?'

'No, I didn't – nothing amiss I hope? Who wants to speak with me?'

'It's her. That doctor. Salma, she says her name is.'

The humid morning breeze didn't deliver me the invigoration I sorely needed. When the director of the firm asked to see me for something urgent, I thought he'd be asking me about my reasons for being late to work. He was in high spirits, looking out with satisfaction from behind his thick glasses at the pile of plans and folders that had been placed on his large desk. I had no warm feelings for him, despite his incomprehensible attempts to improve what I thought of him. Most of the time he would collapse at the threshold, just as I was reaching the final moment of my assessment of his quality as a human being.

He presented to me, with great pride, a multi-million project to build a model city in an area of Baghdad that had been secured by one of those foreign companies to which he was connected by solid ties of friendship. He said that they knew nothing about Iraq and its environment and the architecture of its houses, whether old or new, and that they would definitely be selecting our firm to act as a secondary contractor who would in fact be in charge of everything on the ground. Then he asked me to draw up for him several experimental plans for houses that would be suitable for small employees – workers or branch supervisors or the like – and to be as economic as possible with the building surfaces and the costs in general. Then he fell silent for several moments:

'Listen *ustaadh* Hashim. I've noticed on some of your plans, if you don't mind my saying so, that you – that you sometimes – how can I put it? – that you have a tendency to be poetic – yes, that is the word – more poetic than is necessary. I mean that you waste important surfaces in order to give something of a touch, of beauty – or I don't know quite what to call it – to a house. Am I right in this?'

'My good sir, with your knowledge and experience, you are like a teacher to me. And no doubt there's also a basis and a reason for what you noticed, for in fact originally I had wanted to study literature and not architecture, as I had a passionate interest in literature and philosophy, but

my mother often said to me that she wanted me to become like my grandfather – her father – an architect; and thus it was.’

‘*Literature?* To study literature? God forbid. And how would you gain a livelihood?’

‘That’s a different kind of worry which hadn’t been on my mind at the time. What matters at any rate is that I have this tendency to make a place for poetry – or beauty, if one may say so – on the plan.’

‘I have no objection against that as an architect; but things are a little different with this project. No poetry – no excess beauty – no wasted surfaces. Everything in its proper place with precision and economy; for the profit we make as a firm will depend on that – and in fact, the profit and success of the whole project will depend on it. I’m relying on you because of the great faith I have in your ability and imagination. This project is of vital importance to us – and to you personally as well. I believe it will only be the beginning, and it will be followed by other projects that will be even grander and bigger than this one.’

I thanked him and took from him some of the documents and initial specifications for the project, and then I asked him about the date for submitting the plans; I heard his reply and then I got ready to leave. At that point he lifted his glasses and began studying my face intently with a pair of wide red eyes.

‘My friend Doctor Raghbir rang me up; you know him of course – Amal’s father.’

He pulled out a white piece of paper from the small pocket of his jacket and he began to wipe the glass of his spectacles while still fixing his regard upon my face in a way that could not but seem surprising. I continued to stand before him quietly but with a sense of irritation, returning his gaze. The life of human beings – perhaps of all human beings – is marked by an incessant concatenation of experiences, both trivial and meaningful, that create a succession of complex situations for which it’s

hard to arrive at a correct and final evaluation; yet within the confused rubble of all those various situations and experiences, there arises a single moment of time which, in a startling way, confers a supreme and incalculable value upon a mysterious psychological act that spontaneously issues from a person while one is halfway between consciousness and unconsciousness, between absence and presence, between refusal and abject submission. At that moment, I was – standing before the wide desk, deep in the thrall of a moment like that.

He asked me with some hesitation:

‘Are you still...?’

‘I am.’

Then I bade him goodbye and left the room before he could return his spectacles, whose glass he had finished cleaning, to their place on his nose.

The room I worked in was wide and pleasant, and the rays of sun were flirting playfully with the air; my desk was cluttered with all manner of papers, some in crumples and some in smooth piles, and having just been handed this new task by the director, it was imperative that I put my work affairs in order and do my utmost to carry out what he wanted me to do by the date he’d specified.

I’d told him the truth when he had alluded to what he takes to be ‘mistakes’ in my house designs, and I don’t know why I felt embarrassed when I recalled what I’d said to him. What business is it of his anyway?

He hadn’t asked me why I had chosen to become an architect in the first place; and there I was, volunteering to regale him with a short history of the reasons that had made me choose the profession from which I earn my living. A truly repugnant thing.

I stood in front of the window looking out, from my vantage point on the fourth floor, to the parts of Baghdad stretching out around me. The sprawling date palm gardens of al-Jadiriya, the river winding its way around

them, the suspension bridge, the streets, the clear sky. I only had a few hours of sleep yesterday, five or maybe less; and now I find a sense of tiredness weighing on my eyes and my mind. I need a few days to recover my forces, to leave behind all this madness around me, and afterwards perhaps I'll be able to work calmly and with a clear mind.

He had only dared to utter but a single word when questioning me; for he knew that this single word constituted an unacceptable breach of boundaries. And I was incontrovertibly right to respond, in my turn, with but a single word, despite my annoyance at his dragging her father's name into the matter. In that bygone time, when I had found myself asking about her, I had been told that she was the daughter of a specialist doctor with an FRCS diploma in surgery, Raghib al-Baghdadi; and that she was a level-headed girl with wide cultural interests who came from a respectable family and had had a good upbringing. And this, of course, is in sum the same description that could have been given for every single girl in Baghdad at the time, married women aside. I allowed myself to be contented with it because I wasn't thinking about marriage, even though – such was my dim-wittedness – I was up to my ears in the business. Then some worthy soul volunteered to get us to sit together, her family and myself, at one of the Bingo parties – the whole thing would have seemed perfectly innocent from afar; and they stipulated that I should bring somebody to accompany me, it didn't matter who he was or what his relation to me; I turned for help to my father's women relatives from the Saleem family, and one of them agreed to come along, probably out of curiosity.

We met her and her family and some friends, and we exchanged glances throughout the evening without talking, while my relative went at it in full steam, discussing and disputing and accusing, and it was all like an exam which I had no doubt I'd failed. How anxious I was, how agitated, and lost, and gripped by what was happening to me, gripped by her, and gripped by life. These are the basic conditions for producing human



uniformity. In spite of this, it was a beautiful, sweet-smelling night; the people in the wide garden talking in low voices as usual, the tall trees silent, and I trying to get a good view of her and hear what she's saying. The father loftily smoked his narghile while the mother kept showing off her rings and gold jewellery, all of us engrossed in that foolish game which had us all so hooked. Then we got up to choose our food and she came near me and I was very pleased to see that she'd hung back for a moment so that I could catch up with her. We didn't say much, apart from a few idle words about the food and the heat, and she wore brightly coloured make-up; and when we made our way back at around half past midnight, my relative informed me that she could make a suitable wife for me, if I gained her family's acceptance; and I was anxious, anxious, oh so anxious.

I went to my desk and sat down to gather the plans together and put them in order. I don't like getting letting myself roam widely like this and reliving what happened. Perhaps what I want is to draw up a map of the past so as to understand it. Now that's a new notion; for nobody gives any serious thought to this sort of undertaking, even though it's the point of departure for schemes aiming at social subversion – drawing up the past to learn the direction in which it moves and thereby shape the future. As simple as that; for what took place and what did not take place are like twin brothers; and the difference between them is the difference between something being concealed and its being manifest. Like icebergs.

The telephone rang. It was the director.

'Hello, *ustaadh* Hashim. I've sent you the file containing the projected expenses, the surfaces required, and some of the plans that have been proposed to us. I hope you will put all your creative energy into this work.'

*'In sha' Allah.'*

'I have great confidence. Thank you very much.'

The office boy came in carrying a large file overflowing with the thick papers of the plans, greeted me, and laid it down gently on my desk. I didn't want to ask the director for permission to leave early this noon, even though I hadn't forgotten that I had a lunch appointment at the club. There was no reason to ask for permission because, basically, I had resolved not to go to that lunch appointment; and this means that what would not take place in the future was having a positive effect on the present and was modifying it in certain ways. And the strange thing in the whole business was that I continued to feel unsure as to why I wouldn't be going to that appointment and why I'd agreed to commit myself to it in the first place.

On the other hand, I don't sense within myself at present the slightest desire to do any work; I feel an urge to stay completely languid, or let us be entirely frank and say that I have been enveloped by a deep sense of impotence, sluggishness and apathy. Perhaps I could while away the time by going to visit my uncle Ra'uf and having lunch with him; perhaps I'll go get some food for both of us and we'll eat together merrily and forget ourselves. Let's say kebab with pickles and vegetables from the kebab restaurant al-Ajdad in east Karada. It will be a delightful surprise for my dear uncle, and it will gladden him even more for us to accompany our meal with hearty conversation. Yes, today I must do something that brings joy to the soul.

So I was obliged, after all, to ask the director for permission to leave early that day in order to undertake an important family visit, and I fancied I felt the director's face breaking into a smile before he replied, speaking to me over the phone, gently in the affirmative.

Light as a bird, I left the office around half past twelve, I bought a fair amount of first-rate kebab with all its appetising accompaniments and then took off as speedily as possible towards al-A'zamiya. My mind was truly empty and free of cares, and it didn't occur to me to look for the secret reason behind that; let things be what they will. I crossed the iron

bridge from al-Karkh and I took the beautiful road that skirts the river. It was a luminous day, and the river was flowing along with eternal indolence. I didn't drive past our old house and I turned into an alley that would take me to where my uncle Ra'uf resided. Abu al-'Ala' opened the door for me with his mouth still full:

'Hello, hello, *ustaadh* Hashim, welcome. Yes, he's in.'

He answered me before I had the time to ask, and he continued:

'He came back a few minutes ago. He went out in the morning to look for the nursing home, and this time he found it. Come in.'

There was a broad happy smile on my uncle's face as he stood in the doorway of his room dressed in his heavy military coat. I greeted him and asked him whether he had had lunch and he said no. We sat facing each other with the kebab, the vegetables, the pickles and the tomatoes between us.

'We must have some first-rate tea to follow this first-rate kebab, and I'll prepare it straight away.'

We finished eating and then we sat back to relax, each of us with a cup of tea in his hand. There was a bearable cold in the room, and it had an invigorating effect to an extent. I asked him:

'Are you serious, uncle, about looking for this nursing home? How strange this word sounds!'

When he spoke there were obscure resonances in his voice which disquieted me.

'Yes, I'm serious, and I've finally discovered it.'

'And do you have in mind to do?'

'In a little while I'll go stay there. There are reasons for this. Would you like another cup of tea?'

'Certainly. The tea is excellent.'

'This is something you don't know, but the world no longer has any patience for those who have grown too old. You see them turning a heavy

glowering face on you wherever you go. It's become an everyday thing. There, at least, they look after us and acknowledge that we are – that we are decrepit – and in fact, after that they help us bring the end nearer.'

'What are you saying?!

'Don't be alarmed like this, my son, for this is the law of life – that it should come to an end, and everything that comes to an end at its proper time is good. For as you see, they only work to bring the end nearer, and I am not opposed to this desire of theirs.'

A sense of anxiety gripped me as I heard his words, and I put the cup aside.

'Listen, my dear uncle, you are not a burden on anyone, and it is to your great honour that you have continued to live without receiving help from anyone...anyone whatsoever. So if you find yourself now in any material need –'

'No – oh – no, far from it. You don't understand me. I'm only doing what I want. I don't blame anyone for the fact that I've lived to be over eighty. No, thank God for this blessing of life; but – let me die without disturbing anyone. Let us go on our way just as we arrived – unnoticed.'

I don't know why I remained silent, looking at him. He wasn't sad in the usual way in which one is sad; it was a sorrow that rose above things, a distant sorrow. Suddenly he smiled:

'No. No my dear boy, not like this. Don't let me think that you get upset over things like this. Listen – I'd been meaning to ask you.'

'I'd like to stretch myself out a little to have some rest, uncle, may I? I mean here – on this chair.'

'If you wish to. You often come to see me when you're feeling extremely tired.'

'That's true.'

'Have you spoken to your father and asked him for his forgiveness?'

I remained silent for a few moments, to remind him that I was in the process of getting some rest with his approval.

‘It was he who planted himself in front of me and spoke to me by force.’

‘Doesn’t he have a right to talk to you – to talk to his son? Perhaps he can no longer bear the way you’ve been cutting him out! You shouldn’t be surprised at the way fathers can feel about their sons.’

‘Definitely, nothing that a father like mine does would surprise me, but in order to understand him you need to know the reason why he launched this battle against me.’

He was drinking his tea quietly as if he knew everything already.

‘He had me standing under the rain yesterday night in order to vituperate against me because he’d just heard that his name had been removed from the roster of candidates nominated for membership of the Supreme Court.’

‘And you – what do you have to do with that sort of thing?’

‘He believes I stir up scandals which inflict damage on his name and his reputation.’

‘Ah – now here’s something new. Why does he think such a –?’

Then his eyes lit up.

‘Ah, no – I don’t think he’s right in this. Certainly not, but – listen my son – who knows? In this beclouded world –’

I was on the verge of surrendering to a delicious slumber.

‘What about this beclouded world, uncle?’

‘Many things about which I know nothing at all. You yourself, there are fundamental things I don’t know about you which it upsets me to call to mind. Perhaps your father is like me.’

‘My father doesn’t love me, uncle.’

‘Don’t think ill thoughts of him, my son.’

‘He hates me just as he hated my mother before me. He doesn’t love me –that’s all.’

‘Don’t bring your mother into this. God rest her soul. He loved her and was very attached to her. Look at him, he never married after her.’

‘That’s because he knows he will not find anyone like her.’

‘She – yes – it isn’t easy to find her like, may God rest her soul! But don’t let her come between you and your father. Remember that he is the only person you have left, and it’s the same for him. If only you knew how happy it makes him to see you succeeding.’

I had never seen my father’s face light up with such happiness as it did on the day I first informed him of my plan to get married. Suddenly he lost all of his habitual reserve and he looked as if he wanted to jump up and hug me. And that was one of many things I considered it highly improbable that I would see him do. Caught up as I was in the excitement of what I was proposing to do, his conduct did not surprise me. He thought I had made a good choice because he knew Doctor Raghiv’s family and had heard only good things about them, and he wished me success in this vital venture I was undertaking; then – he stopped talking as abruptly as he had begun, and his gaze turned aside to a corner of the room to rove there for a few moments, grimly, submerged under the wave of a distant memory. Then, he sprung to his feet and wrapped his arms around me, hiding his face and his expression.

‘I know that. But it is rather one’s failures that a father should show concern for, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Today you have a disposition towards melancholic thoughts which I don’t like. Let’s go out for a walk along the river and fill our lungs with pure air, and let’s go enjoy a view of your old house, which is as old as me. Come on, because it seems I won’t be letting you get your rest after all. Let’s go.’

The rays of the sun still retained their heat in that afternoon hour, as it filled the western side of the radiant blue sky with an outpouring of its eternal brilliance. The river seemed to me to be lying prostrate upon the ground, broken and resigned in its inaudible flow. We stopped at a certain distance from our old house, having walked a fair length at a leisurely pace, and then we headed back. I asked my uncle:

‘Who’s living in it now?’

‘The same family that bought it from you back in – how long ago was it? More than ten years, isn’t it?’

‘Yes; when I turned eighteen and I was free to dispose of my assets.’

‘That’s right. We hadn’t been able to convince the trustees to let us sell your share so that we could build your father’s house in al-Harithiya. They’d advised us to wait until you came of age. You see, I had been carrying the cares of the family along with your father.’

‘And you still are, uncle, you still are.’

‘Yes; although I try to avoid cares which are more than my advanced years can bear.’

He was carrying a strong crooked cane to lean on, and some of the passers-by greeted him respectfully as they walked past. We stopped near the riverbank, not far from the strip of land stretching into the water. I ran my eyes over the balcony, the thin wooden windows and the walls. It was as if I was seeing all these tokens for the first time. The colours were faded and my heart was cold, as I felt the obscure presence of my uncle standing by my side. Right next to this balcony with the crumbling wooden rail stands the pleasant sitting room which was reserved for drinking tea in the evening; my aunt Qadiriya kept up this tradition after the death of my mother Sana’, who had been the one to invent it and to insist that we make it our regular practice, particularly on the beautiful days of winter. Beyond, the other rooms press together side by side. My small room, which was connected to my parents’, then another room which my mother had

earmarked for work, for her to do her needlework, and for my father to do his own work, sometimes when he would bring back files from the court to study. And it was mostly to this room that they would withdraw to engage in their shouting matches.

‘They say a huge bridge will be built in the place of the old al-Kazimiya bridge, linking al-A’zamiya and al-Kazimiya. Have you heard anything about this?’

I nodded, and continued gazing at the house. It’s foolish of course to ask ourselves about the relation between the soil and the stones and between human misery and happiness; for whatever intensity human happiness may reach, and whatever depth of misery human beings experience, the rocks that have accompanied them will not answer back to anyone who asks about what happened. For many years I refused to set foot inside that room of my parents; and I persuaded my aunt Qadiriya that we should sleep in the sitting room with the balcony overlooking the river. It seemed to me as if her long black hair had left traces on the ground which no human being could efface; and I was convinced that there would be something profane in our treading with our feet over the place where she had collapsed for the last time. And they brought out her coffin from this door, and they raised it and lowered it three times – a sign of farewell to the family she was leaving behind in the house.

‘Let’s walk on a little, my son. Don’t tire yourself out even more by old memories which avail nothing.’

His words were spoken with finality, and it was a view I shared. I’m not the kind of person who likes carrying lots of memories around, but sometimes we’re forced to place the present in its proper frame.

Then I saw him walking ahead in a funny way, striking the pavement, with that odd cane of his; like a blind poet looking for the ending of one of the verses of his epic poem. I followed him with slow



footsteps. That house was my house; it was I, and if it is still standing and enabling me to see it, it's so that I too might go on existing.

'They say these houses will be expropriated soon.'

He made a gesture with his cane which spanned half the horizon.

'And they say our house might be expropriated as well; this is why Abu al-'Ala' spent his savings on a car, confident that he'd get a hefty sum for his share of the house.'

'How big is your share of the house, uncle?'

'Me? I inherited approximately a sixth, and that's all the space I need.'

'Is this why you're thinking of going into the nursing home?'

He gave me a mistrustful look, as though I had just betrayed him, and then he shook his head and his cane.

'Who knows! I myself do not know; but I'll go into that place anyway.'

'You make me even sadder than I already am, my dear uncle.'

'So be it.'

He stopped walking and turned to fix me with his gaze. There was something sharp and hard in his eyes, and when he spoke his voice was sharper and harder.

'You've saddened a good many people in this short last while, my son. Unwittingly perhaps. I'm not sure, but – it seems you need to get a taste of this condition yourself, just for once.'

'Is there something wrong, uncle? Are you upset? Have I perhaps offended you without intending?'

'Not at all, Hashim. Not at all; but there's an old story between us, which is more like a question; a story I'm still turning around in my mind and I've been unable to get rid of, so I thought that I should tell it to you and ask you about it, in the hope that I might find an answer.'

He was walking with even footsteps that fell in time with the beats of his cane; and I was walking beside him, weighed down by a certain sense of anxiety; for over and above the love he has for me, this uncle of mine with his advanced years loves to confront situations at critical moments and bore into them in order to extract what he considers to be their truth.

‘Listen, Hashim. It’s now February, isn’t it?’

‘Not quite. It’s the end of January.’

He frowned.

‘And this year must be 1976; for I turned eighty in 1973. I was born in 1893, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August. Sign of Taurus.’

Then he turned around to face me; and from the way his old eyes were flashing, I could tell that there were things he wanted to say to me and that he was determined to do so.

‘You remember of course, you had invited me to your wedding party, I mean that night – was it two years ago? A year and a half. It doesn’t matter. The invitation card was a beauty to behold, more beautiful than any other card I’d ever laid eyes on; such that Abu al-‘Ala’ gazed at it for a long time and then said, with a sigh, that it was clearly an invitation to a very special party in which there was little room for us.’

I immediately felt my nerves tensing, but I resolved to let him have his say without making comments or asking questions. I hadn’t been prepared to have him spring this surprise upon me; and there were small bands of white birds following the river in its flowing course, rising up and swooping down with joyfulness.

He remained silent for a few moments as if trying to recollect:

‘It wasn’t a very special invitation in the event, but like him, I believed it was and I waited for you to – was it you who’d asked me to do so? No, I don’t think so. At any rate, I don’t know why I had the notion that you’d be coming to pick me up and accompany me to the place where we were invited, to this club – ‘Alawiya club of course. With this notion, I

waited for you dressed in my finest clothes, from five o'clock onward. That's how it was. I told myself that five o'clock is the most suitable time for him to come even though the invitation says 8 p.m. When half-seven had come and gone, I persuaded myself that I had been mistaken in my belief. I told Abu al-'Ala' that my notion had been misguided; how could he possibly have the time and wits about him to remember me! Right? Abu 'Ala' felt it was his duty to go out with me to help me find a cab, for it hadn't occurred to me to abandon my plan to attend, whatever it might cost, and Abu al-'Ala' seconded me.

'Very well; no problem with the cab – I took it and arrived at the club. What bright lights! What splendour! And everyone in the most dashing clothes and rushing about. Fortunately my appearance didn't let me down, and they were very solicitous showing me the way to the hall, where the music could be heard coming from afar. And throughout this tangle of situations, I mean the cab and the lights and the club and the official attendants and the sumptuous furnishings, I was wondering – who will come to my aid in the end – apart from you?

'And so as soon as I'd crossed the door into the hall, I opened my eyes wide to spot you. It was past eight at the time, and I got the impression that the guests were sitting about in an unnatural way. I don't know how but – somehow they had an unnatural air. Sometimes you get a sense about the way things look without understanding why you get that sense. The way the guests looked was affecting me in just this obscure way. And among all these people, I didn't come across anyone throughout my confused wanderings alongside the walls and through the tables, apart from your father, carrying with him the burden of his anxiety just like me.'

