

Vandalism in Yellow

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Dedication:

To those of you who could not yet make sense of life.

Neither have I, but we try anyway.

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“Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer and the mute tongue will shout for joy. For waters will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert..”

Isiah

PART I

“I must have justice, or I will destroy myself.”

Ivan Karamazov.

1.

Lady in the Yellow Dress

'Before being a fundamental mistake, life is a failure of taste which neither death nor even poetry succeeds in correcting.'

Emil Cioran

I would say, I had three defining moments in my life. It's hard to determine whether three is too much or too little. For instance, some people spend their whole lives without having one single defining moment; others, have dozens. Let's just say, for the sake of moving on, three is an okay number.

1. The first moment was when I realized I was dissociated from my body. It wasn't as easy to have come to that conclusion, but once I sat around and really thought about it, and asked myself a very basic question, "what the hell is wrong with me?" It then clicked. I was dissociated, as I've mentioned. It's as if you're supposed to be driving a plane, but it's on autopilot. I wasn't even in the cockpit. I was sitting somewhere far behind, in economy class, watching through the porthole as my life unfolded before me. There was a space between me and my body. In a sense, my body *was* my shadow, and a shadow is always a less perfect form of its original image. The words I said, once they traveled that space between me and my flesh, came out often wrong, deformed, devoid of their intended meaning. My gestures were clumsy, asynchronous, untactful. The wires were jammed. The rivers still and muddy.

The only time I become one with myself is when I am alone—or, occasionally, rarely, when I am in the company of some distinguished people. On paper, it should feel good, to be one with oneself, but the moment I wear the suit of my body, a kind of dread settles in, a tasteless fear, a trapped scream. It's as if my body rejects me. "*It's like there's this impossible flat blackbird flapping about over my head and I can't count above three,*" one Japanese author said.

To escape that orphan dread, I sunk the pale head of my soul into tubs of phantasmal distractions; in other words, fiction. Films, novels, TV-shows, video games, music, you name it. Anything that had the ability to render me oblivious to the fact that I occupied actual space in an actual expanding universe. The downside is that your head floats so high among the clouds that you lose touch with reality. For example, I could summarize and explain Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason*, or name every character in Wes Anderson's films, but I know nothing about legal paperwork, or much worse, cars. I am a caveman in a modern world.

When push comes to shove however, I have found ways to cope with my condition. A little tweak here, a small adjustment there, and ultimately, from an outsider's view, I appear relatively normal. I managed to craft a papier-mâché image, a version conforming to how an individual

should be like in a society. However, come too close, poke your finger, and you'd make a hole

2. The second defining moment was when I realized I am not much interested in living. I do not wish to *die* per se—although if it came naturally and suddenly, I wouldn't mind. The matter at hand is that I no longer wished to participate. It's as if you were playing a video game. It was somewhat bewildering at first, but quickly you lost interest. You were bored. Why? Let's just say you couldn't figure out what the plot of the game was. You want to stop playing but you can't. And if you do nothing in the game, monsters come and attack you; but unlike the game, in real life, the pain is real.

One could make the fair argument that I should simply end my life, but I would say in defense that it is in fact not fair. First of all, to commit suicide is a drag, blood sweat and tears. There's no easy way. You're going to feel pain one way or another. And even if there's a mean through which no agony is involved, the people who love you are the ones who will suffer. Think about your parents, your family, your friends, your partner if you have one. Why should they go through the ordeal, the stigma, of having a close one commit suicide, for reasons unfathomable to them. It will haunt them for the rest of their lives. I refuse to do that to them.

One could make another fair argument that life isn't fair and that I should do what suits me best, and if that happens to be outing myself, then so be it. I mean, we easily hurt the ones we love for personal gains. We know it's wrong, and we wish we didn't hurt them, but it doesn't change the fact that what motivates us, what drives us, isn't always aligned with what we think is right. So, perhaps saying that I would not end my life because I don't wish to hurt the people I love, is a little hypocritical.

To put it in simpler terms, and to end this dull debate between myself and you, I found no reason good enough to live, nor a reason good enough to die. I float in limbo. I should perhaps make a little clarification. I am not depressed nor do I suffer from a crippling disease. I grew up in a normal household. I had a normal childhood. I go to college, I have friends, I've had a couple of romantic relationships, and I partake in the usual social humdrum. I still enjoy what everybody enjoys, a steak, a cigarette, a nice trip, a nap, carnal pleasures. I could have hysterical laughs, I could fall in love, I could shed some tears. If you play my life like a movie, you'd find no explanation to my apathy for life. For a long time, the problem had been for me not in what I had lived, but intrinsic to existence itself. I believed that rejecting life isn't the pathological state but rather the normal physiological one; but that idea too I had forsaken. I happen to change my mind a lot. Not because I am indecisive, but because I instigate debates with the *me* that holds the beliefs, and I always win debates.

It seems that the majority of people have found their call, their *raison d'être*, a meaning, a reason for which they plow and hustle everyday. This was enough in itself for me to come to the simple conclusion that the problem lies in me and not in life itself. For some reason I haven't found my call. Surely, I cannot be right and everybody is wrong. I simply accepted the fact that I am the way I am. I blame nothing and no one. Not that I would get any justice had I pointed the finger at someone.

In banter I might say that I wish I was never born in the first place, but that would be just banter. I wouldn't venture to claim that I am glad I was born either. I just don't mind being born. It's not that awful, it's not that great.

All things considered, if a magic red 'exit' button suddenly appeared, I would stare at it for a week, maybe two, maybe six months, but eventually, surely, I would press it.

Unsurprisingly, no magic red 'exit' button appeared. The world kept moving on; I alone was at a standstill.

What kept me going all these years is a rudimentary, primordial survival instinct; and a little hobby I like to do.

3. The third defining moment was when I had that dinner.

It was not your usual dinner. I mean, I had a feeling beforehand it was going to be somewhat peculiar, due to the circumstances in which I received the invitation; still, I was surprised.

My date was ‘extraordinary’. I could have called her other names like phenomenal or glamorous—and they’d still be true—but ‘extraordinary’ is the only right word I could think of; which might have, to be honest, clouded my moral judgment.

She asked me to do—again I feel compelled to use such adjectives—‘unimaginable’ things. If you ask me, they were out of line, disrespectful, shameless even. You don’t make such requests when meeting someone for the first time. But as I’ve mentioned before, my assessment and reasoning faculties were gravely befuddled, astutely biased.

She was a beauty.

She asked me to end the world.

The invitation said, ‘*El-Pesto Restaurant. 8:00 p.m., Lady in the yellow dress.*’

2.

Strange Scintillating Object Falling From The Clear Night Sky

Wonder Wall

“Memories warm you up from the inside. But they also tear you apart.”

Haruki Murakami

It was the end-of-semester college party. At the library, which has been transformed into a dance floor and its desks into minibars of cheap nuts and diluted soft drinks, students danced and giggled. Everyone enjoyed their time fully—or so it appeared to be—except for the introverts who couldn’t stand the crowds; and the hurt, self-absorbed dramaturgs who believed that their absence would be noticed and inquired upon; only, it wasn’t. At 10 p.m., the music was hushed, and all had had their share of frantic lousy dancing, including me. I sat beside my closest friend, Noah, in one corner. We sipped Selecto cola in plastic cups and nibbled on pistachios. Some left early; some excused themselves outside for a smoke; couples retreated into the shadows to delight in some intimacy; and the rest gathered around Jack who was playing the guitar. They called him Jack because he’s too white, his hair is long and blond and he plays the guitar; typical American in the Eyes of North Africans, you get it? Actually the most common American name is James, but close enough. That is the extent of people’s imagination; it doesn’t get any better.

Noah is one of the people in whose company I don’t feel dissociated.

“What a douche-bag,” I tell Noah, “he thinks he’s Curt Cobain or something.”

“You’ve never been the jealous type, so don’t act jealous now. Don’t ruin it for yourself, it’ll only make you look uncool. By the way, your socks don’t match,” he says, totally indifferent to Jack or to my opinion.

“I’m not jealous, he’s playing *Wonder-wall* for god’s sake. Do you know how easy it is to play Wonder-Wall?” I didn’t comment on the socks, somehow of each pair I have I’ve lost one sock. It always happens. One of the incidents I stopped to protest and just accepted.