His slow, measured footsteps came to a standstill and he lifted his eyes to look at me, his chest rising. An expression of irony and surprise came to veil his bearded face.

‘He was agitated; he was on the verge of exploding from agitation and anger and embarrassment and humiliation and all the emotions and inner turmoil you can imagine, if you’ve ever happened to experience them. He shouts out to me, ‘Ra’uf *effendi!*’, taking me by the arm and tightening his hand on it, ‘Ra’uf *effendi!* Come this way. Come this way,’ and he leads me to a table near the centre of the hall, where a magnificent tall cake stood glittering. Your aunt Qadiriya was with him, as well as some other women I had never seen before, who I gathered were relatives.’

He started walking again with his cane, lowering his gaze to the ground, speaking as if he was alone:

‘Everybody was grim with worry, exchanging glances and whispering among themselves, and your father’s face was ashen and his hands visibly trembling. They asked me about you. How remarkable, I said to them; and they explained to me that you had gone out at five o’clock in order to take me to the house – your house – so I could be with the family, and that you hadn’t come back and that the guests were waiting and so was the bride and her family and your relatives and hers and everyone else. How remarkable, I kept saying, not knowing what else to reply. At the time we were enjoying the calm before the storm. For it was only a little while before a throng of people rose up near us and directed themselves in an obscure fashion towards our table. It was as if they were invisibly crawling up; and they surrounded us as calmly and gently as could be, and your father whispered in my ear that they were the family of the bride. They were in a state of severe shock and bewilderment, but they spoke with composure and civility. They regretted that wouldn’t be able to stay any longer and they hoped that the reason for the situation was nothing untoward and that the absentee had his excuses; and it was past half eleven at night when they retired, while your family stayed in their seats and kept turning right and left to see who was still persevering and hadn’t yet left, as if it was...I don’t know...a match or a battle. And what was strange, what

was strange, after that, in the whole thing, was that your father and your aunt and their folk got up after a while and excused themselves, and your father told me that he would apply to the chief investigator on duty that night for help in finding you and notifying the police, and then they asked me for permission to leave – as if I could stop them – and so I gave my consent and there they were, suddenly taking off and leaving me alone in the club, hungry, the time nearly midnight, heavy-hearted and exhausted, not knowing whether or not I would make it home.’

And at that my dear uncle Ra’uf burst into a peal of unstoppable violent laughter which shook his body and made him drop his cane, and so I bent down, picked it up and returned it to him, and he took it and thanked me while wiping the tears from his eyes.

‘So you see, Hashim, the humble weapon I possess to confront the world with; the world mocks me and I respond to its mockery by laughing at what it does to me. And don’t be surprised to hear me say that in situations like this, laughter gives you a new perspective in which human affairs come to appear before you feeble and farcical. Tell me, had anyone told you before me what happened there that night, though it’s been a year and a half? Nobody did, for sure.’

He finished wiping the tears of laughter and then he resumed the even pace of his walk.

‘You don’t seem to feel like talking, but I really want you to understand that I have to tell you this story, a story I’ve held back from you all this time. It concerns you too, and as I said to you, it’s been a constant question dwelling inside me. I wanted to see you in the morning, after that night, but I fell ill and I was confined to my bed. It was a rainy night – do you remember? You must remember, wherever you were – a godforsaken night full of fog and rain; I went out caring about nothing and I’d gotten myself terribly cold by the time I found a cab to take me home, way past midnight. What came over your family, that they should leave an old man

like myself on his own in the middle of Baghdad without any means of transport and without any assistance? Now, when I consider what happened to them that night, I realise the extent of the blow they'd received and the deep wretchedness that had befallen them. After that – after that.'

'I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, uncle. I only found out about your illness quite a while later.'

He raised his hands as if to push something away.

'I know that. It didn't bother me much. There's nothing in particular I'm trying to tell you, my son. I told you that most of the time I feel unable to understand. All there is to it is that what seemed to me – I mean what I thought about during the time that has elapsed since then – or more precisely – oh, damn it all.

Then he struck the ground with his cane several times:

'What I want to say is simply that – listen Hashim, my son, you are a person who is dear to me, very dear to me, I only wish you knew how much; and what I say to you only springs from the affection I feel for you. Listen, you're using the wrong approach – this approach of yours – call it what you wish; and you're choosing the wrong people. You're making the wrong choices twice over, and that's not a little – in fact it might be more than it should be.'

Then he came to a stop once more; and once more he was all tensed up, his body was taut, his gaze raised high and his chest swelling upwards, while he still held on to his knobbly cane. The river and the green line of the distant bank extended behind him; and his face, covered with white hair, bore the signs of a vacant resolve and determination that were lodged around his eyes and mouth. I didn't smile as I gazed at him standing with great pride like that before me.

‘I’m sorry because the only thing I can do now is to be sorry. But I’ll certainly remember the words you’ve said for the rest of my life and I’ll be thinking about them for a long time.’

‘Perhaps it will bring you some benefit in the end; for as I told you – though you didn’t hear me – you have saddened a good many people.’

‘That’s true, you told me that. I promise you to think about what you have said to me with all affection and sincerity, uncle.’

‘Please do so, my son, please do so.’

We were looking at each other; and we were, both of us, wrestling with the emotions that seethed within us, in order not to spoil the loftiness and beauty of those moments.

‘Let us head back, for we’ve come quite a long way, and I’m feeling a little tired.’

It was past five o’clock in the evening when I crossed 14<sup>th</sup> Tammuz Street in the direction of the suspension bridge and headed for the firm’s offices, in the hope that I might be able to do some work out of hours after all the staff had gone home. I was thinking that everything that had befallen my uncle – his discomfort, his confusion, his shock, his bewilderment, his getting wet and falling ill – this was all founded on something that had not taken place, on something like a void, like a non-existence. What kind of world is this we live in then, in which logic can lapse to such an extent that real effects occur without a cause?

I felt quietly sad, silent inside, and I had no desire to mock anyone.

I crossed the suspension bridge and arrived at the offices of the firm; the guard opened the door for me and greeted me as I came in, and I entered my office and switched on the lights and the heater, and then went over to the desk and opened the folded sheets of the plans.

I thought I had an avid desire to work and that I had ideas about the architectural design of houses in Iraq that could breathe new life into the style of our houses, old and new, and change the pattern of our lives. But

what one believes is often far from what is actually possible; and the folders and papers lay in heaps on my desk awaiting my creative mark to no avail. I didn't have the spirit to work, or even to think about working at all seriously; and I was struggling against a groundless, violent desire to retreat and disappear.

I felt like drinking some stimulant – some tea or coffee, so I got up and tried ringing the guard, but I got no answer. I went to the window and opened the grill. The sunset was over; the sky had been extinguished and the horizon had turned black. A few lights had come on here and there, red and blue. We used to drink tea together in the room next to the balcony, a little before sunset – my mother Sana', myself and aunt Qadiriya, and my father sometimes. A clear red tea, soothing, just like it should be, with clean green mint and slices of cheese and toasted bread. And my mother Sana' would do her utmost to make sure we stayed, she and I, in a corner or nook that would be all to ourselves. My impulse would be to enter the others' sphere, but she would take possession of me and encompass me with such tenderness and love as allowed no escape. The first day I went to school was a day of jubilation and of mourning at one and the same time; she was neither wholly joyful, nor yet was she definitely sad. She would run about everywhere to prepare everything that had to be prepared while my father waited near the outside door and kept calling out to no avail. She didn't want me to leave her or to have other people taking a share in looking after me. And here I am now, seeing her as if she was before me this very moment, almost throwing herself out of the window in order to take hold of me as she sees me coming back from school with my uncle. On that first day of school, she cooked me all my favourite food; and we all sat together to eat, she and I, my uncle and aunt Qadiriya, with a sense of happiness the like of which I never tasted again in the times that succeeded. And as we sat there she expressed the hope that I would become like her father, an architect, building beautiful houses for people and making their



lives comfortable and secure. My uncle replied in my place, saying that this is the best profession because it combines both technical skill and artistic ability, and that it's therefore the highest vocation a person could follow in the modern age. I must have been six years old, and I remember seeing distinctly my mother's rosy cheeks deepening in colour and her eyes glistening with a bewitching brilliance that was moistened by her tears.

I had an unshakeable childish certainty that this blissful state of ours would last for the whole of eternity. But now I see that the truth is rather that there is no permanence whatsoever in life. There are only configurations of particular situations, configurations involving particular dimensions and particular elements, which reach a certain point, and then – a configuration of other situations emerges. There's nothing stable in all this, only configurations of situations arising and coming together – that's all there is to it; for there's nothing stable in the universe; and I like it that way. I liked that sculptor who every morning used to destroy the statues he had laboured to sculpt overnight. One and all, each and every one of them without exception. For the act of creating a configuration, in itself, is what's essential and important; as for what remains, it's until...

I turned away from the window and from the night outside and I sat down at my desk again. The sluggishness had lifted from my spirit and I felt capable of doing some work or of disposing myself mentally, at least, to work. Every time I followed this method of preparing myself for work, I would produce outstanding and remarkable results. Perhaps the body and the mind contain dormant energies that need to be whetted and driven out in order for them to move and create.

Suddenly the phone gave a shrill ring which shattered the silence of the large room and jarred my nerves. It was the external line ringing. Wrong number, no doubt. For everybody knows that the firm's offices are closed at this hour; and anyone who doesn't know that is a person who isn't worth one's bother and who will receive no reply. I remained

motionless in my seat waiting for this unexpected disturbance to cease. In vain. Then I was struck by that uncommon persistence of the ringing. On the other side of the line there is definitely a person who knows for certain, or for something that resembles certainty, that there's someone inside the firm who will take his call. Could it possibly be the director who, perhaps passing this way, saw the light in my room, deduced that I had come back to work and was overcome by a sudden mad desire to talk with me?!

It was a woman's voice.

'Good evening.'

'Good evening.'

'I waited for you until four o'clock. Was it some unexpected contingency that kept you or are you really so afraid of seeing me?'

'Neither the one nor the other. I didn't want to come and that's all there is to it.'

'Perhaps it is. Because I do believe you're incapable of lying.'

'One can't determine this for sure just like that.'

'I can determine it for sure. There are people who are experts at lying. You're an expert at feeling scared.'

'Now here's something new.'

'Not as far as I am concerned, at any rate; and it has nothing to do with my calling. I told you yesterday in no uncertain terms that it is absolutely imperative that we meet, for your good and for Amal's good and for the good of everyone else who's involved in this business. And I was under the impression that you understood what I said and you agreed to meet today at the club, and you were kind enough to invite me for lunch – and then – you didn't even get in touch to say you couldn't make it and you left me sitting there like an idiot for three whole hours looking up at every face that came through the door as if I was – as if I was – God forbid!'

‘Doctor Salma, listen please, we won’t be able to come to an understanding if you lose your self-control.’

‘I did not – and I will not lose control of my nerves, rest assured; and I won’t let anyone succeed in the effort to make me do so; but what bewilders me is the fact that you don’t want to come to an understanding.’

‘On the contrary, I do want to come to an understanding with you.’

‘Very well, so let’s sit down then and solve the problem in a single go.’

‘I’m sorry; perhaps I didn’t make myself clear; the point I want us to come to an understanding on is that there’ll be no meeting between us and no discussion of problems that are my own concern.’

‘What? What’s this you’re saying? What did you say? Say that again. Say it again please.’

‘What’s the benefit of these verbal jousts? I can’t carry on with them, and what I’ve heard is enough for me for today. I’ve no wish to talk or to solve my own personal problems because somebody else asked me to. This is just what I refuse to do.’

‘Do you mean that you don’t want to see me because I’m the one who asked you this?’

‘Not at all; that’s not it. I’m in a state of mind that does not permit me to –’

‘I understand. You might be right. That’s true. Very well. Can you get in touch with me if your state of mind changes or...if your psychological condition improves? I don’t want to disturb you. Rest assured, Hashim...*ustaadh* Hashim; there’s something of the utmost importance that I wanted to put to you and discuss with you. Put Amal and her business aside; there’s something else. I swear to you. By God –’

‘What’s this, Doctor Salma? Why –’

The sobbing came very low. One could only hear it with difficulty.

‘What’s gotten you into this state?’

‘None of what I’m going through is in any way your concern. If you want to help me, then hear me out, and let me talk to you even – even in a public place.’

What was happening to me at that moment was that I was less interested in what she was saying than in suppressing the obscure impulse which was stirring in some part of my spirit and making me long to respond to her request and agree to a quick meeting. One second I was about to replace the receiver and bring the call to an end, while a second later I felt like crying out, come over here as quickly as you can! I remained silent, locked in battle with myself; and I could hear the sound of her breathing rising and falling in my ear:

‘Listen, *ustaadh* Hashim, before you break off the call. I’m not the woman you take me to be. I thought you’d come to know some things about me from the brief occasions we happened to meet. I’m a married woman, and I enjoy the full trust of my husband and my uncle and Amal in acting towards you as I do now, in broad daylight and in all plainness; because I believe I’m fighting on the right side in the battle, and so I’ll fight until the end. But I’m not at war with you. I’m convinced that you’re a person with whom it’s worth making the effort to reach an understanding, and this is why you see me acting with such indifference to the customs that rule our lives here and to anything that might be maliciously said against me. And now, since you’re unsure what to reply, I will temporarily withdraw for the evening.’

‘No. No. Wait.’

A few moments elapsed:

‘Where are you now?’

‘Why do you ask? At the hospital of course. I’ll be finishing in an hour.’

‘Do you think the club would be a place –’

‘Definitely not. It would not be appropriate at this time of day –’

‘So let’s leave things to luck.’

‘Don’t give up in such a hurry. Wait. There is, I don’t know – there’s a hall in *Baghdad Hotel*, on the first floor, where one can sit comfortably and talk freely without problems or stupid suspicions.’

‘I’ve never seen a hall like this before in *Baghdad Hotel*!’

‘Nonetheless it exists. I could be there in an hour and a half from now – does that suit you? If you don’t want to see me, tell me. You won’t offend me. Please – I urge you specially.’

‘See you soon.’

The wide hall on the first floor in *Baghdad Hotel* was a waiting area; and it occurred to me that it was the constricted space in front of the reception desk that had forced the architects to build this enormous hall. And although I was more than ten minutes early for our meeting, I found her sitting and smoking in a corner of the hall, with a cup of coffee in front of her. After I’d said hello and she’d coolly returned my greeting, I told her I had tried to arrive before her so that she wouldn’t feel awkward sitting on her own, and she thanked me with a shake of her head and blew out the smoke of her cigarette. The hotel waiter rescued me from the silence of the first few minutes when he appeared over my head, and to my surprise, I asked for a glass of whiskey with ice. I noticed that she flung an expensive coat over the seat just next to her.

‘I hadn’t heard you drink whiskey at this sort of hour.’

She was wearing a light green dress with curving black stripes running across it here and there, and the material was manipulated and woven in such a way that it accentuated her breasts to the greatest possible extent and left the viewer in no doubt as to her bountiful endowments. I remembered that her other dress had been cut to the same design, serving very specific aims; and she was sitting with one leg crossed over the other.

I was waiting for her to start speaking, and she was smoking with a false appearance of calm, blowing out the smoke from her mouth with

remarkable force. I noticed a slight tremor on the ring-finger of the hand in which she was holding her cigarette, and she was wearing some light make-up that was almost imperceptible, in the way I like.

The waiter brought me the glass of whiskey; I picked it up and took a small sip. I heard her giving a light laugh so I raised my eyes to her. Her lips were still parted in a smile of unconditional happiness.

‘Let’s try to work together so that we don’t make things more awkward for ourselves than they need be. Put that expensive drink of yours aside and I’ll extinguish my cigarette right away.’

I voiced my agreement, and I leaned back a little in my seat. She put out her cigarette and then she brought her leg to the ground and pulled down the end of her dress.

‘*Ustaadh* Hashim, I only want to urge you from the outset that we should be – that we should be the way we really are, and that we shouldn’t depart from our natural decorum. There are some delicate questions which I feel embarrassed merely thinking I have to discuss with you. No, wait. I’m like you – I have respect for other people and I respect their right to suffer their own personal problems on their own without anyone’s interference. I’m with you, I’m definitely with you on this. But –’

‘I really like the way you’re talking. Please go on.’

She gave me a doubtful look.

‘Very well. Let’s say this is a good auspice.’

‘Yes. Let’s say that.’

Fresh doubtful looks.

‘It doesn’t make me happy to think that you’re trying to be sarcastic; that would be a truly regrettable thing.’

‘I don’t have the slightest intention to be sarcastic. You can be sure of that.’

‘Your intentions will not be my concern in any case. Listen. You know that the matter is a complicated and prickly one, and it doesn’t need any further interference on your part to become even more complicated.’

Then she breathed a long sigh and let her eyes rove through the hall. It was nearly half past eight in the evening, and there was nothing else I needed to be doing this night. I listened to her.

‘Hashim, did you really want to marry my cousin Amal? Please give me an honest answer.’

I nodded.

‘So you came to ask for her hand following accepted custom. You’d gotten to know each other well enough, and her family gave their consent after consulting her to see what she thought of this union and she expressed no reservations. There was the formal engagement, and then the preparation for the marriage began – and there was nothing she wanted that you refused her; you lavished expensive gifts on her unstintingly. You carried out all the promises you made, you bought the furniture Amal had chosen herself, and you built a separate floor for the two of you in your house in al-Harithiya just as you’d agreed. Then you set a date for the marriage contract and the wedding and the trip abroad for your honeymoon, the plan being that all of this would take place in the space of a single week. Am I annoying you with this somewhat lengthy talk?’

‘Not at all. Permit me only to take a small sip from my drink.’

She fell silent for a moment.

‘If you wish. Of course. And the formalities of the marriage contract were completed, and then a week later there was the marriage party and the wedding ceremony and the trip; in a single day – I mean in a single memorable night which you no doubt remember.’

‘Not at all, I mean –’

‘You’re right, you weren’t there.’

I was in fact calm, indeed I could say that I was in a state of the utmost calm and equanimity; and nothing worried me save the thought that the same situation we had been through in the exhibition hall might repeat itself, and that she might be transported by the echoes of her own words and her nerves might get excited without a cause.

‘I want you to know, *ustaadh* Hashim, that I’ve banished from my mind many of the questions that had been preoccupying me – me along with the rest of the family – out of a sense of their futility. Therefore I won’t ask you where you were on that night or why you didn’t do this or that; I was rather struck by a question or two: having gone to so much trouble, in terms of time and effort and money, in order to marry Amal, what was it that changed at the very last moment? And was it based on a premeditated plan? But then after I’d mulled over the issue for a long time, I set these questions aside as well – there was no point.’

She reached for her handbag and brought out her cigarette pack. Her wide black eyes contained a look moist with sadness, sorrow, and accusation.

‘On that ill-omened night, I had never seen people this happy descending in bewilderment into the deepest troughs of misery. It was as if they had received an execution sentence. The catastrophe was so great that they lost all sense of reason, and the only thing they could think about was to cry and to try to cover up the scandal. And if we hadn’t tried our best, my uncle and I, to persuade them to preserve their dignity and behave with propriety – for after all, it might all just be a terrible mistake – I don’t know what tragic results and lamentations might have followed. I’m telling you this because you must know what happened, if by any chance you haven’t heard about it yet.’

She brought out a small golden lighter and with a single movement lit her cigarette and then returned it to her bag.



‘The rest of the story that’s been dragging on for a year and a half, you’re familiar with; you’re an invisible person, hiding yourself away, whether on purpose or without; and when someone confronts you asking you to take a reasonable position, you make excuses saying you need some time to think things through and reflect; or you pretend that you’ll do everything the family wants, and that you’re ready for everything. All this —’

She stopped and made a signal to the waiter, who hastened towards her, and she asked for a cup of coffee without sugar and then looked at me questioningly, and I signalled no, thanking her for her unspoken offer.

‘All this, while the whole affair is slowly turning into a scandal, and the poor girl is nearly crushed by the pressure of these abnormal circumstances, and people and relatives relentlessly go on asking questions and raising doubts and drawing conclusions; and the young men, you surely know that, are milling about her in a flurry, wanting to have something definite, and to know whether they could — you know — approach her — etc, etc. And you, *ustaadh* Hashim, it’s like you’re living in another world, you don’t seem to understand the situation we’re in, nor are you interested in knowing what we’re really facing. Do you think this is a just or humane or — or civilised way to act? Do you know that the only reason why the family has not resorted to legal action has been the fact that my uncle Doctor Raghiv has refused? Now tell me, please tell me, is there any personal gain for you out of all this chaos?’

I’d finished drinking my glass of whiskey on an empty stomach, and a strange sense of warmth and vitality and a certain sense of daring had crept into me; and I was experiencing a strong desire to smoke one of her cigarettes. As I had expected, she hadn’t come up with anything new, but she hadn’t disappointed my hopes, because I hadn’t had any hopes from this girl, this girl who I feel is trying to be skilful, and who I feel is concealing, not just a single thing, but many.

I pretended I was thinking about the question she'd posed me; then I lifted my eyes to her.

'None whatsoever.'

'Once again you're mocking; or at least you're not taking the issue seriously.'

'Not at all.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean I still don't know whether I should take it seriously or not!'

'You're insulting me talking that way, do you realise that?'

She narrowed her eyes as she fixed her gaze on my face. From some perspectives she struck me as having an alluring appearance.

'That's not my intention in the least.'

'In fact you're insulting the whole family.'

'I'm truly sorry, perhaps you didn't understand me very well. I could never intend to do these kinds of things.'

I saw her wincing in pain in a way I hadn't anticipated. Something like a look of extinction, of painful abandonment came over her brilliant, coloured features. I hastened to speak:

'Don't get me wrong, please, Doctor Salma. I respect you all as if you were my own family. Be a little patient with me.'

She bowed her head and began running her eyes over her hands on her lap, over the cigarette lying on the ashtray, over the cup of coffee the waiter had brought a few moments ago and she hadn't touched, over the carpet under the table. It seemed to me as though the thought of immediately disappearing from my view had taken possession of her; and that was a saddening thing.

'I reiterate my apology, Doctor Salma, and I entreat you to listen to me closely, because I feel I can talk to you as I've never spoken to anyone else. In what you said, you mentioned in summary the most important things that might be considered, in some way, to form the basis of what

happened, the actual basis, the historical basis; and I won't dispute their veracity. But my situation is such that there are other things that cannot normally be weighed on the scales, things we might consider to be hidden or hard to grasp, but which are active deep down, down in the deepest depths. And when they work their effect, they do so with the speed of lightning and without forewarning. They deliver their lethal blow and they go on their way leaving you and me to gather the pieces and try to understand, if we can. And I – Doctor Salma, I don't know whether or not I was felled by the force of one of these things; but rather – but rather –'

I wasn't stammering, but all of a sudden my words began to lose their customary significations; and instead of making my meaning clearer to her, I went on repeating sentences and syllables that added nothing to what I'd said. She was looking at me with the utmost seriousness, holding a cigarette which I don't know when she'd pulled out and already lit, her legs crossed. Her attention hadn't wandered, and she was alertly, almost vindictively focused.

'It saddens me that I'm unable to express my thoughts as clearly as I need to; but the thing is, Doctor Salma, that I'm convinced that human volition sometimes breaks down, indeed comes to a complete standstill; and this is the point that precedes the moment when the other things fully deliver their surprise blow. After that – and we must say *after that*, because everything begins after – after the blow of those other things which I'm telling you about. Everything – you're abandoned, utterly abandoned, and behind you lie things that you must explain first of all to yourself, and then, if possible, to others; as for what lies ahead of you, ahead of you all the horizons are wide open of course, and you must consider that carefully – my God!'

I hadn't intended to put one of my palms on my face, goddamn it. I hadn't intended to do so at all, but I did it. Just like that; as if I was drunk or in a state of passionate ferment or in despair over the world.

And she had been lying in wait for me; she spoke with a self-possessed, clear, cold voice:

‘I’m also sad, *ustaadh* Hashim, because I didn’t understand a single word you said; it seems that in this very special state you find yourself in, you’re incapable of speaking in a clear and intelligible manner. I don’t have unlimited amounts of time to spend with you going through endless interpretations. There’s an important point I asked you about indirectly, and I’ll now ask you directly and openly: are you prepared to come to an understanding and arrange a divorce, or are you not? Give me an answer, please – an answer in the measure of the concern you feel about the issue.’

‘It’s an issue of secondary importance in my thinking. I tried to explain...my fundamental situation to you – the situation which happened, I mean – what happened to me. Do you understand?’

‘Not in the least; nor do I want to understand, if you don’t mind my saying so. You don’t need to worry too much about explaining “the other things” to me. They don’t interest me. Not in the slightest. But there’s something very serious which I haven’t had the chance to touch upon and which I have to tell you in the clearest possible terms. A while ago, a person came to see my uncle, who had happened to see Amal and asked about her and about the family. It seems that he found out everything that had happened; and then he cryptically expressed his desire to ask for her hand once the relevant problem had been solved.’

I was feeling tense; my muscles had grown tight.

‘These things happen all the time and to everyone; and perhaps you might say to yourself – to hell with him! what business is he of mine? And I’m with you on this.’

Then she fell silent.

‘The delicate point in the matter is that this person possesses a certain kind of influence, an influence which might be considered extensive; and in his position, he can act in ways – in ways which would not be in

your best interests. I'm sorry, this is the reality, the historical basis, as you called it. Nevertheless, we continue to be confident – he, and we along with him – that the problems will be solved with mutual consent and common agreement.'

'You're threatening me, Doctor Salma.'

I was speaking with the utmost calm. Her composure was disturbed a little:

'Not at all. Not at all.'

'You have the insolence to threaten me, you –'

'I'm not insolent. I'm only passing on to you something that might be to your benefit. You need someone to open your eyes; because you've been pampered, and now you think the whole world is obliged to listen to your views and your fancies and to bow to your commands.'

'Nobody pampered me.'

'But you're definitely pampered, and spoiled rotten as well.'

I signalled to the waiter to bring the bill; there was no longer any point trying to discuss at this level. She saw that and lowered her gaze, once more, to the ground as if she was praying:

'Please. Don't leave. I didn't mean to threaten you. I assure you – I assure you.'

I paid the bill. I whispered:

'I thought you might have understood. I don't know why I get such ideas about some people – about you for example – and then I find myself shocked.'

'I only had your interest to heart in everything I said. You don't know the type of people I'm talking about. I feel pity and compassion for you at the thought of what they're capable of doing. Let us solve the problems, me and you, and get it over with. Don't think ill of me.'

I got up. I was very sad; my heart felt wrung out.

‘No, fortunately I won’t think ill of you. But think about everything I told you in complete sincerity. They were genuine things, there’s no doubt about that.’

Then I turned around and walked off with hurried footsteps.

The air and the light rain that fell on my face and hair made me feel better. I sat inside the car wiping off the drops of water and asking myself whether it was right to abandon her that way – a young girl like her – and leave her to make her way home alone at a rather late hour of the night.

Perhaps she’d been counting on the idea that we’d come to a perfect understanding and that I’d take her back to her husband’s house afterwards. What groundless fantasies! She’s married too. I know that well. A doctor like her, who works in a hospital. I heard it said that he’s a person of no distinction who comes from a lowly family.

I turned the key in the engine. She’d been bristling with wiles and manoeuvres, in order to achieve her end of course. All human beings achieve particular ends; sometimes ones they chose for themselves, and most of the time ones that fall upon them like a curse. Suddenly the rain began to fall hard. The streets were empty and glistening, and I was somewhat light-headed, and I felt hungry and tired. I didn’t want to go eat at that fancy restaurant, where everyone knows how to do justice to the facts. I felt an urge to be shut up inside a warm room listening to music in complete solitude. It had been a different kind of meeting this time. I should not deny that she had spoken clearly and adroitly, and that I had been the one who’d been unable to arouse her interest or captivate her by what I had experienced and suffered. Had she really not understood or had she just pretended to be stupid? And why would she do that? To achieve her end? Perhaps.

The lights at the external door were switched on, and it took me only a few minutes to open the door, bring in the car and then switch off the lights. My mind ran over what she’d said about the furniture and the

building and the gifts. I switched on the electric heater in the main room and took off some clothes, and then I threw a light robe over my shoulders and went downstairs to the kitchen. I didn't find anyone there, and I didn't hear any sound or voice which might suggest that the two of them were awake. I put a light dinner together, placed it on a tray and then made my way upstairs. I sat in the comfortable chair, listening to the music and eating quietly.

She'd never made any special effort to approach me and be friendly, that odd girl, when we used to meet in the customary family setting; and so I hadn't had the opportunity to discover that she talked this way. I had been struck one day to hear Amal talking about her in a way that betrayed little warmth or affection. She had recounted things about her mother, who'd been divorced twenty years back, about the way she'd grown up with her father, about her studies and her success and finally her marriage to this doctor. All so well executed it made one wonder. And yet – and yet; was that all?

And having finished my food and put the tray aside, as I got up to change the record, my mind was still caught up inside that question – was that all?

I chose Chopin's *Nocturnes*, which had become my nocturnal staple these days, and I stood next to the record-player listening to the first piano drops falling with a wondrous order that filled the spirit with shivers; and at that moment two of the many images of that day rose before me in space and came together. The image of my uncle Ra'uf sprung before me unexpectedly from one side, as he stood by the river striking that posture of pompous pride – a pride that was hollow and ridiculous, yet touching and heart-rending at the same time; it was followed by the image of Salma as she sat looking down to the carpet beneath her feet with a grave expression full of feeling. They were facing each other, and they were speaking a single language that bore different meanings; and both openly and in secret, I was

their sole target. The two of them had been united by unusual things; were they also those other things which could not be properly accounted for and which she had talked about, as if by divine inspiration – this doctor who was so deeply bewitched by the thought of solving problems that were in fact insoluble?

Without mincing his words much, my uncle had called attention to a certain approach, and to a certain person who had gotten things wrong; and on her part, she'd been beating the drums and making an unnecessary racket, so as to distract one from the issue that mattered to her more than anything else.

What a delightful story my uncle's had been, despite the tragic spirit that ran through it; and how angry she'd been to hear me declare to her that what she believes to possess the highest importance I deem to be an affair of a secondary order! For she doesn't realise that what is sometimes done without any prior design or apprehensible rationale is the very thing we must labour to understand, striving to adjust our lives to the great facts with which it brings us into contact. She doesn't want to ask me where I was that night; and my uncle, just like her, shrinks back from upsetting me in any way; and I am firmly determined not to exert myself so as to cheapen the sublime moments of my self, which throw open vast windows upon life and upon nothingness. Everyone then moves away, in an unholy trinity. They move away...they move away, to no purpose; certainly away from each other; and possibly away from their guiding light.

The record of the *Nocturnes* came to an end and I didn't start it again. I picked up the tray and went down to the kitchen. I felt sombre. I didn't find anyone there. The thought to go looking for them crossed my mind, but I recoiled from it. I have nothing much to say to them, and I don't think anything new would have happened to them since last night.

I went back to my room. I was seized by an urge to draw up the design of a simple house, wholesome and poetic; a house that would give



one a sense of safety and affectionate warmth, that would shield one, or would open up to the world with one if that's what one wished. To draw it up with just a few strokes of the pen, and then place my personal marks on it. But I felt tired this night and I needed, not just to sleep, but to entirely absent myself from the world. I went in to have a shower, feeling a black spot in some part of the sky of my self, and when I finished my shower the spot was still lurking there surreptitiously. Then I turned off the heater and I carefully returned the precious record of the *Nocturnes* to its place and headed to bed. I stretched myself out on the bed and began conjuring thoughts of rest and inner harmony and deep sleep. I was prostrate with exhaustion, so I surrendered to the sumptuous pleasure of sleep in no time; and just before the enchanting abyss took me, I had a sure feeling that the black spot wasn't concealing itself from view the way it should be.

In the morning, despite the fact that I threw myself into work without interruptions and with intense concentration, the stinging sense of a thorn in my flesh didn't leave me. Architectural thoughts came to me with facility one after the other, great and small; I let myself draw everything that sprang into my mind that morning; yet I was only pleased with a tiny fraction. What pleased me most was my drive and my enthusiasm, the ease with which I was drawing, and the wide variety of ideas I was having. These are truly blessed hours of fertile work which it's not given to everyone to enjoy at will.

It was nearly mid-day when I felt the need for a strong stimulant, like a cup of coffee; the office boy brought it up to me promptly, and I breathed in its pungent smell several times while I stood in front of the window. The sky was the deepest blue, limpid and luminous with a brilliant sun; the coffee tasted delightfully bitter, and I was sipping slowly from the mug with eyes closed when the black spot that had remained concealed since the night before split open and released a disquieting thought. She had delivered to me an unveiled threat of violence against me should this

prove necessary. There had been no sideways manoeuvres on this particular point and she had not eschewed complete clarity. She had said it openly and with hauteur, and perhaps she'd been happy with what she'd said; and I, on my part, hadn't taken seriously a single thing she'd said, as if to spite her and take my revenge on her. What stupidity! Even though – who knows – she might be the person who's best informed as to the type of people she was talking about; and that's why she'd said – had she really said that? – it pained her to think of what they might have in store for me! She had spoken with a bitterness kept firmly under lock and key.

She felt pained on my account; was she really pained? That would be a most peculiar thing, because it ought not to be so; it could not be so, unless we include it in those other things which I told her about.

I finished drinking my coffee before the window, and when I turned back to resume my work, it proved impossible. All of a sudden my mind felt jaded and the gates of thought had been firmly closed in my face. I stayed sitting before my paper-strewn desk, incapable of giving up, and incapable of distracting myself with other work. It seems to me that a multitude of things has begun to accumulate in my life, demanding careful study and reconsideration. And while this situation continues, the accumulation turns into a veritable drowning process, and then one's life becomes like a straw carried along by a torrential river; it has no specific destination, no identity, and no distinction which one could take pride in. That's why it's sometimes necessary to exhibit resolve and bring oneself to a firm halt – and why do I say sometimes? The more precise way of putting it is that...at a certain moment in time one must bring life to a halt somehow and go through a process of wiping everything clean, stripping things bare and setting them straight, and after that, one may let things happen as they will. What matters is that when the hour strikes, one should come to a halt. And I...now – I am threatened and hunted down and alone, and called upon to act – and insofar as I possess these singular

characteristics, I cannot therefore be a straw! For nobody, especially in our days, puts himself through the inconvenience of directing a threat to a straw! On the other hand, however, there's someone who feels compassion for this straw and thinks it wrong that it should be crushed or harmed! And leaving aside this whole clamour of threats and compassion and other sentiments, it appears to me that I'm in need of some judicious and trustworthy counsel; for it may be that I do not understand the age I live in or the world I was driven into, or perhaps even human beings; and that my present situation cannot go on much longer; for whatever way I turn it, it is a dark spot on the radiant canvas of this society, and it is on the verge of transforming itself, for no intelligible reason, into a negative incrimination and unsavoury condemnation of our respectable civil institutions. So am I then, in the final analysis, in a zone of genuine danger? The phone rang, and the voice of the director came through asking in tones of gentle courtesy about my health, about how things were, about the work, and I offered to show him some of the fruits of that morning's labour; then I took the heap of rolled-up papers underarm, feeling almost happy to be distracted that way, and I went to meet him.

As I was eating my lunch at a secluded table in the restaurant of the 'Alawiya Club, my thoughts reverted to a question the director had suddenly put to me out of the blue – don't you have any friends?

I had finished showing him the plans and the designs and I had joyfully received his predictable praise, his paternal suggestions and his urgent official requests; a few moments elapse, and the stinging question comes – don't you have any friends? He had said it in a tone which he was especially skilled in taking, which specifically meant – do you have any friends? At that moment, fortunately, I recollected the thoughts I had previously had concerning the straw and the torrential river and the threat and the rest of it, and this imparted to me a cool such that ice wouldn't melt in my mouth. So I replied:

'Yes, of course.'

And as I said this in fact I was thinking about my dear uncle Ra'uf. Yet it was what my good director left unsaid that was more upsetting and had the stronger emotional effect; and so when I came out of his office I felt that my thoughts about what had not taken place and about the extent of its impact upon one's life were not only sound, but that it was in fact incumbent upon me, at that particular moment in time, to bring my life into accord with them, to act on the basis of their logic and to use them as a source of strength.

I was thus eating my meal with a natural sense of calm and serenity, making no effort to shield myself from the meaningful looks emanating from the corners of the room, indeed even seeking them out, confronting them, colliding with them head-on; and the weather was pleasant and bright on this beautiful sunny noon of early February. It won't be long before I've completed the process of self-reconstruction which I hurriedly resolved to commence. Afterwards I will be capable of fighting, should the occasion present itself, and of responding to forbidden questions.

Certainly forbidden questions; for on their terms, there's only a single answer which a question can take, an answer which they want, not you. They are thus forbidden questions; and it doesn't matter whether one has gotten the word wrong. I will tell her one day – this is my answer.

My going straight back to the office after lunch to work represented a special kind of answer to the director's nose questions. And what a great joy it gave me to find my physical energies rising to this challenge, and permitting me to complete the work I had begun in the morning to draw the design of the beautiful yet modest Iraqi home. It will be my house alone, nobody else's. I was jolted out of my deep state of concentration by the sound of the phone ringing. The time was nearly half seven and darkness was enveloping the world around me. I didn't bother to ask myself who it might be, and I began to collect my papers and plans and

order them on the desk, while the ringing continued. I opened the window and switched off the lights, and then I went out – while the ringing was still continuing.

Human beings don't need to think of anything at any particular moment in time in order to feel that they are full and tired and must have some rest. I breathed in the fragrant air for a few moments as I stood before the offices of the firm. The car was a little way off, parked in the darkness. For a moment I fancied I saw somebody standing next to it, who then moved off.

I opened the door and took my seat. What was the reason for the displeasure that had made the director's spirits sink a little when I answered him in the affirmative? Yes, I have friends. Of course. Had he expected something other than this unequivocal answer which reduced him to silence?

For to believe you know a single person whose friendship for you is such that he would die in your place, is to be a very fortunate person indeed. On one of my birthdays, for which my mother Sana' would always be stirring up excitement several weeks in advance, she asked me to invite all of my friends in class for the party we'd throw for that special day, and I clapped my hands with joy at the suggestion and showered her with kisses, without responding to her insistent questions about the rough number these friends might be expected to come to. I hadn't meant not to give an answer, six-year-old that I was, but I was confused and uncertain about the facts. And on that memorable evening, Mahmud Muhammad 'Ali turned up exactly on the dot and I asked my mother if we could start the party straight away, and I saw a disappointed and questioning expression appear on her troubled face, which made me think that she wasn't pleased with that limping friend of mine with the tattered clothes. At that point I started crying, and she thought I was crying for another reason, so she took me in her arms as she always did, and she whispered secretly into my ear that

Mahmud Muhammad 'Ali was the best friend in the world because he had come to share our joy and that one didn't need many people in order for one's joy to be great.

What birthdays these were, how pointlessly they would wear us out! We didn't maintain that custom after my mother Sana' died, and I began to cringe at the remembrance of the day of my birth from one year to the next. I used to clamour about with her and kick up a racket for no real reason, and this would arouse my father's wrath. And as soon as my father was worked up and started shouting, I'd feel we had fulfilled our purpose and could now allow ourselves to rest!

So when my mother went away and left me standing alone and defenceless before him, I felt she had violated her promise to remain at my side forever. Those are mysterious things which don't appear to bear any connection to the facts, but nevertheless they look like they intervene in the course of the universe and in way in which human beings live and die.

I sped past *Faruq* restaurant and then turned left towards our house in al-Harithiya. It was a little past eight; and this was the time when my aunt Qadiriya would invariably be astonished to see me at home standing before her. I asked her to let me have whatever food she had available and she gave a smile of contentment and asked me about my uncle Ra'uf and whether he'd been able to get in touch with me at the office. She said he had rung in the evening hoping to see me or at least to speak to me, and she'd given him the number at the firm. I was saddened to hear that and I asked her what he'd wanted, but she couldn't say. I was worn out. I was forced to ask her about my father and she shook her head as she stood next to the cooker, so I asked her not to make such opaque gestures and to speak in the language of human beings. She turned upon me an oppressed face bare of emotions.

'Glory be to God!'

Then she was swallowed up in a cloud of white steam whose source I couldn't see. I heard her saying:

'God Almighty, may He be praised, is generous and merciful and forgiving, my son. Your father says he has it from a trustworthy source that his name is still on the list and that he may be promoted soon.'

'And the crisis will be over *in sha' Allah?*'

'Yes. Say *in sha' Allah*. He's your father, and everything good that happens to him happens to you. Say *in sha' Allah*.'

'I already said it, didn't I? That's enough calamities for us. I'll go change upstairs and I'll be back.'

'Don't be long. Everything is ready.'

I didn't want to be pleased at this trivial piece of news which could, after all, turn out to be nothing but an unfounded rumour; and for the same reason, I also didn't want to let myself be upset. What worried me, as I stood under the tepid water of the shower, were these instantaneous irrational responses; they were things in which reason had absolutely no say. As if they were a forbidden land in which logic could find no point of entry and in which it held no sway. You happen to hear, for example, the most trivial, most common and light-weight bit of news; and before the judicious part of your mind has had the time to weigh and evaluate the piece of news and its meaning, you find something strange leaping and dancing about inside you and in the atmosphere all around you, proclaiming a sense of joy, contentment, acceptance and rapturous delight! The only thing that remains for reason and judiciousness and careful reflection to do after that is to bow in submission without uttering a word. What is this all about, then?

And then a truly amazing thought assailed me as I was wrapping my body in the towel and sitting down on my comfortable chair – hadn't what had happened to me on that night belonged to this category of things? The

very same category, only with different foundations and psychological dimensions and obscure unconscious purposes?

It was possible, possible, and yet also not possible, no, not possible either. I hadn't resolved on anything in particular, that night; or had I perhaps done so without knowing it? Everything had taken place without any sense of hesitation or restraint, and I had switched to a different, pre-eminent destination, without being overwhelmed by doubts and without losing an incomparable spirit of rapture – or is it more correct to say...a rapture of the spirit? And after that, the curtain went down without reason having uttered a single word, raised a finger in protest or demanded an explanation. What is this all about, then?

I rose from the seat, got into my dressing gown and was about to put on something relaxing on the record player when I heard the distant sound of aunt Qadiriya calling me, and I remembered the dinner and at that moment I actually felt hungry. I went downstairs and apologised to her and quickly ate her cold dinner.

Neither the overcast morning sky nor the downpour of rain managed to roil my clear mood as I drove to work. As always, I had forgotten the dreams I'd seen and I had forgotten the interpretations I'd given them upon awakening at dawn; and I was happy with that. I had the sudden feeling, before submerging myself into the designs I'd been working on the previous evening, that there is something singularly unique about me, and that I am a person of distinction. There are my creative capabilities in architecture, my intellectual faculties, and the genuine independence I have – both materially and mentally. What more does a person of distinction possess? And as I stood leaning over the desk, I was overcome by a sense that I have a purpose to fulfil in my life and that I don't resemble this whole swarm of human flies that surrounds me. Within me lies a wellspring of inscrutable things of a preternatural sort, things which create a sense of unease, yes, but which are tracing out the contours of a



brand new type of human being. Is that possible? I mean, that I should be a person unlike anybody else, because I bathed myself in the waters of a strange and extraordinary experience which shook my whole existence and changed me completely?