“How do you know? You don’t play guitar.”

“I’m telling you, it requires zero talent. Gimme a guitar and three hours and I’ll prove it to you.”

“Okay, he’s a phony and you are better than him,” he says.

“Okay maybe six hours.”

I downed what’s left in my cup in one swig and watched with disdain the scene before me.

Throwing a furtive glance every now and then at her; only, she was so focused on him.

"Wow, you're so talented. You seem to be very passionate about music," commented a girl among the crowd around Jack, her eyes glittering. A girl whose view on life is probably narrower than a back alley in China-town, and her imagination no wider than a child's comic book; who beholds the guitar as a magical item, not understanding that it was simply a few strings vibrating at a certain frequency, making a sound that is amplified through the hollow wooden structure of the guitar. It's on those types of girls that Jack's ego feeds; and god knows there's plenty of them.

"I play music to find myself," replied Jack, very sincerely. The girl smiled, a smile so satisfying she'd probably wet herself.

"Jesus! Did you hear that? *I play music to find myself!*" I tell Noah with apparent cynicism and scorn. A cynicism that might be the end of me someday.

"So? We all do things to find ourselves, one way or another," Noah replied, maintaining the same level of indifference.

"If you have to play Wonder-wall to find yourself, believe me, there's not much there to find."

"He probably plays many different things, give the guy a break. He's an artist."

"Are you provoking me? You're provoking me right? First of all, Wonder-wall is the apex of his talent, he wouldn't miss to show it if there was more to it. Second of all, he's not an artist, at least not yet. Playing an already written music isn't a work of art. Imagine if someone repaints one of O'keeffe's paintings, say 'Ladder to the Moon', would you call him an artist? No, a painter is someone who paints something entirely novel; and a musician is someone who creates his own music. He's not an artist, he's a musician, and not a great one."

Noah glanced at me and grinned mischievously. "I'll pretend that I am not aware that all your anger towards Jack is because Stella is there among the crowd around him and who, quite fairly, seems to be pretty much enjoying herself. But I'll just humor you and believe that you are repulsed at Jack because of Jack's shallowness for which everyone seems to fall."

It was true, almost obvious. I was worked up because Stella was one of the many girls nested around him. Though I was certain--or wanted to believe so--she was purely enjoying the music and not admiring Jack's disingenuousness. Because Stella is too authentic to fall for such a fragile show, isn't she? But just seeing her gawking at him, with those eyes that once slit my soul like a razor, smiling, was making me bitter. Poor Jack. I hold nothing against the guy to be frank, he was just doing what he enjoys (which is sucking attention to survive); moreover, he truly believes his words, *I play music to find myself*, which is enough reason to hold nothing against the guy. He was probably just going through that phase of life, when he learns about the existence of the Illuminati and about Chakras and positive energy (which he now believes it is his purpose in life to spread). Listening to Allen Watts and trying to awaken his inner potential. He's probably questioning religions too, and figuring out that a lot of things don't make sense in this world, and he's feeling all *woke* about it. He's also probably reading quotes by famous philosophers too, not really understanding shit of it. And now he believes that Art and Love are the only salvation for humanity. I mean, come on, we've all been there. It's like puberty or going Emo; just a phase. That's why I am understanding, and hold nothing against Jack, nor against the girls who are admiring him for that matter. Women are attracted to mysterious guys who radiate an artistic aura, and it doesn't really matter whether they are real or fake; women believe what they want to believe, and they want to believe they're in for an adventure. You can do anything to women, except bore them.

Of course, you could also say, I was just jealous. But I was head over heels for Stella, I

couldn't help it, could I.

Stella is another person in whose company I didn't feel dissociated.

▼

"Aren't you going to tell her?" asks Noah.

I shook my head. I would approach a girl if I liked her, but Stella was a slightly more complicated matter.

"I see," he says.

A moment of silence elapsed, and the party was starting to grow sad and heavy on me. This often happens, when I am surrounded by people, having fun, conversing, laughing, I suddenly feel a pungent loneliness; and I can't do anything about it.

"I'll meet you later buddy," says Noah. He rose from his seat all of a sudden.

"Where are you going?"

He looked at me, winked, with sad eyes and a one big smile. I didn't know what to make of it until I saw him walk over to a girl sitting a little further back from Jack, good looking, healthy, not overweight. Which meant that Noah was doing something against his nature, and at odds with his heart's yearnings. Noah had a girlfriend, and not just any girl. Lin and Noah were the kind of couple people pointed at, envied, admired and gossiped about. Lin was a walking charm, beautiful and elusive. And when she met Noah, it was an instant chemistry, that their clothes almost caught fire.

Noah is a bit of an offbeat guy. He doesn't say much and he avoids any indulgence in futile arguments. But if he wills it, he'd shred his opponent to pieces. He's one year older than me, and even though he often keeps a reserved attitude, I witnessed enough to say with measured humbleness that he's a guy of great culture and ferociousness. The number of books he has read is awe provoking; and the amount of knowledge he has piled up is intimidating, even to the snobbish self proclaimed 'cultured' class of the university. He's a math genius, or was; and he holds many national titles. Everybody expected great deeds of him in the past, and at some point he was supposed to leave abroad on a scholarship to study math in a prestigious European university; but for some reason, he declined it days before boarding the plane. Instead, he stayed here. And for the people who don't truly know him, he appears to be a very mediocre guy. He knows it, and I know that deep down, he's very bitter about it. Lost glory is acid to the heart.

That is why, when I saw Noah approach a random girl, I was surprised. It was hard to think that he'd ever cheat on Lin. Though it is not very strange for guys *in love* to commit certain infidelities, but Noah wasn't the type. It was even more unlikely that they'd broken up.

▼

The absence of Noah's company was my cue to leave the party. And besides, watching Stella mesmerized by Jack wasn't that much fun anyway. I stood up, dusted the pistachio's crumbs off my shirt, threw the empty plastic cup in the trash can and walked outside to the paved terrace. I lit a cigarette and leaned against the rail. The breeze was gentle and cool, and Jack's sordid

guitar sounds, the dissonant chords and the distant chatter added a strangely soothing background noise. I stared aimlessly to the distance; what better refuge from a party than losing one's gaze in the night sky? I'd say nothing, unless your crush walks out and joins you, and you kiss under the twinkling stars; however that fell deeply in the realm of the impossible.

I'd done my share of social interactions for the day; an activity that, if exceeded a certain limit, would begin to drain me and grow heavy on my soul; and this party had exhausted me enough. However I judged it wiser and more diplomatic that I blended in, and maintained a fairly wide circle of connections and friends. Make less enemies, more allies. That was my Motto. And after three years of college I'd gained a considerable amount of popularity; though, of course, it was all but an act. If I'd behaved naturally I would have probably made more enemies than friends, because all this social humdrum bored me to death, even stifled me at times. I wouldn't be surprised if some people said behind my back, "he's a little weird, that guy, isn't he?" I guess I could come off as a little odd, but not creepy. Actually if they got to know me, they'd find out that I was a nice type; the only thing is, I am not interested in knowing them. I'd prefer my own company over a thousand Jacks, and before my pretentious defective eyes: almost everyone was a Jack. And I have a sever allergy to Jack's ego, Jack's philosophy and hollow morals, and Jack's lack of imagination.

But of course, not everybody was Jack. Generalization is the sign of the lesser mind. It seems that humanity keeps a minimum degree of integrity in the form of a minority of human beings. They do not play by the rules of the masses; they do not conform; they do not water it down; they do not lie to your face; but instead, they live by their own ideals and codes, unapologetically, and they do not lack imagination. Noah, my friend, is one of them. And so is Stella; or was. Perhaps I should say that I do not consider myself belonging to any of the two previously mentioned groups; I do not have the right nor the aptitude to judge myself. Plus, I am everything I make fun of and despise, that's why I am oftentimes angry with myself.