I was sitting motionless, finding it hard to concentrate my thoughts. These kinds of intellectual flashes which suddenly blaze out on the summit like that leave me feeling blocked, almost paralysed. How can I feel properly when I'm thinking seriously about such things?

It is a fact that something, a certain experience, a certain event which can hardly be described as an ordinary one, crashed upon me like a bolt of lightning; and I was still alive after it had gone; as for the hypothesis that '*this*' had transformed me into a human being like no other, this requires demonstration. And the very genuine sense I have of my distinction is not enough; it's rather the act – the act which is reflected upon the self – or the spirit? – and which endows it with a dimension it had not possessed before. A dimension of density. A dimension of fecundity. A dimension of singularity. A dimension of the capacity for confrontation. A dimension of distinction. That's it – a dimension of distinction that is built upon those other dimensions. But one must not forget the foundation – the *action*. The action. The action. And I, had I really acted? Had I truly conducted myself independently? Or – or action been taken upon me and through me, as I was buoyed along on the surface of a torrential river?

'There's no harm done, my son, because perhaps the world becomes a happier place when the flower of humanity acquires one... more young man of distinction. No harm done whatsoever.'

He was smiling, as always, sitting at the table across me in the restaurant *Faruq*, trying to hide how awkward he felt in the new atmosphere into which I had dragged him. I'd rung up my uncle a little before mid-day when I was no longer able to work and I had invited him to

have lunch with me, after he'd informed me that he was planning to leave for the nursing home soon. And I had a feeling of happiness as I drove him to the restaurant and on the way there, told him all about the things that had happened to me and the thoughts I'd had. His face turned dark, until it seemed to me as if his beard was changing colour, but he made no comment until I reached the point where I told him about my feelings of distinction; then he found the strength to make a quiet expression of mockery.

There were only a few customers around so early in the afternoon, and I was still feeling happy at the presence of this tender-hearted old man at my side. The rain didn't last long, and soon the sun was once again sending forth its beautiful warm rays. The food was brought to us and he turned his attention to it, remarking appreciatively how good it tasted and how well it was cooked. Then he found the moment to speak:

'I don't like weak people. Weak – by this I mean those who stand at the furthest extremes of weakness and power. I don't like those who are passively submissive and I don't like those who act oppressively. Those last are weak as human beings because they are constantly afraid and they turn into oppressors. I don't like either of these two.'

He picked up the glass of water and took a long gulp from it.

'There are also – I forgot about them – those who are dishonest about their weaknesses; weak people who hide their weakness in one way or another. What foolishness. They use all sorts of crooked means in order to create a different impression. I don't like these either. And you, Hashim my son, you're a lucky person, because you're financially independent. That's a great blessing. You aren't subject to anyone else's power. Even your father needs you; and in the firm you are an employee with a special standing, because you're also one of the partners. Do you see what I mean?'

My uncle wasn't in the habit of indulging in this kind of talk with me; and of course he had never done that before, which was why I was

filled with foreboding that he was, perhaps, about to sadden me with other remarks that might be related to his recent decision to choose his final resting place.

'That's true, uncle. What am I supposed to do? Even you turn down the help I could give you at this time of your life, and you'd rather go to the nursing home.'

He gave a sorrowful smile. He continued to smile, looking at me with eyes that overflowed with affection. The moments passed; they kept passing.

'The nursing home! Yes. Yes indeed. I wanted to talk to you before entering it; and I'm happy that I have the chance to do so. Look at me my son, Hashim, and please don't be annoyed at what I say. I'm usually a man of few words; what takes place in this world no longer concerns me now. You know that; but you on the other hand do concern me. I cannot stop thinking about you and about – about your life and what...what will follow. You believe me, don't you?'

'Of course. Of course uncle. What do you think?'

'Good. That's a good thing.'

Then he took another drink from the glass of water and put it aside.

'These days they throw inside all the spices in the book, and I'm not used to them. Never mind, what's the worst that could happen? I'd wanted to have a word with you even before hearing your latest news. I believe this woman – the one who spoke with you – is right. You must take things more seriously. The world we're living in is no utopia, and anything could happen; and you're not right to think they're merely jesting and bandying about empty threats. And you, you my son, what should I say, do you feel – do you still miss your mother, God rest her soul?'

'What? I don't know exactly. I haven't thought – I haven't thought about that.'

'I mean to say, my son – don't go on missing her and being unable to adjust to life – your life. Do you understand what I'm saying? In our parts they say, he is a mummy's boy – that is, a pampered child who failed to mature.'

Then he made some obscure gesture with his arm.

'That's what they say. Damn it. I don't know why...'

I was on the verge of becoming agitated.

'I don't understand you properly, uncle. What are you trying to say? Do you mean that I was pampered or – spoiled, and that I haven't matured yet? Do you mean that? Tell me if you do.'

'Not at all. Spoiled? Who said that! Pampered – yes. All mothers pamper their only child. Is there anything more to that? But – I mean...there's your father.'

He grasped the white napkin, crumpled it up and threw it on the table.

'I have a feeling, which I don't know to what extent it is correct; only a feeling, that you are doing your father injustice. That's what I want to tell you.'

'And why are you telling me this now?'

'Because in a few days I will no longer be with you, and who knows when we will meet, and whether we will meet; and because I see you moving in a specific direction, the way you act. Listen Hashim, there are things which no-one else in the world knows apart from me, and if I – if I reveal them to you, it's only because of the love I have for you and nothing else, and because as you can tell, I will soon be on my way; so don't be more upset than you need be and take the facts as they are, and don't read into them meanings of your own invention which they don't possess.'

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

'The truth is that your mother Sana' – may God rest her soul – did not have the strongest nerves and the strongest constitution, and ever since

she was a child she had suffered, and we too had suffered a lot at her side until she grew up and things settled down a little; yet she continued to be extremely delicate and vulnerable, and she wasn't able to live with your father in the way that would have been natural and...proper. He wasn't the cause of everything. Certainly not. May God be my witness. He wasn't the cause. Her nerves weren't firm, and physically she had no stamina or capacity for endurance.'

A tremor was entering my limbs, while my heart began to beat faster.

'That's not true, uncle, you know perfectly well that it isn't true; and if she was ill – or anything else – it was because of him, he's the one who made her ill and wore her out and drove her to her death. He – he and nobody else. I saw her falling dead at his feet.'

He stretched out his arms, took hold of my hands and squeezed them.

'Yes, my son, yes. That is true. You saw truly terrible things. That is true; but there's no point in continuing to live off these memories. There's no point whatsoever; and you put them down to your father and you poison your life and his, even though he had no direct involvement in what happened. You are his only son and it's above all for your sake that he didn't marry, and then you come along talking that way and wanting to take revenge on him! Good God! And I myself, Hashim, please, I have no ulterior purpose of my own in all this, but I – if the truth be known – I tell you, my father and I – your grandfather, that is – suffered with her – we suffered for a long time. Then we thought people were right, that she'd gain the strength to live when she married and had children. And we weren't entirely wrong, but it was a hard job for her, because she wasn't able to endure the shock and strains of marriage; and had it not been for you – had it not been for your magical presence in her life she wouldn't have lived all these years, God rest her soul.'

‘Don’t you feel, uncle, that you’re wronging my mother Sana’ and myself? Why are you doing that?’

I had wanted to answer him calmly and sensibly, but my voice rose and then continued to rise and grow harder without my intending it:

‘And you defend my father! That’s nothing short of mind-boggling! And you fancy I want to take revenge on him! Who told you that? Answer me please – who told you? And what do you want me to do for him? I find it strange to hear you talking this way. Really! What’s all this talk!’

My uncle looked startled and shrank back in his seat with a stupefied look; then he suddenly choked on the water he was drinking and began coughing and gasping until he’d almost turned himself inside out. I got up to help him and to soften the effect of the shock, and the waiter hastened towards us bringing another glass of water. After a few minutes my uncle recovered himself and began wiping his face and mouth, apologising about what had happened. He remained quiet, staring down at the empty plates before him and moving his lips from time to time. His features were part-concealed and part-disfigured by his thick, matted beard. I didn’t feel like prodding him to speak. I was disturbed and upset and deep in the mud of it, oppressed, my mind cloudy, unresolved on doing anything; and despite the sadness I felt, I wanted this old man to be obliterated from my view.

‘Please, my son, please don’t talk to me sharply. Please be careful.’

His voice was very hoarse, broken, and deep with sadness. He raised his right hand and ran it over his beard and his head.

‘I must be extremely weak without realising it. Forgive me if I offended you with the things I said, because that wasn’t at all my intention. It seems to me that at this time of life I’m not in a condition where I can give advice to people.’

I tried to interrupt him, hoping I might restore the peace, but he raised his palm between us. His thin bony fingers were dark, with long dirty nails.

'Say nothing more my son. You invited me and I came specifically to see you and speak to you, and then all this happened. Don't let yourself get angry without a reason. You invited me to lunch, didn't you? Otherwise I don't know whether I have enough money on me to pay for all these dishes!'

Then he stretched his hand into his pocket looking for I don't know what.

Feelings of pain descend upon us all at once, whereas this isn't the way with the few joys we taste in this life; and like the scorpion's sting, you feel you're burning without a fire in a part of yourself to which medicine knows no access. You go forth in an agony of yearning, hoping that someone might help you, and you then lose yourself in a boundless desert.

I went home in the evening to listen to the music and to wait for my tears to start flowing, to no avail. The tunes failed to reach my state of mind, and I stayed shrunk into a ball like a hedgehog in my comfortable chair until the early hours of dawn. Then I got up in the morning, dragged myself to the phone, and got in touch with the director to say that I wouldn't be coming in because I was ill.

I slept till mid-day, and I slept past mid-day, without dreams to mark my sleep. I didn't want to answer any calls. I didn't want to hear expressions of sympathy. I didn't want to be alive. And I wasn't exactly sure what deep hidden thing was putting me in this unaccustomed state. Then, at long last, with a splitting headache savaging my head, I sat up in my bed at around five in the evening in order to finally try pulling myself together. The persistent knocks on the door had been continuing for several hours, and the darkness was about to descend; a sliver of sky appeared through a gap in the curtains quivering blue and joyful. My eyes fixed

themselves on this shimmering luminous sign coming from afar, and I remembered that, throughout my hunger, my sadness, my pain, my isolation and my loneliness, I had not shed a single tear.

Then it occurred to me that it would be splendid good fortune not to die with a headache, so I got up with some difficulty, swallowed an aspirin and threw the windows open. And after I'd washed, eaten, reassured my family that I was fine and drunk two cups of strong tea, I sat down and tried to fathom the secret reason why the name of that doctor had been occupying my mind throughout the last few difficult hours. That was a peculiar matter which I was unable to consider in sufficient depth because something else was drawing my thoughts in a different direction; for things had wound up with my uncle yesterday in a way that involved little comfort for anyone. I had offered him a heap of apologies on our way back, and I'd kept repeating and repeating them. Those stupid strong emotions he'd excited that had temporarily overwhelmed me had dissipated. I saw him standing at my side, smiling in that kind-hearted way of his, bidding me a hurried farewell, looking as if no power on heaven or earth could stop him. I wanted, of course, to torment myself on his account, but later I relinquished the idea. And so it was that I stood, that evening, on a balcony behind the kitchen looking out to a small garden and a wall, sitting on my own and trying to collect myself and to renew my connection to my true depths.

And if, notwithstanding the discomfort I felt, I had left my dear uncle Ra'uf to suffer alone like a martyr, some of what he had said nevertheless possessed an importance of guaranteed longevity which was capable of bringing many changes to my life. In what he'd said he had jumbled together values and impressions and premature opinions, and this made it hard for people with limited patience like myself to discover the golden needle buried in this dense haystack.



How had he thought I would react when I heard him talk about my mother Sana' as some sick or neurotic woman? Did he think this would detract from the love her orphaned son felt for her? What concern is it of mine who was the cause of the domestic misery I experienced in my childhood? Did he want to remove all responsibility, all guilt, all accusation from the father's person, that person who was sound in body and nervous constitution? And what's my connection with anything? Does he think I set myself up as some kind of executioner or judge or a god of sorts, exacting retaliation against people for reasons whose knowledge is reserved to myself? And why does he imagine I'm taking revenge against my father? What strange notions! What sort of unimaginable hearsay is he basing himself on? I can't help wondering whether he hasn't gone senile with age. My father was always with me when I tried to live...to live like them, pleasantly and with feigned happiness. I remember how happy my father had been when he was introduced to Amal on the evening of the official engagement, in the spacious garden of their house in al-Mansur; and my uncle was at our side, and I don't think he forgot those hard-to-miss indications. And I was happy that they were happy – that the family was happy. Everything ended just as it had started, in a courteous and orderly manner and as custom stipulated. So he was happy for me then, and I was happy on my side too. Then events took the course they did, and his feelings underwent a complete reversal and subversion. Is this something we would describe as a revenge of any sort? How unjust people are! And I on my part, it won't hurt me now to see my mother Sana's pure image sullied by things people say that – how could I describe them?...things that for some reason or other arouse discomfort in me. She was, in fact, acutely sensitive to the highest degree. She could read one's soul just by a look. It would be enough for her to glance at me in order to know what I'm thinking and what I want. And he, my uncle, he'd been close to her from the time she was a child, and he has no end of stories he can tell about that

time. But he – the old fox – this isn't his aim. Not at all, it's not she that he's aiming at. As far as he is concerned, she is finished – and oh, how wrong could he be! – and his task now is to turn the mouth of the gun towards a different person whom he thinks he knows, yet he doesn't quite know as well as he thinks – towards me myself! There's something he knows about me which he's keeping from me – something I don't know. He knows something important about me. Damn it all. That's it; he wasn't just shooting words into the air from behind his white beard without purpose. He wanted to deal me a fatal blow; but he lost his footing – that wretched old man did – and he no longer had a clear view of the target.

I was sitting in the darkness, emptiness all around me, the bare small garden and that mute wall before me, and I was feeling sad. My uncle Ra'uf was a person whom I greatly cherished. I wanted to speak openly to him. He had been my mother Sana's older brother, and he had a long record of suffering and of being treated harshly by life, and there was a tormented heart between his ribs. All this made him, in my eyes, a person in a special position to understand me; perhaps – perhaps. This 'perhaps' held me up day after day; and yet I didn't want a single shred of doubt, not even the slightest shred of a fraction of a doubt. Likely. Probable. Possible. Vacillations and doubts. No – no. I wasn't capable of waiting for an unknown reply. How bitter then it is to ask – for me to ask the question I'm asking! Or is the truth rather that I'm asking no questions because I know the answer; that there's something else I want, which surpasses all the answers I could be given?

Something else – something else; this is how I wend and wind my way and then end up back at my *other things*. Yes, it's one of my other things, and it's a thing that is precious, rarely encountered in this world and hard to obtain. I spoke to her about it a little on that singular occasion a few days ago. She seemed to me to be on the verge of understanding, but then she turned her face in the other direction and let go of me, and she

started chattering about mundane meaningless trifles. She – how harsh she is! We had been buffeted about, Amal and I, in the middle of the whole hubbub – the family and the relatives and the screaming children and the ululating women – and we hadn't been able to put the engagement ring on each other's finger, and suddenly she had materialised out of nowhere and was there calling out to her cousin to give the ring a strong push and get it on her finger!

And as a result of this way of regarding things, which constrains the natural order of things so as to press it into its own artificial order, the ring of pure gold is transformed into a ring of sand, and relationships begin to come apart.

A thought suddenly came to me and I got up. The clock was showing a few minutes to eleven and the night was quiet. I'd heard she had married a few months before our engagement and that she'd spent her honeymoon with her husband in Europe. She was proud of her wealth and she had a firm and unassailable belief in her importance for the human race. Her husband picked up the phone and I asked to speak to her, pretending I was calling from the hospital. This annoyed her, but the fact didn't disturb me at all. I told her I was in a bad state and she broke in and started shouting that she had no time to waste listening to such drivel, and that it would be good if I would snap out of whatever it was I was in, because things were going from bad to worse, and so I asked her – what things? The other things? She fell silent for a few moments, during which I was able to hear the voice of her husband saying something I couldn't distinguish, and then she said – 'thank you, have a good night,' and she hung up.

Yet another situation scintillating with ambiguity in which I find myself wondering what happened and why and how.

On the third day of work, I had finished nearly half of the plans and designs that had been required of me, and I felt like showing them to the

director and asking him for some advice and any other guidance or observations he might have. I felt a sense of contentment approaching happiness as I presented to him the fruits of my labour and explained the architectural aims I had pursued, guided by the general principles of the project as he'd described them.

He was glad at my work but it did not leave him entirely pleased. He thought that the belt still needed tightening in order to economise on expenses and exploit the available surfaces to the full, and that costly and poetic luxuries had to be avoided. He said:

'I know you believe in these things which find their way into your designs, because it's only faith that could make you forget your instructions.'

And he laughed:

'But Hashim my brother, we're living in the age of unbelief; or if you want to hear another truth, it's the age of belief pluralism – is this the right expression? And if I could put it differently – the age of convenient belief. Do you know what I mean?'

'These are truly strange views, *ustaadh*, and at the same time disturbing ones.'

'Disturbing? Not at all; they might be unfamiliar, because new truths often seem strange, but they're not disturbing; they needn't be disturbing – you get my point?'

After I left, I continued to ruminate on these statements which the director had pronounced with such a light and carefree spirit. He had no new truths to peddle, only disfigured ones; for if belief had different aspects, this entailed the destruction of its essence. Or had he meant to say that it assumes multiple appearances, because by its own nature it does not possess a single appearance?

In that case, I cannot have complete trust in the truths I arrived at after that night, and I cannot trust in the meaning of that night – or the

meaning of that event – for the simple reason that there are always new truths which are followed by new beliefs. Or is the reverse rather the case – that changed beliefs create new truths?

In any case, the poetic touches which the director said I give to my designs out of a sense of faith in the buildings I draw have gradually begun to diminish without my experiencing any change or novelty in truths or beliefs.

Being able to work was like a beam of emotional warmth which afforded me great nervous relief; and I felt a sense of exhaustion mounting whenever I returned to the ordinary world expecting to get some rest.

And despite applying myself to my tasks during the length of the office hours and for several hours beyond that, the work proved impossible to complete as per requirements within a reasonable time, and I was forced to continue working until late at night.

I was feeling agitated that evening for no obvious reason. I rang up our house hoping to talk to aunt Qadiriya about something in particular, and the rough staccato voice of my father came through. I was surprised to hear his tone softening when he realised it was me, and to hear him asking me repeatedly why I was so late coming home these days. He was a tender and affectionate father. I apologised and explained to him about my heavy work-load and time constraints, and I gave him my promise not to be late in future. I asked him about aunt Qadiriya, he called her to the phone and I spoke with her.

This brief amicable conversation with my father left me shaken. Perhaps he was right, who could deny that?

And I, the third party in the business, did not have the discernment that would have enabled me to understand what was happening or try to change it. Amid clashing individual temperaments, we were being driven – they and I along with them – towards a permanent and settled state of domestic unhappiness, which was only prevented by her succumbing

suddenly at the beginning of the race. That event had put paid to all struggle; and it had been left to me to establish on my own my true relationship with all that had happened and with my mother Sana'. Suddenly I became aware of the sound of light taps on the window pane and drawing nearer, I saw they were drops of copiously pouring rain. To my astonishment, I discovered that the time was already past ten. On winter nights that's a late time. I felt a need to stand before the glass and watch the falling raindrops and the street lights and their reflections on the wet ground. It's as if I felt like falling asleep on my feet! Or somehow losing consciousness while my senses continued to be active and awake. It's this spell-binding rain and the secret agitation that's possessing me; and these drops that are softly rolling down the misty window, they're bringing it back to me as if it was happening right now, that crazy evening – it seems to lie outside the flow of time – when I was dressed in my black clothes, with a shirt as white as snow and a shiny blue tie, and I was standing – standing – I remember it well – in front of the mirror; a tall guy, without any gracefulness about him, but with a physique that cannot but impress. I had arranged everything, or everything had spontaneously arranged itself, and I was aware of some obscure need which I never succeeded in identifying. We had decided – my father, aunt Qadiriya and those women relatives of my father – to go to the club early to take care of anything that might require attention; and I'd mentioned this to Amal in the morning, telling her to get some rest in the afternoon, because we had not only the long night ahead of us, but also the trip to London early the next morning; and she had laughed with delight as if I'd just told her the most brilliant joke! Then we went to the club at around half three in the afternoon and we were caught up in a medley of endless problems; and I didn't remember my uncle Ra'uf and the promise I'd given him to bring him to the club until a quarter past five. I asked my father for leave and took off. I was driving at moderate speed, and the rain was coming down

heavier by the moment, making it almost impossible for me to see the road. It was then, most likely, that the event began, when something else, another thing which I can find no name for and which I am still at a loss to describe and explain, began. It was as if I had entered a vast spinning vortex, or as if some unfamiliar and almighty force had taken possession of me. This is what it means to wander off one's pre-established worldly course. This is what it means to lose oneself in the clouds against one's will. I entered into contact – or was it that I was firmly bound? – with a different law, and I came under the dominion of an infinite power. This was not a fancy or a figment of the imagination; nor was it a reality which one could simply accept. Caught at the point of cleavage between two different dimensions – two dimensions in conflict yet closely adjacent – I was looking for someone who could 'connect' with what had happened to me. And as I realised from the outset that the person capable of understanding me would need to look into my eyes without listening to what I said, I called off my search.

I was still standing next to the window, the drops still hurtling down the glass. I don't like the way I suddenly fall prey to these tendencies to get absorbed and dissolve in the watercourses of the past; that is surely not a sign of good health.

I felt I wouldn't be able to do any more work that evening. I turned back lethargically, gathered up my papers and arranged them in a particular order on the desk, and then I put on my coat and very slowly I made my way out of the building of the firm. Perhaps I am suffering from a special kind of exhaustion which I should feel wary of. The inscrutable exhaustion of the spirit; the kind of exhaustion which nobody admits to and which drives some people to take their own life. It's an exhaustion that arises from the sum-total of the strains of life. Indeed, it's really the concentrated essence of these strains.