▼

Stella suddenly walks out to the terrace. She doesn't see me at first, instead, she moves her raven hair from one shoulder to another, and looks to the distance; a very serene look on her face. I liked her hair a lot, it is night woven into strings. Its fragrance used to invade my nostrils when I held her in my arms. I used to run my fingers through its dense depths during idle afternoons spent watching one movie after another; but now I can no more. She turns around and notices me, smiles, waves, and joins me.

"Hey Razi," she says, a tone between voice and whisper.

My dad named me Razi after the great Muslim philosopher and scholar Al-Razi. He wished I'd become something like him one day, that I'd carry his will through his name, but my father didn't account for two things. First, in Bone, the psychiatric hospital was also named after Al-Razi, as a result, schizophrenic people, or, in more eloquent words, crazy people, were referred to as 'Razi', as in "*he's crazy man, I swear, he's Razi.*" Second, if my father had done more research, he'd have found out that Al-Razi is regarded as a heretic by *El-uma*, that his words are blasphemy and that he'll roast in hell. I don't mind it though, it is my name after all.

"Hey you," I replied.

"What are you doing out here all by yourself?"

"Hoping that you'd notice my absence and come look for me," I half kidded. She chuckled. "I'm out for a smoke, though I would have loved to keep listening to Jack on the guitar, lovely

sound,” I added, half kidding again.

“Yeah he plays fine,” She said nonchalantly, “I don’t like crowded places, at least not for very long, so I escaped.” I took a drag and nodded. I knew she wasn’t too comfortable among the crowds, that was partly why we got along very well in the past; we weren’t especially antisocial, but we preferred calm empty places, the kind of places old people liked. In that matter, we enjoyed being senile together.

“You still write?” she asked.

“Yeah a little, nothing substantial.” That was true. I wrote very little, nothing substantial. Not that I am supposed to write much.

“Substantial is overrated.” She leaned on the rail beside me and watched the same darkness as I.

“How about you? Still making your black and white photos?”

“I don’t remember ever telling you that?” she said as she looked at me funny. It’s oftentimes true that only people who lack any talent go to photography, ‘*buy a Canon camera, buy a talent*’. But it’s different with Stella. She had Horus’s eye. She sees what most people can’t, and she captures it. I’m not saying that because I am in love with her, for instance, she’s terrible at painting, at writing poetry, at cooking too. But you’d know what I am talking about if you saw any of her photos.

“Yeah I still take those,” she said. “In fact, I want to take a picture of you right now, like this, in this position, smoking and alone.”

“But I am not alone, I am with you,” I protested.

“Act as if you are, forget about me.”

That’s what I’ve been trying to do for the past couple of months, and I’m failing drastically, I wanted to tell her. She pulled out her Iphone, adjusted her position, and took a snap of me, just one. She fiddled with the colors on the screen and in a matter of seconds there it was, my photo, in black and white. When I looked at it, I saw a shade of me I thought I had lost forever. I saw the *me* that I keep hidden from the world, the *me* that I wish someone would dig out and kiss and slaps into existence; and she did it in a matter of seconds.

“Impressive,” I commented.

“You like it?”

“I do like it.”

“You look kinda sexy from this angle,” she went.

“Glad I have at least one sexy angle,” I went, and she chuckled.

“How about I take a picture of you instead.” I snapped the phone from her hands and flashed the light on her face. The wind blew—Click—I contemplated the picture for a short while before she snatched back her phone from my fingers. In the picture she looked like someone who’s about to say no when they meant yes, in other words, irresistibly charming. The wind messed her hair and revealed the scar on her forehead. A picture that revealed a scar, I’d say damn poetic.

“You look like a rock star who’s about to set the stage on fire,” I said.

She smiled, averted her gaze. I was kind of cheating. I knew how much she adored rock’n’roll and rock stars.

“I’ll keep it, for your sake,” she said. “It’s the first time you take a picture of me so.. why

not.” She once told me that what photographers love more than taking pictures is being photographed themselves. She’d forgotten about all the pictures I’d taken of her, too.

“Aren’t you going to ask me about the scar? Most people do when they see it for the first time,” she asked as she stuffed her hands in her jacket pockets. I reached my hand and was about to brush the scar with the tip of my fingers, but stopped midway. I almost forgot that I was no longer allowed to touch her so casually. Habits die hard.