The rain was coming down hard and I didn't have my umbrella with me, so I made my way hurriedly towards the car. I plopped myself lifelessly behind the wheel; I didn't mop the rain off my head and my face. I'm still gripped by that unshakeable sense of stupefaction and disconnectedness from the present. What's happening to me again?

I was also like this in my car on that bewitched evening, dressed in my groom's black clothes and my shiny blue tie, as I drove from the club towards my uncle Ra'uf's house in al-A'zamiya while the rain fell hard, when...when a delicious shiver ran through me and began creeping down softly from the middle of my neck to spread through my shoulders, my arms, my back, until it reached my waist, and immediately I was taken over by a sense of cold-blooded imperturbability and a feeling of absolute indifference. I began to see myself from the outside, from a distant vantage point in which my own being appeared to be detached from me; I was acting without there being any living connection between myself and the way I wanted to be acting. I was a neutral observer, and I was pervaded by a sense of fear that was mixed with that pleasure which the first shiver had imparted to me.

They were nebulous moments carrying a wondrous unworldly magic, which now, when I bring them back to mind, provoke in me a feeling of great apprehension not far removed from terror.

I turned the key in the ignition and the car did not respond, but it grumbled awake on the second attempt and settled to an even murmur. I let it warm up a bit longer than necessary, as if I didn't want to move and leave this dark square. I changed gear, moved a little to the rear and then turned towards the main road.

The drops of rain appeared in the white headlights like soft lines connecting the ground to the sky; and I was sitting loosely, though still mindful, behind the wheel, driving steadily and with concentration.



The street Karada/International Border was empty at this time of the night, and I was heading towards Kemal Jumblatt square with the idea of crossing the suspension bridge next so as to get home in the quickest possible time. I pressed the button to switch on the heating and the warm air rushed out and flooded me with heat. A hundred meters ahead, the square seemed to be bursting with brilliant lights. I was in a state of loose surrender to my exhaustion as I reached the edge of the square. The thought glimmered through my mind, at one moment, that all the experiences a human being could live through over his lifetime ought to be, even if only in the smallest part, understood or at least capable of being understood by other people. And on the basis of this idea – The long black car which suddenly shot out of the deep darkness from the right had its lights switched off; and it was advancing at breakneck speed toward the middle of the square into my path. And as I had my full attention present, and as the black car struck the kerb and came to a standstill in the middle of the square just a few meters ahead of me, I realised without a shred of doubt that I was in the process of having a car accident.

I hit the brakes hard and I tried to get out of the way by twisting the wheel outward – but I didn't succeed, and the impact was violent and terrifying. My body shook and the wheel struck my temples; then silence fell.

My senses were confused and I was feeling dazed. I hadn't taken in straight away exactly what had taken place, but this didn't stop me from feeling angry, so I opened the door on my side and got out of the car. I was dizzy and my vision was blurred. I was astounded that nobody had gotten out of the mysterious black car whose rear I had crashed into. The cold raindrops were beating down on my face as I approached the driver's seat with faltering steps. I didn't see anyone. The car's windows were tainted dark, so it was impossible to see inside. I knocked on that strange glass once or twice and I waited. At that moment I heard something like the

fluttering of a wing or the sound of a light wind or perhaps a moving gust of air coming from behind me – and my head was struck by a sharp strong blow which felt like it was breaking most of the bones of my skull.

...I was, then, on that evening that was quite unlike any other evening, dressed in a groom's black suit with a shiny blue neck-tie and a snow-white shirt, which I had carefully chosen on one of my trips abroad; a Pierre Cardin that followed my body as if it had been tailor-made for me, with a simple adornment on the lapel. And prior to anything else, and without special prodding from anyone, I should mention that I boast the most expensive men's underwear, both in the print varieties and the fancy white ones; for in the competitive market of impression management, there are plenty of advantageous methods to be employed which don't always occur to people. And in this outfit, I was driving round and round in my car through the deserted streets of Baghdad, under a strange rain that had broken its leash and just wouldn't stop, feeling myself helpless and paralysed, with a sense that I was looking for something which I couldn't bring myself to fathom. And from the club, I didn't head to my uncle's house as I'd told my father but to our empty house in al-Harithiya, where I came to a stop and remained huddling inside the car, itself submerged in darkness. A stretch of time elapsed, in which I just listened to the rain tapping urgently on the roof and the glass and on my bare nerves. Then I got out of the car and made my way indifferently towards the house, I entered and headed upstairs to my part of the house – to that flat which I had built for us, Amal and myself. She had visited it with me, we had visited it together, we'd visit it most days. She had told me she was impressed with the architectural simplicity with which I'd managed to convert a pair of wasted bleak rooms on the roof of the house into a small dwelling with genuine warmth. I entered the sitting room. It was illuminated by the distant street lights. There...there in that corner we had spent some delightful time. And in the bedroom we had caught our breath,

wishing we didn't have to leave. Without intending, I entered the bathroom and inadvertently came to a standstill before the mirror. I was looking back cloudy-eyed and elegant in my singular dress. I adjusted my tie and I wiped the water off my hair and my clothes. Then I stood motionless, with my hands dangling at my sides, limp like the features of my face. A colourful empty image.

What a long time I had spent looking for this clear mirror! A mirror clear as a crystal that lets you have your image for free precisely the way it is, with all its precise colourfulness and pallor and unease, and its oblivion to the world and its unwitting despoliation. And I continued to stand in front of the clear mirror, I continued to stand. Adjusting my tie and looking into my eyes and wiping my hair; then adjusting my tie and tightening my belt after unbuckling it and focusing my gaze intently into my eyes. Riveted to the spot, bound in chains by an infinite time, I remained in front of the mirror. Sighing, though my mind was empty – no thoughts, no images, no memories, no intentions. At that moment, I heard the clock on the wall strike seven times, and I went downstairs to rove throughout the empty house, from place to place, without knowing what I was looking for. Then all of a sudden it struck me, and I rushed out of the house. The cold rain lashed at me viciously as I ran toward the car and got inside. Still out of breath, I stayed there watching the water pour down the front windscreen, picking up the reflection of some unseen lights. Then I came back to myself, and I started up the engine and sped off.

The streets were flooded with the rainwater and the traffic was moving very slowly. I took Damascus Street and then turned into 14<sup>th</sup> Tammuz Street. I was feeling well, I was standing on a bed of hot coals; forgetful of everything, remembering everything. And I was steeped in silence, recoiling in the deepest recesses of silence; feeling no particular desire for anything, but with an obscure premonition that something in particular was about to happen to me.

I crossed the iron bridge in the direction of al-A'zamiya; it was a Thursday. Nothing lies before me and nothing behind me. Only a void. A void; and the streets stifled by rain and people and cars, the traffic heavy near the mosque, the clock showing seven thirty-five and the wide courtyard within the mosque empty and brilliantly lit. The caretaker didn't recognise me and went on eating his food while darting me sidelong glances; and when I asked him to open the gate of the graveyard for me, his expression grew rigid and he mumbled something I didn't catch; so I slipped a big sum into his hand and he choked on his mouthful; and stashing the money away, he rose quickly and I followed him with heavy footsteps driven forward by an obscure but passionate yearning to visit my mother Sana'.

When the gate closed behind me, I stood under the shelter and looked around with a trembling gaze to get my bearings. I was shivering, transported by what was happening, and the rain kept coming down quietly and without cease; and under the weak bursts of light reflected from the mosque's lights, the graves appeared before me in humble abjectness, lost among the shimmering crystals of water; and as one pushed by an invisible hand, I went forward with a hesitant step, thinking that I knew where her grave was located. I was rushed by a wet wind and sharply falling raindrops, and on my second step I staggered and with a sense of indifference, fell into a small puddle. I remained motionless, raising my head and trying to recollect that other landmark that pointed the way to her grave. A tall, really tall tree; whose densely-branched top splits into two parts that lean out in different directions.

Finally I got up and I stood there without moving as the chill of the water tightened its grip on the tips of my head, on my shoulders, my chest, my arms and my legs. And as my eyes got used to the darkness and the outline of the trees began to carve itself before me and I got a sense of where I was, I turned toward the west, picking my way through graves

looking like crouching ghostly forms and through a ground which was vertiginously slippery, my lips humming along to the mournful lament of the rain; walking and stumbling and clinging to the edges of the graves and the trees, without a word to break the silence within myself, only wiping my rigid face from time to time. Then I was rescued from this wretchedness by a long, tall shadow dancing about on the western side, whose intertwined top branches were split asunder into two clumps far apart from each other; I braced my heavy body and I quickened my step. And just next to the towering strange tree, a diaphanous light was enveloping the grave as if specially directed to it from above. A deep thrilling joy enveloped me as I sat down at my mother's side on the eastern side of the grave. I was drenched to the bone, surrounded from every side by impenetrable supernatural mysteries, I was confused, perceiving the presence of celestial things around me; and I had my hands crossed on my lap, resignedly receiving the stings of the rain, the wind, and the obscure voices. If I have been brought here, in this harsh and difficult time, it must be for a reason which I must apprehend from up close, encounter directly, and understand. I won't be irredeemably lost, and soon, no doubt, my spirit will be finding repose; and under the tall cloven-browed tree, next to the resting place of my mother Sana', the rain and the cold boring into my body, the eternal flow of the hours slowed down, and I never once thought about my relations with people and with the world and no questions beset me about what I was doing. I was deep inside a crucible that had been specially moulded for me and for the sake of the moment in time I was experiencing. I had before me then a spectacle that wore two different faces, one of which lay hidden behind the first; for behind this tempestuous darkness, the black ground, the rain and the cold and the thundering, at the same time concealed itself and disclosed itself the radiant face of my mother Sana', the face of absolute immaculacy, the face of self-giving, the face of purified love, the face of the infinite. It was my task to hold myself together and be

patient in order to finally receive the blessing of the one lying near me in peaceful rest, and to banish from my heart every trace of fear, and terror, and distress. And I was confident that I would persevere through the bitter tribulation whose rugged paths I was treading, and that I would touch her gossamer luminous hand stretching out to me from behind the stones.

And as the time passed, my thoughts and my apprehensions and my shivers multiplied, and it seemed to me as if the ground itself was growing restless under the howls of the wind, and the gleams of lightning and the fulminations of thunder were almost cleaving it open. Then I was overpowered by a sense that I wouldn't be able to survive intact until destiny should allow the happy event to come to pass, and I slowly began to feel my arms, my frozen legs, my chest, and my head, and it was arduous, the time was past midnight, my breath was starting to come slow and constricted, and then I got up heavily, as if paralysed, and I began to stagger forward, touching the graves and supporting myself on them so as not to fall, until I reached the passage where the gate was located and I knocked but no reply came, so I leaned on the wall and I raised my eyes to the sky, and it was overcast with angry clouds and blades of white lightning would pierce it from time to time and it would roar and rumble, and rumble, and the wind was blowing with frenzied madness sweeping in from every direction to pursue the racing clouds and disperse them. The swift movement of the clouds as they raced each other fixed me to the spot, and I stayed there watching them, gripped by the sight as the water poured down my clothes and my head rested against the wall.

I estimated that I hadn't been wounded too grievously, but that pain at the back of my head was almost blinding me. Suddenly I was assailed by a strange, unendurable kind of pain. I closed my eyes. No, I'm not sound and intact the way I should be. A violent vertigo seized me that nearly drove me out of my senses. I was dizzy, the world was spinning around me, and the terrible pain was tearing at the base of my skull. Then, a few

moments later, I felt an ungraspable, celestial sense of bliss encompassing my entire body and permeating it with a delicious sense of repose; it was followed by the touch of those warm, gentle, soft fingers which embraced my right hand with the most exquisite tenderness and started to press it. I was happy and befuddled and lacked the power to move or to open my eyes in order to see who was standing at my side. Then I breathed her sweet-smelling perfume, the one I've known since the days of my childhood...since the beginning of time. She used to place the distinctive bottle in front of her when she'd sit to make herself up. A few moments would pass and then the scent of the perfume would spread through the air. Nina Ricci's *L'air du temps*.

I felt my spirit expanding and I was flooded by a sense joy and love and gratitude. She had surmounted the obstacles then and lived up to her word, and here she was, coming to me from behind the stones and the rain and the wind, taking my hand and assuring me that her love is the whole of life and creation and infinity, and that I am, will be, and will continue to be forever and ever.

Once again I cloaked myself in my dense personal cloud and I sat in the comfortable chair listening to my music with a sense of serenity. This man Chopin, to whom I've recently become addicted, grows so soft in several parts of the *Ballades* that his slow strokes and their exquisite gentleness almost make my heart stop. Artists sometimes let us imagine that they are too deeply absorbed in the forms of their creative work to find the strength for a very light piano note or for an infinitesimally small coloured line; when in fact they always know that before them, in the infinity of space or time, there is a spirit waiting for this extraordinary touch or that stain of colour with the most passionate yearning in the world.

Yesterday the surgeon came by, and he lifted the last bandage that was still wrapped around my head, and assured us that the small remaining

wound would be healing within a week at most, and that I should spend that period resting. We had little need for this last admonition, because from the time I came out of the hospital eight days ago I have been pursuing a course of restful convalescence. No work, no problems, no questions, no expectations; nothing but the closed circuit of thoughts coming and going, sometimes going but not coming, or most often coming but not going. I wasn't perplexed; I am not completely perplexed; which is to say that the circle of perplexity has not closed; in the sense that the reactions and consequences which had determined the value of what had taken place had not given me in return an explanation or fundamental clarification of that event. And when it comes to non-material evaluations, one must always be on one's guard; for sometimes all heroisms are nothing but thin air; and the moment may come when one wakes up and discovers that there's nothing but a black old pip in one's hand. I didn't tell them the truth about that staged car accident, first of all because of a sense of its futility, and secondly in order to seize all the more tightly the spiritual interpretation that had been granted to me alone. Besides, the fact is that nobody asked me about what had happened to me and by what special skills I had managed to receive a blow on the head from a mere old car accident. They arrived at my side praising and thanking God that I had come out of all those nasty imbroglios with a few wounds but with my life intact. It wouldn't be too long now before the whole affair was forgotten. But what agitated me and still continued to do so was my inability to bear the presence of my uncle Ra'uf. I didn't tell them that, nor did I tell him; he understood it from my look. And when I was leaving the hospital, on that cold, sad evening, while everyone was standing around me, I noticed him slipping away stumbingly with his old wide coat and moving away from our happy gathering. Thus it was that we signed, he and I, an utterly incomprehensible agreement to part.



Upon my return home, the order to promote my father to membership of the Supreme Court of Iraq came out and the family breathed a collective sigh of relief at the widest level. On that special day, I smoked my first cigarette, and I embarked on my habit of constructing my personal cloud of smoke in the sitting room. This operation – one that's truly received the wrong end of the stick from the lobbyists of healthy living – is in reality a covering operation of the highest rank; for in addition to the enchanting cloud which I recently discovered, and which has served me profoundly for clarifying my thoughts and giving them firmer shape, by assassinating one deliberately and with determination, this noxious smoke with the truly infelicitous reputation grants one the delicious sense that one is living on the brink of danger.

Yet I felt no serious concern for the travails of my physical health, and I took everything people had said about the gravity of my injuries in a light and derisory spirit; because in my view – and it might be a mistaken one – the body is a fine passageway for thoughts and feelings, but it is not their birthplace or primary fount; and it is the soul – held captive by the body – that suffers from the disturbances affecting this passageway and from the defects of its form. And today what I believe is that on that night in the graveyard my soul melted down its passageway in order to escape to the other, the untrodden side; only the passageway didn't come apart, and they came to give a blow to my head so that everything might perhaps come to an end.

I got up to put on one of Chopin's pieces – Scherzo no. 2 – and then I went to stand at the furthest end of the sitting room near the window. I wedged myself between the cold walls and let my eyes roam through the wide room. The sheets of smoke were really quite dense, white tinged with brown, and they looked as though they were intermingling with one another like rain clouds, but in fact they were stroking one another, touching one another, feeling one another, so to speak; if we were

to make the walls of houses like this, we would achieve an architectural work without precedent – the house that feels for its inhabitants, that reciprocates their love and shares their feelings. What an idea!

I rushed to a desk and laid out some papers and plans on it, and then I sat down enthusiastically, took the pencil in hand, and began tracing out some winding curves which contained no sharp or broken lines. I wanted the walls to become as one; to embrace each other and hold each other's hands, not to stand with a wooden rigidity next to one another. Perhaps this expression conveys a rough idea of what my thoughts had been – perhaps; but I didn't feel that. They are excellent designs which are utterly incapable of implementation. There is a deep flaw in the nature of the building – of every building; for as long as stones remain stones, lacking in feelings or in the capacity for sympathy, it is futile to create a beautiful architectural design that would be built out of these stones and would be inhabited by human beings with emotions and sentimental needs. Everything is futile and doomed from the start.

Yet I am not following a clear and straight line of thought, and that's what irritates me, for I had once resolved not to think chaotically as most people do; not because I harbour any particular hatred of chaos or any special love of order, but because I am scared of entering a vicious circle, if not indeed a plethora of vicious circles. They're a frightening thing, these vicious circles; a terrifying mental haemorrhage.

During that infinitesimal split-second between that blow and my loss of consciousness, I experienced a crippling fear of these vicious circles; of them, and of bouts of delirium. It was the circles that drained and devoured my thoughts and left me like a stupefied animal; the delirium was an intense and unbearable exhaustion; it preyed upon me for days on end and sapped both my body and soul. Then...then, the body received that celestial love at long last, and everything inside it relaxed and unfurled, and a sense of well-being, warmth, and bright colours spread throughout its

length, and that vivacious pleasure, the affectionate touches, the fragrance and the perfumed scents all came back.

I was told yesterday – even though it feels as if I had just been told today – that my car had been repaired and taken back to the house. Aunt Qadiriya was speaking to me through the folds of the cloud and darting her troubled gaze throughout the sitting room. I was glad to think I'd be able to resume my wanderings under the rain throughout the streets of Baghdad, just like before. Then she informed me – or was it that I spontaneously intuited it without anyone having informed me? – that my uncle Ra'uf had left his room in that house near the al-A'zamiya coastal road and had established himself in the nursing home whose address he'd been looking to discover the past long while. 'Nobody knows in what land he will draw his last breath', as they say.

She went on standing there at the corner of the door; I smiled at her. It wasn't the time for any kind of food, I wasn't preparing myself for the visit of anyone whosoever, and nothing untoward had befallen my father, who, ever since his promotion, had been going around the house puffed up like a proud little rooster; so what had happened to this poor woman to make her stand around like that while anxiety made a quick meal of her?

'I can hardly see you, my son; how can you live in the middle of this smoke, you who are convalescing and only fresh out of hospital? They say that clean air has a healing power; have you heard that? Your father and I are afraid of disturbing you. We always think you're sound asleep. And here you are, spending all your time smoking. What made you change like this my son, Hashim? Was it perhaps the car accident and the injury to your head that made you smoke like this, God forbid? Or is it your spirit that's burning, as they say? How my heart goes out to you! And these telephone calls, as you know, just won't stop, and my legs have become looser than loose threads from the sheer number of times I've walked from

the kitchen to the telephone. I take the calls for you my son, Hashim, because I know how tired you are and how weak your body is; I wouldn't want to come in and give you a headache by giving you reports about every single person who's been asking questions and calling, but the director in particular, he's been very persistent. By God, he made me feel embarrassed. I wasn't able to lie to him. He seems to be an honest man who's gotten himself in a fix.'

I interrupted her:

'A fix! Come on now, what a thing to say.'

She looked startled to hear me speak, and then she clapped her hands.

'As you wish my son; but what else can I say when it's he who said he's in a fix?'

At that point I realised that something wasn't going quite the way it should be; and I was right.

In a troubled tone of voice he asked me whether I was still working on that project of the firm's that was to build houses for small employees and I said no, because I had completely forgotten about the issue and about the houses ever since that blow, and then he said that in that case it would be best for me to forget about everything once and for all, for that tender which had been all but settled between our firm and that friend of his had suddenly been withdrawn, and that I should therefore rest and try not to busy my mind with those poetically minded houses because their time had not come yet. When I asked him what had happened and what this strange news was all about, he was silent for a moment, and I thought I heard him sigh.

'Nothing new, *ustaadh* Hashim, there are lots of things you'll have to learn in life, and one of them is how to show fortitude in accepting the inevitable, however bitter this might be. Get some rest now, and we'll meet soon, *in sha' Allah*, and then we can talk. Don't let it concern you too

much, for these kinds of things won't affect your position in the firm; we know you very well and we rely on you and on your architectural capabilities.'

I wanted to go see him at once, but he refused, reiterating his request that I rest and not give myself worries, and then he got off the phone.

He didn't have the right not to see me; and the fact that he had done so meant that matters were far worse than he'd let on, and that I was directly involved in the affair; and once again, my suspicions were justified.

When, a few days later, I finally braced myself and despite a slight sense of vertigo, got into my car and drove to the firm to see him, he didn't add anything substantially different from what he'd already told me over the phone. At first I was annoyed at his attempt to create an air of mystery and conceal the facts – which always turn out to be trivial and unworthy of serious consideration as soon as they come into the open; then a short burst of anxiety broke over me as I watched him making some obtuse gesture while referring to the cause of the whole affair.

'My good sir, tell me openly and directly, am I personally involved in this dubious business?'

'I can neither deny nor confirm that, *ustaadh* Hashim. I have no proofs or indications for either of these possibilities. I'm sorry, but that's how things are these days. The important thing is that we didn't lose a great deal.'

Afterwards, awash in the warm sunrays dancing around me in the streets of al-Karada, I felt light-headed, almost flying, from a secret joy that had powerfully burst forth throughout the deepest reaches of my self. The joy of the ultimate possession, the joy of confidence in the person that I was; I was smoking and breathing in the cold air that was scented with a spirit of spring.

Before I left, I told him that I felt happy, for many reasons whose knowledge was reserved to me alone, and that my wish for him was that he could be like me and that he could look forward to building kind-hearted houses for people, and at that he almost fell off his chair laughing while shaking his head at my words, and there was a hidden sadness in his eyes.

I felt giddy the moment I stepped out of the firm, but a slight tiredness began to creep into the elation I felt driving along in my car, feeling the breeze, surveying the streets. This integration of the spirit which I discovered by chance yet also by merit weighs down on my recovering body, for it demands – and it could not be otherwise – a passionate fervour and an uncommon alacrity of response; this is why I had to shorten the period of convalescence as much as possible through good nourishment, so as to restore its previous capacities and abilities in the quickest time possible. At that very moment, the name of the restaurant *Faruq* leapt out before me and I pulled over in front of it and got out. And despite the fact that my mind had been preoccupied with the matter of that blue car that was visible in the distant horizon and that had been following me from the moment I left the firm, the first woman I saw sitting in the big hall brought her to my mind. Aunt Qadiriya had made lavish comments about her manners, her delicacy, her readiness to be of service and her assiduous attendance at the hospital almost on a daily basis. There's nothing that doctor with the mysterious motives has in common with this unfamiliar girl except her short hair and round face. The place was packed. And the smell of cooked food was mingling with the smell of people's perfumes and the smoke of their foreign cigarettes. I took a seat in a secluded corner close to a large window overlooking the Baghdad international trade fair. I wanted to feel at ease, to savour a sense of equanimity and a clear mood; but unseen eyes kept observing me with piercing looks as I sat at the table, picked up the menu and turned around to call one of the waiters. At that point they extinguished themselves among the other eyes and hid their fiery

arrows from my view. I liked to believe that the weakness of the body sometimes had an impact on the senses. Even on the sixth sense. Insofar as it constitutes the port and the passageway through which worldly imports make their entry and personal exports depart, we should be prepared to see the most wondrously fanciful notions reaching us through it at every moment.

I had an excellent meal without having to receive any of the manager's contributions. He was busy serving a very special group of customers whom he had hidden away into a corner prepared for the purpose, and he didn't notice me. I lit my cigarette and turned away from the hall to cast my gaze over the shrubs lining the road that separated the restaurant from the Baghdad international trade fair. I was a person; my feet were firmly planted in a ground of my own creation; and I wanted to feel a sense of pride.

From this point onward, there are things that are waiting to be done; for the authentic acts which created me as a person are still waiting breathlessly to be extended and continued. And neither the 'means' by which I had reached this level would matter, nor the fact that nobody had understood it or would ever understand it. My uncle Ra'uf had been connected to me closely enough for me to be able to speak to him openly, but I'd had my misgivings about his weak and narrow understanding and I'd worried that, contrary to all appearances, he might be rigid in his view of things. And when he'd talked with me the way he did, I realised I was right.

And then with that doctor, I had alluded in general terms to the shock that had formed me, and she hadn't responded to what I said. From the way she looked at me I felt she was capable of grasping my meaning, but at the very last moment she'd balked and kicked me in the shins with her petty material requests.

Right now I needed my room and my music and my own personal cloud; but I stayed there smoking calmly, looking out at the clear sky. Standing firmly on my feet and caring little about anyone, I feel capable of confronting them at the present moment. It doesn't matter whether or not they have understood, that is a different question. What really matters is for them to know for certain that I am the one that makes the choice. I am the one that will make the choice whenever I want.

A tuft of brilliant white clouds was drifting softly across the sheet of vast heavenly blue, my pulse quickened, and I felt suffused with happiness. All the trials and tribulations of recent times and all the shocks endured by one's long-suffering spirit had taken place for the sake of these sublime and heavenly moments. Suddenly and without forewarning, the face of my mother Sana', queen of the day, had risen before me reflected on the window pane, covered with tears like glistening pearls, yet radiant with a boundless overflowing joy. I was gripped by a warm urge to seclude myself and be swathed by the blanket of music and thick smoky cloud, for it was there, there that I had my personal time, there was the person who remained untouched by time.

She was slightly taken aback to see me sitting in the reception room of my father's elderly women relatives in the Dragh quarter, already smoking my second cigarette. She was elegantly dressed as always, wearing a tight dress that hugged her supple body closely, a light grey flirting with blue and red. And she was on her own, so I got up and said hello and asked her about the person who was supposed to be with her, but she mumbled out some unintelligible apologetic sounds, and she sat down and started responding to the questions of one the old women who'd stayed in the house that evening on our account. The time was just after four o'clock on a March afternoon, and as soon as she'd gotten in touch a week after I'd gone back to work, I had immediately agreed to have a meeting with her in which Amal would also be present. She had rung me up in my office at the



firm and told me she was delighted that I was well again and my health had fully recovered. Then she began jabbering away without saying anything whatsoever and I cut her short and asked her whether there was anything that she or anybody else wanted from me, because she should just come out with it. She fell quiet for a moment and then she said that she was thinking about meeting me to discuss something important and that she proposed to bring Amal along. I concurred straight away, and when the problem of where to meet came up, I remembered this house of my old women relatives which seemed the most suitable place to meet, especially as both of them were familiar with its location. She hesitated – because it was of course obligatory that she hesitate – almost as if I'd proposed to her to go to bed with me there, but then she gave her agreement in a tone as if she was making a real sacrifice on her part. I didn't let her get away with it. These things belong to the past, whereas now – no. I hastened to tell her plainly that she wasn't under any compulsion to come to this or to any other house – neither she nor Amal nor anyone else – for basically I had no particular desire for this meeting to take place. This time it was she who hastened to fix the hour and the day, and asked me to be on time because she'd be leaving the hospital expressly for this appointment. That gratified me. As soon as she sat down, she pulled out a cigarette and lit it, and then it seemed to occur to her to ask me for permission to smoke, and she turned to me and realised I was smoking my second cigarette. She was wearing carefully applied make-up, and her look didn't express the sharpness I'd anticipated, but rather a kind of inner agitation. She said:

‘Amal wasn't able to come. Her mother wouldn't let her; but I got a clear picture of everything she wanted to say to you. How are you? Have you fully recovered your health? You look as if you have.’

Then she turned to the old woman to ask her the usual questions in a somewhat louder tone of voice, knowing she was hard of hearing.

At that very moment – quietly, with the most perfect gentleness – a light whiff of her perfume reached my nostrils. It was invigorating, magical, it made my heart tremble. Nina Ricci, *L'air du temps*. My breathing began coming a little faster and I felt myself surrendering to a strange pleasure that suddenly surged up in my being. What are these chemical confections doing to me? And yet...and yet they...

She was repeating her question to me while fixing me coldly with a sharp look. I paid no attention. The old woman wanted to offer us something, some tea or coffee, and I had been deaf to her question the moment the fragrance had struck me, so she'd turned to ask me herself and had repeated the question with a certain irritation. The old woman got up and left us alone with the depressing furniture. The sun was insinuating itself into the room through a pair of dirty small windows and casting its crimson rays in a vain effort to light up some of the corners.

I was still in a state of emotional arousal when I asked her:

'Did you come to the hospital?'

She raised her eyebrows:

'Didn't they tell you?'

I was beginning to wonder whether this damned doctor was trying to wreak all the havoc she was capable of inflicting on my life. She went on:

'Several times. Why do you ask now? You were unconscious the whole time. I got to meet your uncle Ra'uf the last few days; he is one of the most...charming, perceptive, profound, and humble people I've ever met.'

I wasn't following; for within seconds, I had begun battling with the desire to surrender myself to this singular, mysterious elation which her perfume had aroused in my whole being. She was touching me to the core; and caught up in the tide of this intoxication, I perceived the approach of darkness, of despair, and the crushing defeat; for like all great things in this world, this perfume wore different faces and carried conflicting meanings.

The old woman came in carrying the tray with the tea and the coffee, dispelling the awkwardness of that suspicious silence that hung between us. We quietly took our cups and all three of us busied ourselves with the task at hand. The old woman kept looking from one of us to the other, not knowing what she was supposed to do.

She asked her about some distant relatives of hers and the conversation went back and forth for a few moments. I was silent; I was slowly regaining my equanimity and soldering my fractured parts back together; and in some deep dark corner of my self, I was in anguish. I could not let a person like her witness my undoing. No.

She was sitting with her legs crossed, and I could see their shapely form and the way the colour of her tights and her blue shoes matched with her clothes, and everything about her features, her way of sitting, the way she was holding the cup, amounted to an odious proclamation of the hidden depths of her soul.

'We won't spend our time sitting in silence, will we? Have you come to a new decision, *ustaadh* Hashim, which it would give us pleasure to hear you tell us?'

I tensed up as soon as I heard her voice, almost as if I was hearing her for the first time.

'You mean – after what happened?'

A questioning look:

'What happened? The car accident? Accidents like this can happen to all of us.'

'Really? Do you think so?'

'What do you mean?'

'I will let myself believe you're being honest in pretending not to know; but how were you rationally able to accept the idea that a mere old paltry collision could have resulted in an almost fatal injury arising from a deliberate blow to the head?'

I saw the hand holding the cup tremble a little and her eyes begin to widen:

'What do you mean? I don't quite get you. Wasn't it a car accident?'

I shook my head. She continued to look at me as if spell-bound.

'Yes? Please explain what you mean.'

'I've no wish to explain. It was an accident that was staged in order to make me stop and assault me. That's all there is to it.'

A look of genuine terror appeared on her face and she placed the cup on a small table that was next to her, and then pulled out a hand wipe from her bag and ran her fingers through it. She was looking at the floor, and most of her open bosom was rapidly rising and falling.

'I hope the news doesn't upset you; for these accidents might happen to any one of us, as you said.'

She lifted her eyes to me.

'I – I am truly shocked, for many different reasons. What you say is horrific, unbearably so, and it can't be kept quiet. And you – you've therefore been in extreme danger ever since that day. In extreme danger – do you understand?'

I felt calm; the effect of her perfume on my nerves had somewhat subsided, and I had gotten used to the velvet thrill of intoxication it had enveloped me in. My mind was clear and I was in a steady spirit. It gave me pleasure to be disclosing to her what type of people they were, those wheeling and dealing with her in the shadows.

'I understand perfectly, but I don't take the matter in the way you'd like.'

She looked stupefied.

'Do you mean to start playing with words again in order to scare me or are you – are you really not concerned about what happens to you?'

'As long as it bestows upon me spiritual density and a special worth, it's fine with me.'

She drew back in her seat in real agitation; then she straightened herself up and the swell of her breasts appeared more clearly. She was in the kind of state of disturbance which one can do little to escape from; and I recalled having earlier intuited that things in her head weren't in the best order. She was silent for a few moments, looking over at me as if studying me:

'I had a long talk with your uncle, were you aware of that? He knows you better than any other person; and I was lucky that he gave me his trust.'

Then, slowly and heavily:

'May God be my witness, he's right in everything he said about you, even though..even though – why don't you just put an end to the whole affair and divorce her, and put this whole dirty business behind you?'

After that she began to vociferate in a voice which nobody would have agreed to call quiet:

'Why? Tell me, why is that – why?'

Sparks were flying from the fiery gaze with which she was fixing me; and I almost thought I could hear her breath rising and falling in her breast. I couldn't give her an answer, and perhaps she felt that.

'My God, what a state I'm in!'

She turned to the old woman who was sitting motionless next to her and raised her voice:

'Aunt Hashimiya, would you mind getting me a glass of water?'

The old woman was listening without hearing much, but she heard the doctor's last request and immediately got up to shuffle slowly towards the door of the room.

'Yes, of course, Doctor. Just give me a minute.'

She placed her right palm over her eyes:

'I'm really sorry, *ustaadh* Hashim. I know you don't like these types of obscure questions or the spectacle of – people losing self-control. I'm sorry – God, I'm a nervous mess!'

Then she picked up her bag and opened it, and she turned her gaze quietly towards the door with her purse resting on her lap.

I was sitting still as a stone, secretly asking myself whether she was feigning all those expressions – in which case everything would be in right order; or whether for some reason she had really lost her calm, in which case things would defy comprehension and give ground for concern.

'I'm prepared to answer you, Doctor Salma, should you be interested in getting an answer. There's a lot I have to say to you and to any other person who is capable of looking deeper into the heart of things.'

'Really? And you think I've got the time and the stamina to look at – the heart of things, as you say?'

The old woman entered carrying a glass of water on a small tray and offered it to her grandly. She took it and brought out a green pill from her bag, and swallowing it she downed the glass of water in a single go.

'Your health, Doctor.'

'Thank you, Aunt Hashimiya. Forgive me, I've tired you out.'

The old woman bowed gently and shuffled out of the room again. The area around us had grown gloomy, almost completely dark. The rays of the sun were no longer visible; and the only remaining light was cast by reflections coming from some unknown source. I saw her light a cigarette and look at her watch and then straighten herself up on the chair. Her body's shapely proportions and full curves offered themselves plainly to the eye. It nettled me to think that she might take pleasure at the admiration she provoked in men. She broke the silence:

'We should take advantage of the time that's quickly passing and reach a point of convergence or – divergence. I must begin by mentioning to you some of the things Amal said to me and asked me to convey to you.'

A moment elapsed:

'She's prepared to return all the gifts you gave her, every one of them – without exception, if you agree to –'

She fell silent for a moment. All those gifts suddenly flashed before my mind in vivid detail. How careless I'd been about my money, and still continue to be!

It still means nothing to me now; for some, it's the illusion of power, whereas for me it's the illusion of illusion.

'That's a noble gesture on her part, but it's pointing in the wrong direction. It's regrettable.'

'I already knew what you'd say and I told Amal; but that wretched girl –'

'Now please. I don't like your describing her like that. She's got nothing to do with anything. Nothing at all. Don't be unfair to anyone just because you want to explain things which are extremely hard to grasp.'

'Very well, very well; I won't be unfair to her. Am I to infer from this that you've taken a new decision?'

I noticed that the old woman hadn't come back, so I got up and switched on the lights in the room. I returned to my place. She moved forward in her seat while holding her cigarette, her knees joined closely together and her arm placed across them. Her eyes were wide, round, perfectly clear, and around them wondrous circles had been traced in kohl which made them open even more widely and reflect unseen lights.

'I don't know what you're thinking about, but I –'

She interrupted me sharply but gently:

'I want to bring this unpleasant story to a close; especially after the latest complication that happened to you.'

'I would like to talk to you first; there's something in particular that I'm interested to discuss with you. You didn't let me speak the last time we met.'

'Perhaps I was wrong. Circumstances have changed now; and like your uncle Ra'uf, I –'

'What does my uncle have to do with us?'

'Didn't I tell you we talked about you and had a long discussion?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Don't start worrying now, *ustaadh* Hashim. We felt greater understanding for you. I'll tell you all about it once I've heard what you have to say.'

I quickly suppressed the anxiety that had suddenly surged in me as I listened to her talk; but I was still unable to resume the topic I'd been about to broach. I was looking at her from a different vantage point, and perhaps she noticed a change in my mien.

'Let me repeat, don't be anxious. You can talk about anything you want. It's important both for you and for us that we should talk – and talk exhaustively. This is your time, so don't waste it, Hashim. Let's try to come to an understanding and reach an agreement, even just once in our life.'

'I am not anxious, I am not anxious.'

At that moment, I would have liked to be able to listen to my music; it would have drawn me closer to my own thoughts and given me the words I needed; there's nothing in the world that could take its place, not even the music of these softening glances – they're no use to me. They're drawing me away from my thoughts and visions; but I will pull myself together and brace myself, for this is the first difficult test I have to face. Yet I will cut my great battle short, because it isn't for everyone; and I won't let this woman have anything but the most infinitesimal shred of my wisdom.

'Listen, Salma, Doctor Salma. I will talk to you openly about what happened to me. I don't know why I should do that, but I'll be completely open with you. But please, don't take what I tell you as though it demanded any kind of reply or discussion – or argument. I'm talking to



you as if there was a need to do so; and I don't know whether I'm right or wrong.'

She was listening with a slightly exaggerated display of attention. I brought out my cigarette pack and took one out, then I offered her another and she took it. We lit our cigarettes and a few moments of silence passed between us.

'Do you happen to read books of philosophy, by any chance, Doctor Salma?'

She smiled ingratiatingly and shook her head.

'Nor do I, sadly; otherwise I would have been able to fathom things and perhaps analyse them and put them forward the way I should. You know, for these types of questions of the spirit – or whatever you want to call it – medicine is of little use. Nor is architecture, of course.'

It gave me pleasure to be exchanging glances with her and to watch her features relax and the tell-tale signs of tension depart from them. There was a familiar warmth and trustfulness about her. A sense of anxious apprehension was goading me on to speak, even as an unavailing sense of hesitance was holding me back; and when I haltingly began my story a moment later, I was overcome by confusion and first words, then meanings, fled my mind. I felt I'd been abandoned to nothingness, to be speaking with it, and speaking about it. I fell silent for a few moments; not so much because I was in any way afraid, but because I felt as if I didn't have much to tell her. But with her strange eagerness and her ardent air she made it easy for me to resume my narrative; and only a short time passed before I began to feel as if I was revealing to her matters of the greatest moment which no human being had ever experienced before. I recounted to her what I believed had happened to me. I left out of my account the thoughts and most of the feelings and apprehensions, and I stuck to the core of the events; and I was right to do so. For human beings follow the events and changes that take place with close and careful attention, because that's the

kind of time they live in; but they turn aside from anything that does not take place and that might in fact be the foundation of everything; and that's where one's foot begins to slip and tragic things begin to happen.

I was talking and she was there before me; her image grew pale and distant at times, and disappeared at others; but she continued to sparkle in her listening attentiveness and her complete engrossment.

Then I suddenly came to a halt when our deaf elderly host opened the door and her eyes began to question us about some nameless thing. At that moment, I realised that deep inside I had resolved upon a difficult and inscrutable thing with respect to this young woman whose senses I had at my command, given that it was only to her and to no other living being that I was interested in speaking. She signalled to the old woman to leave, for there was nothing we needed of her, and she withdrew meekly with her head bowed.

'That dawn, after I made it back home, I was taken ill with a high fever which left me bedridden for more than two weeks. Nobody asked after me during that whole time, and I didn't ask after anyone when I recovered and went back to work. And the days passed as they say, and the rest is history, and remains unfinished. That's roughly the whole story.'

I fell silent and for a while our gazes continued to cross, and cross again; while our silence, our very special silence, was tenderly embracing the world. She lowered her eyes to the ground for a moment, then picked up her handbag and took out her pack of cigarettes and lit a cigarette; she blew out the smoke and went back to bury her gaze beneath her feet. I was vexed at the thought that she might believe I was expecting her to respond to what I'd told her or to think of other things which I was unable to divine, and which might be undesirable or -

'I'm truly happy, *ustaadh* Hashim, that you could have bared your personal crisis with such honesty and sincerity. I feel that at this point, it's

very possible for us to be open with each other – I mean to reach a mutual understanding that would rest on proper foundations.'

The element of vexation concerning what she might think was now burying its teeth into me with determination.

'Indeed.'

'And even though I truly realise how ambiguous the situation was which – which you were dragged into against your will, I believe it is a situation that ends – I mean that might end happily and to the advantage of everyone involved. Don't you see that? Will you permit me to explain what I mean?'

'Yes.'

'Good. You are aware, *ustaadh* Hashim, I mean you had that experience you described while being, how can I put it, not – I mean without willing it. Is that right? And whatever might be the meaning of this thing – I mean, this issue – I mean this event, in some way or other, it – we agree that – it prevented you from attending your wedding party. Isn't that right? Isn't that right?'

I stood there looking at her in astonishment, incapable of understanding the reason why she was so agitated and speaking in this disjointed way. I didn't answer.

'Isn't that right?'

'I don't know.'

'But why not? Why not? The matter is crystal-clear, isn't it? Look, *ustaadh* Hashim, look at me.'

She had turned towards me, her thighs firmly pressed together, and her arms making large gestures to emphasise the meaning of her words. Her forehead was a bright white, as was her open neck. I was unable to stop myself from stealing a glance at the cleavage of her full breasts.

'I'm a woman that talks straight and thinks straight, and I admire everyone who does the same; and whether or not you agree with me, I

respect your view and your right to differ. But there are some things that are self-evident, I mean things that need no discussion, because otherwise we'd never reach any conclusions. For example – let me give you an example.'

She extinguished her cigarette and then placed one of her polished fingernails on her lips as if thinking about how to formulate her point:

'You didn't come to the wedding party. You were – there...in the cemetery. Very well; this didn't happen voluntarily on your part. I know that. I make no comment on this, but – your being there prevented you from coming to the party, isn't that right? Or am I wrong? Very well. You don't need to answer. You don't need to answer. I want to – I mean, to go along with the logic of these amazing things – excuse me – these things only, there's no need to qualify them. And this logic indicates that its meaning is...no marriage, isn't that right? But no. No. No need to answer. No marriage. After that, we may ask ourselves – what then? Am I right? Do you permit me to complete the logical sequence of these things? The conclusion is very simply the dissolution of the marriage – i.e. divorce. That is the logic of the things that happened to you without your willing them, and that's what I agree with you about and what solves the problem from the root.'

'I didn't agree with you about anything.'

'I didn't mean to say we've come to an agreement. I didn't mean that at all. I only meant to say that what is self-evident points to this conclusion, which is a logical one, and you're on the side of logic just like me.'

'What logic?'

'The logic of these things; of your things – those strange things of yours. Don't you think so?'

'Not in the least.'

Her eyes were tired and overcast by shadows of bewilderment, incredulity and despair. She let out a long sigh and fell back in her seat, flinging her head towards the rear. Her large breasts bulged out powerfully, and it occurred to me that she had no need for these sorts of movements in order to declare her utter incomprehension.