“It’s okay, you can touch it if you want,” she said as she grabbed my hand and drew it closer to her forehead. I lightly brushed off the scar with my fingers, and then pulled back my hand. Touching her brings back unwanted memories; unwanted because memories summon feelings, and feelings summon pain, and I am one of those people who doesn’t enjoy pain that much.

“What about the scar?” I asked, feigning ignorance.

“Someone threw a rock, and it knocked me out. Probably some kids playing around, though they never found the culprit. I was sent off to the hospital and remained unconscious for about 37 hours, the doctors said. This scar is the only vestige of that accident, no lasting damages.”

“There was damage actually. You’re seeing me, and I don’t exist. You’ve gone crazy,” I half kidded again, there was lasting damage.

She kicked me in the tibia, I winced and she said that I was real enough for her.

“That scare is a gain though, considering,” I said.

“Scars look better on men, not women. High heels look better on women, not men. There’s a difference.”

“So if I wore high heels, we’d either be a terrible mismatch, or one hell of a pair,” She smiled. “Let’s try that some day, and stand before a mirror, then we’ll see,” she said.

I lit another cigarette.

“What about you? Are you scarred? Physically speaking,” she asked.

“Nope, only emotionally.”

“Oh..”

“I’m joking. Want to see something cool?”

She nodded. I bundled the strands of hair falling down on my right ear and I showed her my half earlobe. The other half is missing, someone cut it. Vendetta, I think.

“Dear! What happened to your ear?!”

“An accident.”

“That’s why you keep your hair long,” she said, looking appalled. “It is actually kinda cool,” she added.

“No it isn’t.”

“Nah, it isn’t.” And we laughed it out.

“Yeah, people always have a weird reaction when they see it. I hide to spare everyone and myself some uneasiness. The world could use less uneasiness.”

“Good call. Though I already gotten used to it. It looks horrible, but not so bad,” she teased.

Who stole the memories?

It happened several months ago, on an autumn night during which we attended a jazz concert, a tribute to Chet Baker by a french trio who visited town, Stella and I. It was a good night. We talked about jazz and about Chet Baker, how he was beaten up and lost his teeth and couldn't play the trumpet anymore. We also sneaked a few kisses in between sessions when people clapped and the theater went dark. The concert over, we bid our friends good bye and strolled home. On the way back, we made a stop at the beach and laid down on the cold sands, steaming cups of tea in our hands. The sea tingled under a thin winter moon. Ships and stars blinked in the distance. "Do you know about the Hedgehog Dilemma?" she asked, her voice hushed. "No," I said. "It's about two hedgehogs on a cold winter day, they try to snuggle close to one another to stay warm, but each time they touch, they can't help but hurt each other with their sharp spines. They seek warmth, but it is inevitable; they hurt each other if they get too close," she said. "You mean that's the human condition?" "Yeah, kind of" she answered. "If I get too close to you," she went on, "and lean against you like this, and you put your arm around me like this, we are bound to hurt each other. One way or another." "I guess it's inevitable," I said. "What do you think we should do about it?" she asked, and I said I don't really know. "If we go separate ways some day, it wouldn't hurt like mad, but it would be a dull pain that we'll carry within for the rest of our lives," she said. I looked up at the night sky and glimpsed a scintillating object. At first I couldn't tell if it was a star or something else, but a short moment after, I realized it was an object falling down from the clear sky. I was confused, so I kept staring at it, and before I knew it, it hit Stella right in the forehead.

An image of a man in a Top-hat came to mind, then disappeared.

I took her to the hospital, and as she explained, she remained unconscious for 37 hours straight. The object that fell from the sky was a half spherical paperweight, made of clear glass, the size of the palm of my hand. A greenish matter beautifully swirled inside, a slow whirlpool that spun towards a center; one couldn't tell if it was really spinning or if it's just an optical illusion. The more you looked the less certain you became.

Of course I couldn't tell the doctors or the authorities that a paperweight fell from the clear sky and knocked her down. Instead I just mentioned that a few kids threw rocks at us and fled, one of the rocks hit her on the head before we could make it out of there.

When Stella woke up, she experienced a momentary memory loss. Luckily, she regained all of her memories a few hours later. However, for reasons I will later clarify, not everything. A few pages were missing, stolen. She completely forgot about me, about us and the time we spent together. It was the first case of selective memory loss I've heard of.

Now she just remembers me as a comrade from college, a friend but not that close of a friend, a friend of a friend, so to speak. Fortunately, not many people were aware that we were a couple, and to the very few who knew, I just explained that we broke up, and that no one should mention to her the notion of me or us. I thought about it a lot, telling her: "hey, you forgot about me but I am your boyfriend." But I've come to the rational coward conclusion that it was weird. So I preferred to just let it be for a while and remain that distant friend of hers.

Stella and I met in peculiar circumstances, and I don't think we would have ever been together if not for those circumstances. Also I don't believe there's any chance we'd find ourselves in similar conditions ever again. It came naturally, that's why it was good, that's why it

worked—Because even when things went downhill, we were able to believe that it was fate that got us together after all; a practical lie, or maybe it was true. Now I don't know if I should go after her heart again, or just leave it to fate, so to speak.

I still remember though, everything, that's why it is a little bit hard for me; a little too much sometimes, most of the times. I could ask her out again, try to win her over again, but I thought against it. Perhaps someday, she'd suddenly remember, and come back to me. And perhaps this will never happen. Who knows really, and who's to decide.

▼

"I think I'm kinda drawn to Jack, there's something about him," she said. I took the last drag of the cigarette and threw the butt off in the distance. I watched the glowing embers as they got swallowed by the darkness, and remained silent for a while.

"Perhaps he just looks like a rock star, with the guitar and stuff," I said finally.

"Yeah, maybe it's that."

"Real rock stars are poetic and deep, interesting too, a little dangerous. Jack is none of that. The only thing he has in common with a rock star is playing the guitar, and he doesn't even play that good, neither does he play the electric guitar."

"Hey! don't spoil him for me," she said, punching me in the shoulder.

"The truth is often disappointing," I half teased.

"The truth is often disappointing, and things from a distance look more beautiful," she said, then she squinted, looking a bit confused. "Someone used to tell me that, I forgot who."

We shared a moment of silence for a while, then she looked at her watch. "I better get going, it's getting late."

"Okay."

"Hey, why don't you show me some of what you wrote the next time we meet."

"Maybe.. maybe I will. You show me your photos too."

"Great, ciao!"

"Hey!" I shouted, she turned around halfway. "Are you still going for Jack?"

"I don't know. Probably." She smiled, waved, and left.

"He's a douche-bag!" I yelled as she was about to enter the hall, she turned back for a fleeting second, still smiling, said, "Your socks don't match by the way."

I looked down, flustered, smiled. What the hell am I doing.

3.

Mr. Dandy's Pop Quiz

Green Eyes and Wooden Chairs

"If truth is what you seek, then the examined life will only take you on a long ride to the limits of solitude and leave you on the side of the road with your truth and nothing else"

Thomas Ligotti

There was a sudden blackout in the neighborhood as I walked home in the middle of the night from that party. A mellow quiet darkness flooded the streets without warning or notice. I halted, looked up at the sky, looking for bonus stars, stars that come out of their bashfulness only during blackouts, but nothing greeted my field of vision but hazy pink clouds. Not even a moon. I lit a cigarette and walked ahead.

Around the corner, one street light seemed to have escaped the murky fate, as if powered by imagination, it stood lit alone, its mercury lamp blinking a faint orange hue, shedding light on a perfect circle on the ground; a dozen moths flew frantically around; as if performing a spiritual rite. It was on my way home, so I walked in its direction, and as I passed it, I noticed a black cat with wide green eyes resting beside the street light. We stared at one another, me and the cat, and only after I was further ahead that it twitched in my mind: it was the first time ever that a cat stared straight into my eyes. I looked back but the cat had disappeared.

I tried not to think of Stella being with Jack. Not to imagine her in his arms, or any other man's arms for that matter. I was aware that I shouldn't entertain such ideas, it was wrong; no, it was lethal, poisonous and sickening. But being aware of the danger didn't stop me from dwelling upon it. I couldn't help but feel that she'd be sullied, besmirched and robbed of something very precious if any man other than me touched her. Picturing it in my mind was jamming the smooth gears of my soul. However the more I tried not to think about it, the more it expanded and throbbed in my head. The thing is, there was no other distraction.