Suddenly she got up from her seat without glancing at me and headed lightly and nimbly towards the door. She was of medium height and had a well-rounded body. She turned around before going out and said:

‘I’m going to get a glass of water. Would you like some?’

With a voice that was warm, coquettish, untimely.

I stayed there studying the door into which she had vanished. I’d thought we’d made a solemn commitment from the start that there would be no discussing or analysing or explaining; but she – there she was, letting her worldly instincts get the better of her and using inadmissible means to try and benefit from lofty matters which have nothing to do with our problem. Should I be disappointed in her? She returned alone carrying a glass of water and she drew near. I smelled ‘*L’air du temps*’ emanating from her once again, carrying the same mysterious magic. I lifted my gaze to her; she had a gentle light smile on her face whose meaning I didn’t understand – if indeed it had a meaning. I asked her:

‘It’s you that wears this perfume...’

Then I took the glass, feeling like I needed it.

‘Of course it is me; what do you mean?’

‘Yes, indeed. I mean...since when?’

‘I don’t remember, I really don’t remember.’

We sat down, and she began talking again with feigned smiles that failed to conceal her agitation and nervous tension. She was thinking of melting down the most exalted things and mixing them with the mundane concerns that were preoccupying us, so as to succeed in realising her truly wretched material aims. The ‘event’ was a prophecy; or let us rather say

that it was one of those transcendent commands that surpass our faculties of comprehension, whose gist is that you should not marry this girl Amal. That's all there is to it; its meaning is as clear as daylight; you simply obey the order and divorce her. That's all there is to it. Why can't you see that?

At first she kept repeating, why can't you see such-and-such a thing? Then, a little later, she began to cry out, why don't you realise such-and-such a thing, and that's what made me feel anxious and ground on my nerves. Then after a while she started shouting in my face – why are you pretending to be blind? Why are you pretending to be stupid? Why can't you understand these simple things?

At that point I was forced to quiet her down by commenting in a loud voice:

'Be careful, Doctor Salma; don't lose control of yourself for a second time.'

Within seconds she had calmed down and contracted herself into a corner of the couch. I wasn't taken in by this appearance of feminine retreat, and I continued to feel apprehensive.

'I haven't lost my self-command, *ustaadh* Hashim, but you – you would provoke even a stone to anger, even a stone; and I – I'm entirely calm – I tell you, your uncle Ra'uf – oh – if only he was with me now, he's the one who knows you best and knows what kind of person you are.'

'I know far more than you do about my uncle and about his ideas and those stories of his which have absolutely no basis in reality or fact. What he did talk to you about anyway? What did you say about me?'

She sat quietly in her corner, looking out at me with visible irritation; then she curled her lower lip contemptuously and looked away:

'You talk as if we've become your enemies – your uncle and I. Such a strange thing – yet another one.'

'What did you say about me?'

‘Neither of us had ill intentions towards you. You know your uncle, as you say, far better than I do, and he loves you more than anything in the world, and I –’

She smiled once again in that enigmatic way of hers which harboured myriad different meanings and which spoke of bitterness and defeat, but also of the purest sincerity and infinite affection.

‘And I – who am I; even your uncle realised that I’m incapable of harming you. He saw me once while I..’

She interrupted her sentence and then she glanced at her watch and a look of astonishment appeared on her face, and she hurriedly sprung to her feet, straightening out her clothes.

‘My God! How quickly the bloody time goes by!’

She glanced at me:

‘And we – we’re no use, are we? I mean, do you believe this discussion we’ve been having could produce any good for anyone?’

‘Indeed I do. Why can’t we show some patience – just for once?’

‘Do you think so? Do you really think so?’

I asked her:

‘Were you wearing this perfume of yours – ‘*L’air du temps*’ – when you were visiting me in hospital?’

‘What’s that?’

‘...and my uncle saw you holding my hand while I was unconscious and felt he could trust you and he told you very personal things about me – and about – about her.’

‘About her?! Oh – you mean your mother? Yes, that’s true.’

Then she sighed as if a large weight had been lifted from her chest and she sat down once again in her distant spot.

‘Don’t think evil of anyone. I’ll keep saying this to you over and over. There’s not one person among us who doesn’t have your good in mind. Not one of us. Quite the contrary, quite the contrary.’

'Not a single person among you understands, and that's the root of all evil. Please allow me – for a good two hours now you've been raising your voice and going on about a screwed-up conventional logic which you and your cronies know so well – and this includes my dear uncle; rants and stupid questions about causes and effects and consequences and supplementations – and so on and so forth, and it never occurs to you or to the nitwits that surround you – and sadly this includes my dear uncle – that the person possessed of a vocation, the person who came into being after he was united with the Supreme, the person who was called and responded to the summons, that person has a different nature, a second nature, because he's connected body and soul to different realities; and above all, he's got nothing to do with your logic and your conclusions and equations. He's in the process of being formed and he keeps rising higher and higher to a unique mode of being that defies description. Do you understand? Are you capable of understanding? You – I'm speaking to you, I'm speaking to you this way, because through a clumsy accident which you're all too well aware of, you infiltrated into the subject of my life and you crudely defiled its authenticity and its meaning and splendour. Damn it. I'll never forgive you for that.'

As she was listening to me, her face had turned ashen, pale as death; and the colours of her make-up on her cheeks and lips had transformed themselves into bright clumps that were detached from her features. It seemed to me as if she was trembling violently, and when she spoke her sentences came disjointed:

'I – I don't understand you. Never – I won't understand you. What are these things you're saying? And why are you talking to me in this insulting tone? Why? But still, still; I must - I must explain to you some of what – of what – oh God!'



She hid her face in her hands and buried it in her lap; and when she raised it moments later, her eyes were moist at the edges and wore a look of despair.

'I must tell you plainly what I believe – what we believe. Listen to me. Please let me speak. Oh God! What business do I have with all these problems? You're putting your life in danger. You've got to understand this very well; and you're doing it deliberately. Don't interrupt me.'

She was shouting as if I was about to attack her.

'You – don't interrupt me and let me finish what I have to say. You're in the same situation as – yes – the same situation as your mother. Don't interrupt me. I've – I've heard that from your uncle. He's right. He's got no doubts about it. She was – yes – you don't know about this, after you were born she changed. She changed, and her whole life came to focus on you. She was no longer interested in her husband. She began to think of herself as – yes – I'll say it, because it's true – she began to think of herself as being forbidden to human beings. Yes. Don't say it's not true. Because you don't know. She was – she ruined her marriage. She ruined it with her own hands. Your uncle did his utmost to help her but he didn't succeed. He knew that her – her nerves were weak – didn't he tell you? But he never imagined she'd come to such a point. She no longer cared that her marriage was being ruined, she no longer cared that she was destroying herself. She didn't seem to care about anything, as long as you were with her. And this is just how – this is just how you are now. You're destroying your life and you just don't care. You know they're there. They're lying in wait for you and they want to put you out of the way at every cost. They'll kill you. They'll wipe you off the face of the earth – and you don't care – you just don't care.'

Fortunately I still retained my composure, and I was helped in this by the feelings of pity and compassion that were pervading me toward her.

'The only thing I care about are the poisonous things you're saying about my mother. It's all because of the fabrications of that half-crazed uncle of mine. In his heart of hearts he hated and envied her because she inherited an enormous fortune from her mother while he didn't get a single penny. He kept hounding her throughout her life. I detest him. He's like my father. They made her life hell – that poor innocent wretch. And finally her husband killed her.'

'No, no, far from it. Nobody killed her. She was sick; and you are just like her. You're just like her.'

'Me too? Why –'

I stopped. At the corner of the couch where she was seated, she was huddled up like a frightened cat, playing with her bag and looking at me with troubled eyes as she kept biting her lower lip:

'You're in quite a state, Doctor Salma, what's the reason for that? Aren't we trying to discuss things in a calm and proper manner? We might have lost our grip on the reins a little, but that's no reason why we should have a nervous breakdown; am I not right?'

She didn't reply. She turned her eyes away from me and hid her face in her palms. Her fingers were long and slender with polished nails, and I'd forgotten myself and the anger her words had provoked in me and I'd begun to struggle against a diabolical feeling of tenderness towards her. Her sufferings were, in fact, gratuitous in every respect.

'Yes, yes, indeed. There are things I need to say to you, *ustaadh* Hashim. I don't want to...I don't like these sharp verbal jousts between us.'

She too was calm, and her features were heavy with sadness:

'As you know, in reality I've got nothing to do with the business between you and Amal; it's just that I fancied myself a problem-solver, but here I am now, getting into new problems. I've now come to believe - you'll agree with me on this - that we - that you won't come to any

understanding; and that with these notions of yours, you're rapidly heading for disaster. I've told you this; and I –'

She brought out a small white tissue paper from her bag and wiped the corner of her mouth and her left eye:

'I feel really troubled and confused; but I – but I –'

Then, to my astonishment, she got up heavily from her seat.

'I've resolved to let everything take its inevitable natural course. Let them do whatever they want regardless of me. I won't intervene, not in the slightest way. And these notions of yours – in actual fact, I understood nothing from them, nothing at all. But I feel you're unnaturally obsessed and consumed by them. And I believe your life is in great danger, a danger that comes to it from two sides. The side of those people I told you about who've already tried out some of their arts on you, as you're very well aware; and the side of that person whom you yourself called – the person possessed of a vocation. A great danger attacking you from two sides, God forbid. As for myself, I've revealed enough about myself and I've been severely punished for that by the things you said, which I won't forget as long as I live.'

She slowly moved towards the door, and I got up and took a step in her direction, but she made a signal that I shouldn't come near.

'Please let me go. You've no business with me. You've tired me out greatly over this past while.'

She opened the door to leave the room. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

'Don't think I was exaggerating in any of the things I told you. They won't leave you in peace. You can rest assured of that. And if you want a heartfelt last word from me...take care of your life and try to preserve it – it's the only one you've got.'

Then she went out, and I could hear her swift footfall as she made her way to the outer door. For a few minutes I continued to stand there

without moving, and then I went off looking for my deaf relative throughout the house, and I finally came upon her performing her prayers in one of the rooms. I waited till she'd finished praying and then I thanked her for her hospitality, said my goodbyes and passed on Salma's greetings and thanks; then I left. It hadn't been me anyway that had personally striven for this kind of meeting. They were the ones who'd wanted it and they got what they wanted, and I myself feel I'm no worse off than I'd been before. We were tossed about in our discussion like the waves of a stormy sea; and the truth of the matter is that I've no idea how I managed to keep my calm, as indeed I continue to do even now, despite the plethora of veils that were rent during this meeting. It was a little past eight, and the night was calm and humid. I turned the car into a road at the back of the Dragh quarter, and I wound up at 14<sup>th</sup> Tammuz Street.

I didn't feel like going anywhere. I wanted to be alone with myself somewhere where I'd never been before in my life; and it wasn't easy to countenance the thought of meeting anyone I knew. To put it roughly, I was experiencing a sense of estrangement from my self. And perhaps it was this wind, which was carrying a waft of spring on its wings, that was calling up this yearning for solitude inside me. Or perhaps it was those execrable words which Salma had uttered about my mother Sana'. Peddling second-hand from an old man who's voluntarily committed himself to a nursing home his memories and interpretations about events that happened over twenty years ago! And she is sure that he is sure about what he says! What demented patter – what empty and meaningless drive!

To be shooting off cleaving the darkness at over a hundred kilometres per hour filled me with a sense of well-being and lightness and pleasurable tension; it is an idle form of spatial liberation. Or perhaps a way, just as meaningless, of quickening the blood in the veins of time. I felt disturbed; I felt disturbed. I didn't want to think about anything and I wanted to think about everything. Nothing will be solved, I think, by

taking the view that everything is false and deceptive, so nothing of any solidity comes of that. And I, caught in the thick of this spinning tumult around me, I need someone who grab hold of me and whom I could grab hold of.

The headlights of the car were projecting two pale spots of light that danced restlessly before me, and I was surrounded by more than a single darkness, disoriented and without direction. I drove through many busy streets and then headed out toward the peaceful suburbs of Baghdad. I didn't stop. I had the obscure sense that speeding ahead in the car might help me start my thoughts moving and get them to a safe haven or something approximating one; but I wasn't ready to take in fully what I wanted to understand. There's some kind of closure or inhibition somewhere in my mind preventing my thoughts from flowing down a natural course. That's what was disturbing me; that, no doubt, is what made me feel even more disturbed as time passed. When one embarks on a scientific investigation, as I understand the matter, one first sets a goal and then one constructs a strategy about how to reach it, whether by means of theory and experiments or by means of experiments and the imagination. I'm not a scientist, and I lack a clear aim. I'm only a person who came into personhood by means of an experience that humankind deems alien and repugnant. And in this situation I find myself in, which some people took notice of and as a result tried to exterminate me, what matters to me is that I should establish myself in my position before anything else, and that I should acquire firm foundations as a self and be able to extend myself indefinitely. This crystal-clear statement is retreating from me now. I feel it retreating it from me, not in an obscure way, but for obscure reasons. Obscure reasons; and I certainly say obscure, because I don't give any serious consideration to the remarks themselves that Salma had conveyed to me. They were remarks I viewed as groundless and unsound. But those images that suddenly fell upon me while she was speaking – as they used

to fall upon me every now and then in the past – those images have a not entirely negligible significance; for they are my own images. I was six years old, on the first day of school; it had been a day full of excitements, and by evening I was in a state of extreme exhaustion, and I fell asleep in my mother's arms while the family was having dinner. Oh, what a sweet sleep that was! At some point during the night I became aware of the sound of shouts coming from the adjacent room that overlooked the river. I was seized by terror and I found it impossible to stay in bed, so I got up and rushed over to their room. I opened the door cautiously. The first thing I saw was my father's face. That's a basic image there. It was a face that spoke of a man who'd been stabbed in the heart a thousand times; sallow in its paleness, the traits distorted, his eyes and lips and the tip of the nose quivering and sweat streaming down his forehead. In an instant he wiped his face with a quick motion of his hand, and he looked as if he was about to break down into loud laments. I was filled with fear at the sight of these confused, tormented, despairing features and I shut the door on them and ran off to hide myself away in my room. It wasn't he that was doing the shouting; he was just awkwardly struggling to endure his sufferings. That is a basic image which I've been concealing from myself for years and years. Indeed, after a long time spent concealing this image from myself and a multitude of others that resemble it, it came to be buried deeper and deeper in bottomless dark recesses, until I imagined I was safe from it; and I was mistaken. She would take me in her arms in the dark of the room, shaking and streaming with sweat as she repeated her words in a whisper, as though deliriously: 'Don't worry. Don't you worry, my darling. He won't harm me. Never ever. You're my angel, my son, and I am like you. You're mine. You're all mine. And I won't belong to anyone else after you.' Were these really her words? Or am I remembering things deliriously, just like her?

The street was dark, its darkness stretching out to infinity; and I was exhausted and I was driving along in a state of dull stupor, without any

thought of getting anywhere in particular. And these faded images which survived the fires of the blood and the nerves, in what ways could they change the secret history of my self? That is the question, and that's what I need to place before my life. The stunning definiteness of that night on which I was called is something that cannot be touched by time; because that is the person-forming foundation on which Being must be erected. And this woman Salma, with her distinctive stupidity and perverted sentiments, will only reap repugnance and contempt from my side. When she preens herself on logic as if she was the one who invented it, I can hardly stomach my regrets for having taken such pains to tell her about my extraordinary visions in a language she understands. Wasted effort which lies beyond recovery. As for her dolling herself up with perfumes and other shopworn feminine trappings, that's a separate question which I will reserve for careful analysis at a later date. As if I didn't have enough on my plate already. Good God!

Faint lights appeared on the horizon, and I realised I had driven further away from Baghdad than I'd planned. Perhaps I'd accidentally taken the Ba'quba road and perhaps this was Khan Bani Sa'd. I veered toward the dusty pavement, carefully reversed the car and started my way back.

I was hungry and I didn't want to eat; enervated in mind and body and I didn't want to rest; and in this situation it was necessary that a call for help be made. And it wasn't in my power to do that.

I was driving slowly, properly relaxed in my seat. It appears to me that over there, in my horizon, lies a purification process of a special kind. Or perhaps it's a pruning process that would eliminate the dead and withered branches, so as to breathe new life into the sound core of the body. These pronouncements may be comical, but they are sound; and I will begin with them...But what is it that makes them comical like this? I think it's the hackneyed language in which they were expressed; not just hackneyed, but tattered on top, besides having an odious fluidity and a

fragmentation that makes one queasy. What a language, bringing under the same weird roof all the cast-off scraps of the ancients and the perspiring toil of the moderns!

In fact, what I wanted to say and language twisted out of recognition was that the many flaws that have come to attach to my visions have made it imperative that I work to sharpen my ever-coruscating essence and that I sunder from it all the revolting inanities and pieces of shabby work that have come to adhere to it. That is the point of the matter.

Then I felt a sudden urge to stop in the middle of the darkness and merge myself with it, and I pulled over to the left-hand side of the road and stopped the car. I stepped out into the pitch-black still night. The air bore the smell of grass and dust and the musk of the wind; and the white stars were dancing joyously in the black bed of the night. I stood there filling my lungs with the clear pure breeze. I was alone, melting into the darkness of the gentle night; I could see the glimmering lights of Baghdad over there...over in the distance. I stood there contemplating them; and then I felt the deep sense of tranquillity beginning to envelope me little by little, like water being poured out from above and coming to flow into every recess of my body. I was truly alone, and I wasn't in the least disturbed. And when I got into the car once more and lit a cigarette and started for the city, I felt that the arduous day I'd been asked to endure was over.

The blade of grass bows humbly before the storm and escapes with its life, and the giant tree stands proudly before it and is broken. It was on the basis of this logic that she'd been addressing me. Very well. Where is the bright spot in all these logical statements? I want the bright spot at all costs. This life has no meaning without at least one little bright spot thrown in. So let's say...the blade of grass bowed proudly — can we do that? They'll be laughing at us from the rooftops; because it's a contradictory statement, that's why. A statement that contradicts all the prevailing moral notions of heroism we've inherited from our forefathers. But now — what's the



relationship between these moral notions and the poor blade of grass that desires to protect itself? It's a legendary relationship, you see, a relationship which the entire course of history has defended through every single man and woman that's passed through its pages. But I myself, there are no notions I'm defending. I'm not on the side of history or the men who've made it, and I'm not – moreover – on the side of the blade of grass, on the side of the tree or the side of the storm. In reality, I am a blade of grass, and a tree, and a storm; and the two statements are separated by a vast abyss. If you'd understood what I tried to explain to you, you would have been able to touch my meaning with your own hands. Because it's all too easy for human beings to take the side of the blade of grass, or to be impressed by the stance of the tree, or to be cowed by the storm's might; or, on the contrary, to condemn all parties without exception; but...try to grasp what a miracle it is when you yourself are the blade of grass, the tree itself and the very storm. That, as I told you, is what it means to become a person; that you should be a person, not merely an individual, once and for all.

I stayed like that tossing and turning in my bed as sleep refused to take me, soundlessly going back and forth in conversation with that madwoman Salma. It happened to me twice on two consecutive nights. And here she is, coming to oppress me for a third time five days after we met, despite all the light food and the cigarettes and the lukewarm showers and the two-hour walks. What enraged me especially was the way thoughts and imaginings and particular images kept recurring. Especially images of her on our last meeting, which came to me wrapped in a confounded sense of desire. I'd thought that once that arduous day had passed safely or had seemed to do so, the actions and thoughts and revelations it had consisted in – or which it had secretly harboured – wouldn't keep returning again and again, capering freely between memories and reactions and capitulations to feeling or instinct. And in the context of the peaceful happy

life I was leading in the company of my father and aunt Qadiriya, the emotional and mental turmoil I was undergoing seemed like something that firstly could not be tolerated and secondly could not remain a secret for long.

I wanted to set about purging my most sensitive affairs from their besetting flaws, in keeping with the promise I'd given myself, but the aftershocks of that difficult day, the exhaustion induced by many sleepless nights and the elusive new anxiety all colluded to do away with my valuable time. The orderly structure I maintain in my everyday life places me beyond anyone's reproach. Whether I've slept for two hours or for eight, my waking hours always observe their regular pattern, and the same thing holds for the times when I go to the firm, when I work, and when I eat. These things always remain in place and they're not disturbed by anything that happens to preoccupy me, however serious. There are the trivial things of course. No day is entirely free from them, and it would be hard for me to list them off with any precision. What does it matter to me that the director of the firm has now acquired the habit of greeting me brusquely whenever he sees me? Or that he makes meticulous inquiries as to the size of my share in the firm and whether I'm one of the founding partners or whether I was an interloper who'd gate-crashed my way in by purchasing shares...and so on. And then there's that blue car that follows me around at strange irregular hours; one time it will be as I'm going to work, another when I'm returning, one time after lunch, another when I'm going home late at night. All these are factors that manage to distract me despite the nugatory weight they carry; whereas I am in need of the kind of focus that would reach all the way into the hiddenmost recesses of my personality; when all is said and done, these recesses are ones that I've come to hate and find revolting at times. But they are still there, whether people like them or not; because people like taking special pains to sniff them out wherever they can find them. And among the hidden recesses which I found not so

much revolting as odious and which presented itself before me like a wonder of nature...was the thought of having a deep and intimate talk with my father in order to find out whether there was any truth in what my uncle Ra'uf had said about my mother Sana'.

He was nothing but an ordinary human being, this man, and the least one could say in describing his parameters was that they were stunted. No real ambition. No imagination. No capacity for broader thinking. No inner fertility. No intellectual gifts. No hobbies whatsoever. No human aspiration. No lasting sentiments. And despite these remarkable distinctions, he was a man held in high esteem by the members of his society; he not only commanded the respect of the judges who were his colleagues, but the rest of the people held him in great honour as well. And if we were to expand the picture by adding a selection of conventional hang-ups (the hang-up caused by his looks and his height; a hang-up about sex no doubt; a hang-up about his job and his fierce attachment to it; his hang-up about money), of which the most important, the deepest and the most self-destructive would be – a hang-up about his marriage, we would then be in a position to understand that my reference to wonders of nature in connection with the possibility of our coming to an understanding was not one that lacked appropriate foundations. Which is why I banished that secret thought which drove me – albeit indirectly – to describe my father in terms that couldn't possibly be considered nice, and as a result aroused feelings of shame and irritation inside me. And although he didn't prove himself to be far removed from the descriptive terms I applied to him, he did at least display a certain courage in confronting the situation that had to be confronted. On that night, I was in the sitting room inside my flat, and I was listening to my favourite music without quite hearing it, the room only half-filled with smoke, when suddenly a series of soft, gentle knocks came on the door, the way aunt Qadiriya normally knocks. I blew the smoke out of my nose and mouth and realising that the time was half

past ten, I tried to guess what might be the reason that had prompted aunt Qadiriya to go to the trouble of coming upstairs and knocking on my door at this late hour. Is it the phone once again? And who could be calling? The director of the firm? Surely not. Who then? Her father, Doctor Raghib? He's too civilised to change his behaviour toward me. Amal herself? Her mother? And with a foolish kind of obstinacy, I persisted in banishing from my mind that one name that stood there – just as obstinately – with the expectation of being included in the list.

I got up and opened the door. It was my father. He was frowning, with a glum-looking long face; he didn't have his glasses on and he was wearing those striped pyjamas of his. His eyes flew over my figure and went roaming throughout the sitting room as if he was looking for something specific, and then he said:

‘What strange prison is this you're shutting yourself in this way?’

I saw he was being ironic and I relaxed a little; I stepped aside wordlessly and he came through the door.

‘Do you think it's healthy for you, Hashim, to be staying here in this room, with this habit of smoking non-stop – God preserve us – which you recently seem to have developed?’

I was busy asking myself what urgent necessity could possibly have impelled him to visit me at this hour, and I didn't reply. He got to the middle of the sitting room and stood there looking around; then he noticed the music playing and calmly asked me to turn it off. I wasn't feeling on edge the way I normally do when I'm with him, and I was preoccupied by my efforts to figure out what he had in store for me. I invited him to take the comfortable chair and I told him I'd open the window straight away, because the weather was mild, despite a light pinch of cold. He sat down without speaking. I went to the window and opened it wide and the cold air rushed in, redolent of the giddy scent of the nocturnal trees.

'Don't forget to shut it again in a little while. I've come to talk to you because I haven't been able to find any other time to see you. How are things with work, at the firm?'

I made some kind of gesture to indicate that everything was as usual, and he began saying something about a period of regeneration and new construction and about his hope that I would reap great benefit from it.

Then there were a few moments of silence:

'After that regrettable last conversation we had, I swore to myself that I wouldn't talk to you about this business...this business of yours, but – I don't know, there are three of us in the Supreme Court and we sit together in a single room to work, and we often end up discussing personal issues. Yesterday 'Abd al-Khaliq started talking to me – do you know him? He's on the same roster as me. He said he was aware of all the details about – those details, and that he wished to tell me his opinion, if I wouldn't mind hearing it. I felt embarrassed to tell you the truth and I didn't say a word, and he said your son is doing himself a lot of harm through this stance of his; he's harming himself socially, in terms of your reputation, and he's harming himself from a legal and a material point of view, and have you both thought – he said you in the plural, because he imagines that we – you and me – think together – he said, have you thought about the consequences of this stance and the harm it's causing? In fact these things were present to my mind and I know them far better than him.'

Then he turned towards the window:

'Close the window. The air is too cold for me. To go back to 'Abd al-Khaliq. I'd thought he would come up with something new which we weren't already aware of; but at any rate, I told him, I'll pass on your valuable remarks to my son, and who knows, perhaps he might profit from them, because they are truly judicious and sensible words; and I thanked

him – what else could I do? I thanked him warmly for his sound judgment and good intentions.'

Once again I was overcome by the familiar feeling of irritation I get in my father's presence, especially when I see him smacking his lips as he pronounces his words in that odious way of his, as if he was savouring their sweetness. Then a moment later I imagined I glimpsed shadows of self-satisfaction passing through his eyes.

'And I don't know whether there's anything in what this friend said that I need to explain to you, because you know what social damage means and what it means to get a bad reputation for whatever reason. These are things everyone is familiar with; to which I may add that it is difficult – yes, indeed – very difficult for a reputation that gets damaged by something to be repaired within the space of a single generation. Human beings are benighted creatures of adversity as they say, and they find it hard to forget anything they consider a scandal or any other behaviour that affects one's reputation. Creatures of adversity – there's nothing to be done about it.'

He cast a glance at the window and satisfied himself it was closed, but still made a gesture as if annoyed and anxious. He was ensconced in the comfortable chair with his legs crossed, and I was listening to him while still standing. I felt no tiredness, and a second later...it was as if a page had turned within my depths, and suddenly thoughts wearing bright, beaming countenances began to course through me. The things he was saying, which were heaping on me adversities upon adversities and threats upon threats, began to fill me with a sense of lightness and a strange kind of elation. As if that had been my goal since the beginning of time! As if, throughout my life and without ever coming to realise it, I had been striving to incur this priceless collective wrath! I chose a chair and sat down mildly. He was asking me a question and I hadn't heard him:

' – i.e. a marriage without marriage! Do you understand? Tell me, do you understand?'

'What?'

'The legal damage. In the eyes of the law, you're a married man, but in reality you have no wife, i.e. it's a marriage without marriage! May God preserve us - this is the end of days as they say, by God.'

'Yes.'

'Don't say *yes* like this as if you understand. Do you know what it means for you to be married in the eyes of God and people and the law, and yet – to have no wife? To be without a woman to share your home and look after you and your children, in the way that God and his Prophet have commended to us? How can you live through your youth without a woman by your side? And you tell me *yes*!'

He still looked as if he was relishing all his convoluted talk, while my emotional tension kept rising the more he kept heaping adversities over my head. This was one of those rare types of conversation that I really craved. He was making a clear reference to the topic of sex; which is for him the essential topic.

'As for the material damage – '

And he began swinging his head from side to side.

'Here things are even more dire. You spent several months scattering the money that's rightfully yours – right and left, without any qualms whatsoever, may God be my witness. As if you'd been following a textbook – how to go bankrupt in seven days!'

At this point I was unable to suppress a loud peal of hearty laughter; for it's rare to hear such a good joke coming from this gaunt and withered old man with his frowning face.

'Quite so. Quite so.'

His eyes grew sterner as he gazed at me, unable to grasp exactly what I meant repeating these words.

'I don't always have the energy to take things humorously, and I'm finding it difficult to carry on with this conversation. Perhaps you're not

aware of the fact that Amal and her family came to see visit you in hospital while you were unconscious; and a few days ago her father Doctor Raghbir rang me up to congratulate me for becoming a member of the Supreme Court. He's a remarkable and unusually refined person. It's a great shame. And I don't know how it occurred to me while we were talking – '

He began tracing out short circles in the air with one of his hands:

'While we were talking, as though I wanted to be courteous or...I don't know – perhaps I was moved by his culture and civility, I said to him, who knows, perhaps things will go back to where they'd been before, and we might once again – once again, I don't know how; at that his whole tone suddenly changed – my dear sir, that's a question that admits no discussion, and all we desire and hope for is that Mr Hashim will have pity for Amal in her situation and agree to release her. That's all.'

Then he placed his arms crosswise in his lap and pursed his lips so that part of his lower lip disappeared under the white hairs of his moustache. He was waiting for me to say something, to shed burning tears, to fall to my knees on the floor. Perhaps.

'Quite so. Quite so.'

He puckered his lips as if he meant to whistle, and then starting looking toward the window.

'Of course. It was foolish of me to expect anything new.'

Then he rose to his feet abruptly and I followed him. He walked to the door and stood next to it.

'You fancy yourself a strong person who can resist till the last, my son; but in case you didn't know, human beings are weak in the ordinary run of things, and you – why wouldn't you be like them? Why can't you think of yourself as someone with ordinary human weakness? Time is passing and you don't even realise it; and you might fall ill or something bad might happen to you, God forbid – and I, will you have me by your side forever?'



At that moment and without any prior warning, my eyes lost their focus and the colours around me changed and first they went dark, and then again bright. His face slanted a little and his features grew longer, so that his nose twisted and his eyes and mouth grew wider, and then it moved away from me...it moved away; and when I spoke, it was somebody else speaking with my voice that cried out.

'My dear father, could you please answer me honestly – even after all this time has gone by? Were you happy with...my mother Sana'? Were you happy with her? Answer me. I beseech you.'

The muscles of his cheek twitched faintly and he puckered his lips once again as if he meant to whistle, and then an inexplicable terror appeared in his eyes and his sagging shoulders. He turned around and opened the door placing his grip on the handle.

'Yes.'

Then he went out and slammed that piece of hard wood in my face with a violence that sent its echoes resounding through the entire house. I remained motionless at the spot, counting the echoes reaching me from the answer of my only...my singular father. I created my personal cloud once again and sprawled myself on a couch in a corner of the sitting room, listening avidly to my exquisitely beautiful, sorrowful, dreamy, contemplative *Nocturnes*. The comfortable chair was empty and repugnant in its emptiness, and I was smoking contentedly with a feeling of complete indifference to everything; for in my ever-turbulent depths, two wholly divergent poles had met and had been united, spreading a sense of security and merciful grace throughout my entire being. The first was - that night...I now see it from a different perspective; and the second was the change of feelings I experienced while listening to him talking to me about their views. There's something these two things have in common. A secret connection which refuses to divulge its name to anyone. And the only reason why the two poles came together despite the differences in time and

essential nature is because they both spring from a single root which is the Whole, and the Whole is that root.

For at a time when I couldn't have been more carried away with other human beings in their merry-making, on the night of my wedding, what was it – what was it that had seized me from the neck and thrown me out of course, and sent me sheltering in the rain on the ground of a graveyard, buried among the corpses? And where lies the wellspring of the rapture and joy that surge up inside me and flood me as he sits across me drawing up bucket after bucket of dangers, woes and adversities from the well of those people of ours, in order to brandish them in my face – in his son's face?

So I felt cool and composed; for all of a sudden I've reached the end of the road and I've laid my hands right on what I'd been looking for. I shook off those thoughts that had seduced me into trying to probe the words of that half-crazed uncle of mine in order to preserve the pure image of my mother Sana'; or into bandying about words with that doctor in pursuit of noble aims.

Now, as I lie stretched out in the middle of the smoky cloud taking pleasure in the sound of the music, I feel that I am the one that was and I am the one that will be.

The truth is that I did not heed my initial desire to follow my vocation; yet at this particular moment, I am the one who desired and the one who desires, and I am now the one who will desire, in the future, and until the end of time. And I was smoking.

It was a spring morning, despite the rain cloud that was filling the air with the smell of the earth and of flowers; and the sun leaping like a child between the clouds was an April sun, the very spring sun itself; the windows of the car were covered in wet dust and the windscreen wiper was working hard to clear them, and I was heading joylessly to the firm's headquarters.

It's been a week now, since the night he came asking to talk, that my father won't speak to me; and today when I loudly made my way down the narrow staircase singing an operatic aria, he passed next to me with a look of disgust and went out of the kitchen without returning my morning greeting. This was most definitely an event calculated to bring joy to the heart and open my appetite for a good breakfast, had it not been for the fact that aunt Qadiriya's news that morning were not, as they usually were, unoppressive. For the day before yesterday my father had found out that my uncle Ra'uf had fallen ill and it seemed that, with help from the nursing home, there was no hope of recovery; and out of spite towards me, my father hadn't told me, and had gone to visit him the previous evening, and upon his return he'd described his condition to aunt Qadiriya and grown even more wrathful and spiteful towards me. I wasn't able to laugh it all off. An inexplicable sorrow overcame me and I pushed my food away. I felt confused in my unhappiness. I remained silent, looking to the other side of the table. I wished I could think things through with perfect equanimity, but the tumult of these emotions was grabbing me by the throat.

I downed a glass of water. I heard aunt Qadiriya exhorting me to visit him soon, and I gave a nod; and then not a moment had passed before she was announcing to me that Amal's mother had called her up, as she does from time to time, and informed her that Doctor Salma had been taken to hospital nearly two weeks ago.

' – she said two weeks ago or maybe ten days. I didn't understand. I don't know how this woman talks. She said a breakdown; and she needs complete rest, complete rest, she said. But tell me, Hashim – this breakdown – isn't that in itself complete rest?'

I said to her as I returned to my breakfast:

'I don't know, but you should have told me about this earlier, aunt.'

'Yes, yes; eat your breakfast, my son, for these are difficult days we live in and people nowadays let their likes and dislikes meddle even with illness! May God preserve us.'

I reached the firm's headquarters exactly on time and sat at my desk determined to forget everything and to get down to work; but I was unable to do either of those things. I drank a second glass of black coffee, I walked around the room and I gazed outside the window from time to time. The sky was purple blue and glowing; and I felt depressed at the thought of going to visit my uncle and seeing him on his deathbed; and at the mere shadow of a thought that Salma, lying in hospital, might be – might be waiting or hoping – deep down – for me to visit her and let her know how well I understood the causes of whatever breakdown she was happened to suffering. The horizon was filled by a furrowed black cloud and the wind was battling against the wooden frame of the open window. What's the point of all this?

Questions of this sort sometimes intermingle with a speck of dust or the image of a tree or the tone of a word or an unintelligible whisper; what's the point of my going or what's the point of my not going? What's the point of both these contrary things?

There are people who consider the very act of posing these questions itself a meaningful one, and I despise these people; and there are others who hold in respect an unidentifiable something in you and impartially grant you the freedom to pose any questions you like. For as long as we're human beings, nobody has the right to deprive us of the sense of futility, in both its simpler meaning and in that other, more complex one. The director of the firm rudely demanded my presence. He sent someone to summon me. He didn't have anything important to say; and he avoided looking at me in the face, and he kept breaking off his sentences and sometimes even his words. A strange thing. He wasn't pleased with various plans and designs I'd given him nearly two months ago to look over. He

seemed to detest them and to want to set fire to them on my very head; he returned them to me saying they were no good. All of them, every single thing inside them; even the pen and paper. I picked them off his large desk. I felt – for some obscure reason, as always – that I was his rival, and that, deep down, he was possibly afraid of me. A sudden desire to break into laughter came over me, which I naturally suppressed, and I stood there motionless with respect, waiting for that idiot to expand on his remarks. I went on standing, and I went on waiting; for more than forty-five seconds. Nearly a whole minute. I didn't know I was waiting for another insult, for had I known – I would no doubt have gone on my way, for I was too depressed to be receiving groundless insults. He lifted his gaze and asked me as if he was seeing me for the first time:

'Yes?'

He was looking at me through narrowed eyes. I turned around and slowly walked out of the room. After that meeting, I decided to visit my uncle and renew my acquaintance with the face of death; and to get in touch with someone who might know the hospital in which Salma was being looked after.

A human being is not a human being unconditionally and without criteria; for the state of being human as we know it is not some automatic state which comes to adhere to those we call human beings from the moment they're created, not to leave them until they turn to dust. That would be an inadmissible situation beyond tolerance. So long as we continue to be alone here, and all things...everything is in actual fact leavened by our actions, the state of being human must rest on particular conditions and it can't be had for free like some gift arriving without a sender, or like something found lying on the street. The ascent to the state of being human and then to personhood must pass through an experience of fragmentation and fusion which knows no boundaries; and that's the first step in order for the spirit to take hold itself and gain a sense of

extension and liberty. The architectural expression of this idea can be expounded by means of two lines – a vertical line which is fixed to the ground, and another line at its end that extends horizontally to infinity. The lowest point of the vertical line is a red mark which stands for the first convulsion (or jolt, or shudder) of animal life. And at the point where this ascending line meets the horizontal line that extends into every horizon, there's a second mark which has a different colour from the first red one. This mark is the convulsion of the person; and the road of ascent lies in the space between the two marks for some people; and it's a road of ascent and descent at the same time, for it is a road governed by harsh conditions. Some people continue their ascent until they reach the second mark, and then embark on the road by which they extend into the distant horizons; others – and these are the woeful crushing majority – allow themselves to relax on the road of ascent and they slow down and start to grow putrid and grow even more putrid as they begin their retreat downwards, and the road doesn't become a road of ascent but a road of all kinds of filth and revolting refuse.

I sat down to take a look at the corrections the director had made to those designs he'd handed me back an hour ago. I was calm, and I was looking earnestly for my errors. I discovered that he was using a red pen. That was a new thing which expressed a sense of authority. Perhaps like me he'd also found that it expressed a sense of authority and he'd put this discovery to the worst possible use. It hadn't been enough for him to make small observations or suggest changes or the removal of some parts of the plans, but he'd crossed out most of them with two red lines which were repeated over and over. As if I was that farcical knight, Zorro, and he was placing his distinctive mark on my forehead! And then he'd follow it up with the remark – 'no good'.

The esteemed director didn't bring me down with these actions and I acquiesced without difficulty to the task of spending the whole afternoon

going over my papers. I had a keen desire to be benefited by him in spite of him; for I was still under the sway of that strange feeling that had come to me while I was standing before him and had suggested to me that he saw me, perhaps, as his rival. Yet there was one trivial thing he had thoughtlessly done which had left its mark on the paper and which really nettled me, to the point that I thought of going back to his office – for I found a small number inscribed in red on the edge of one of my plans, with patent indifference. Doubtless it was a telephone number or something of the sort, which he hadn't found any other place to write down apart from these miserable plans. I kept looking at these dumb numbers, and for no particular reason the thought occurred to me that people never think about the way in which they will die; nor about the place in which this preternatural event to end all events will occur. After that it occurred to me that it is only the spirit that dies, whereas the body is annihilated; for it is put together from the very start in a way that carries the ingredients of its annihilation. The death of the spirit is something that never ceases to amaze the human being that has become a person, because it forms its contrary, just like the body; and there lies the eternal crisis of the spirit. The spirit is squeezed between the body, which it cannot dispense with if it is to come into personhood, and between death, which comes to it through this body by stealth. That is why the spirit always retains the right to feel anguish and terror; for its immortal preternatural essence fell into the snares of the body and by means of it entered the plane of annihilation. I felt as hungry as a wolf as I threw aside the last of my red-streaked plans. I rang the janitor and then I looked at my watch and discovered to my surprise that it was nearly six in the evening. How thoughts consume a person! I asked for something light from a small restaurant that had recently opened near the office; then I realised the sun had nearly gone down and that it was too late for this kind of light meal so I cancelled it and asked about the director, and I was told he'd left over two hours ago.

Then I started ordering my papers and thinking about the visits I had to make. I cast a look outside; it was a beautiful time of the day, the light was dim and soft on the eyes and the sky was sprawling in its diaphanous blue robe, and I was feeling a little sad. It wouldn't be easy for me to face my uncle Ra'uf and to have to see him and talk to him, but I was counting on the affection I'd felt for him in the past and on his extraordinary relationship with my mother Sana' in order to overcome the pressure of my negative emotions. As for Salma – I need to find someone who knows where she is. Visiting her is a different matter, though one no less complex. Perhaps she hasn't heard about my uncle's recent illness. There's no alternative then but to speak with anyone who happens to be at home, whether a member of the family or the domestic help. I lifted the receiver and dialled her number. And on this understanding, no harm can come to the spirit, in spite of the body and of death. The phone was ringing somewhere. If it's possible that the spirit survives death and lives on immortally, human beings may, ultimately, nourish the faintest and feeblest glimmer of a hope that we might not become and forever remain dust to dust. Out there the phone kept on ringing persistently, without an answer. And whatever one might say about hope, it is, fundamentally and at its core, something that bears no relation whatsoever to despair; and at the very least, it's what one should take as one's starting place. I replaced the receiver. There's nobody at home at this time. I rolled up my plans into a bundle which I placed with the other things I was carrying and I left the room, which by now had grown rather dark. The street was as empty as always. I saw my car at a distance, parked on the small square in front of the firm's headquarters. A piece of bread and some cheese with a little bit of tea and milk will tide me over till dinnertime. I brought out my cigarette pack, and then immediately put it back into my pocket. My mouth was dry and I had cramps in my stomach.



My uncle hadn't been right to strive so doggedly to demolish the image I held of my mother Sana'. It was a piece of gratuitous caricature. And perhaps Salma had wanted to convince me that what he'd said was true in order to then be in a position to achieve her ends.

The small square was secluded and empty and steeped in darkness. I noticed a long black car parked just next to mine, and it struck me that it didn't look entirely unfamiliar. I didn't recognise the make, and it was locked and had tinted windows.

I opened the door of my car and threw my things inside, and then I sat in the driver's seat and closed the door. At that moment, I heard a door slamming nearby, and I noticed someone coming out of the black car and walking calmly in my direction. I put the key in the ignition and I lowered the window at my side indifferently, and I was just about to start up the engine. He stopped next to the door and leaned over slightly until his pale sallow face was irritatingly close to mine.

It was a man in black clothes and a dark blue shirt; he had short hair, and his features were rigid and expressionless. He smiled in my face with the most perfect civility.

'*Ustaadh* Hashim Saleem?'

There was an accent in his voice whose origin I couldn't identify. I looked at him, I looked him in the eyes; his eyes were cold, black, small. I felt no inclination to answer. I was physically capable of fending off any harm he might try springing on me.

'Excuse me – is this *ustaadh* Hashim – the man himself?'

And for some obscure reason, I nodded. It only took a fraction of a second for him to pull out the revolver and point it firmly to my forehead. I saw his dead eyes fixed upon me, and I noticed one of them was quivering slightly at the lower end. There was nothing left to say, and I was – I was alone.

*Aryana, Tunis*

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