The street was unusually long, dark, and quiet. After a while, it finally dawned at me that I might've taken a wrong turn. It was dark alright, but to get lost in my own town, that's new. I looked back and forth but I glimpsed nothing that could hint to my whereabouts, so I just kept walking ahead, until another orange street light appeared around the corner; the power was still not on. I strode in its direction, and as I passed it, I saw another black cat, green eyed, and it stared at me long and hard. My heart fluttered at the realization that it might be the same street light, the same cat. I froze in my spot, looked back and in every direction; had I been here before? But only then did I notice how thick and total the darkness was, how deserted the place and how unnatural was the sky's color. The cat had disappeared again, and the shadow of panic

gently caressed my heart. I pulled out my phone to check the clock but it showed me a blank screen, __: __, there was no reception either.

“Stop acting all surprised now, you’ve obviously leapt into another realm,” said a voice, manly but unearthly, from the shadows. Startled, I stared in its direction, and a man slowly emerged before me, wearing a full burgundy tuxedo and a burgundy bowler hat; only, it wasn’t a man, but a black cat, or a cat-man. His eyes wide and green, as if all the forests in the world melted into them.

“Hi, you can call me Mr. Dandy, enchanté, oh please,” he said as he stretched his arm for a handshake. I stood perplexed for a while, but eventually shook his hand back.

“Hi, pleased to meet you, I am Razi,” I responded, still trying to grasp the situation at hand.

“I know.”

“You know?”

“Yes, I might know some stuff I am not supposed to know. Actually I know a lot of stuff and if you want an example so we could get it over with, I know that your left earlobe was cut in the name of some undeserved Vendetta.” And he mentioned some names.

I guess somewhere deep in my mind all the potential possibilities were being calculated in a futile but necessary attempt to clarify this happening. An attempt to find a coherent context in which the reality I was witnessing coexisted with the laws of nature I thought I knew very well—and with a sane mind, I should add. The calculations were a failure, but I guess my mind didn’t want to fling the results at me right away, in order not to rack panic and havoc upon me—upon itself.

“Wait.. how is it obvious that I leapt into another realm?” I protested.

“I mean, you’ve been walking around the same place, and you can’t get out of here unless I wish it so. You can try and walk out if you want, I’ll be waiting here.”

“Who are you and what is this place?”

“I am Mr. Dandy. And this is another realm,” he repeated. I kept looking at him, half smitten.

“Dear god! It’s a joke, relax! Oh please,” he burst out.

“So..?”

“This place is.. how to explain this in simple ways that a simpleton such as yourself could understand. Think of this as a back street that no one goes to anymore and that everybody forgot it’s there. It existed before the world came into being, and it’ll keep on existing forever.”

A simpleton?

“Before the world came into being?”

“You know: ‘*The heavens and the earth were joined together as one unit, before We clove them asunder.*’ Or, ‘*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and god said, let there be light.*’ So, you get the general idea: before the heavens and earth were *one unit*, or before the *beginning*, or before the *Big Bang*. Whichever version helps you sleep at night.”

“I am going to suppose, for convenience’s sake, that what you’re saying is true. So, who are you and why are we meeting?” I said, and I thought of how cool and calm did I just sound, under such circumstances.

“Who am I? That one is a little trickier,” he said as he took the bowler hat off his head, held it in his hands, dusted it off—though it looked pretty clean to me—and then gazed at it as if

watching the universe unfold. “Think of the wildest thing you can imagine, multiply it by infinity and take it to the depth of forever, and you will still have barely a glimpse of who I am,” He said finally, haughtiness in his voice. “But it doesn’t really matter, I am but a messenger.”

“I guess I am a simpleton after all. So you’re a messenger? What’s your message?”

“Yes,” he said, looking suddenly serious. The quietness weighed oceans and the wind held its breath. He retreated into the darkness again and came back holding two chairs. Simple wooden chairs that might’ve existed only in a strict girls-only school full of lesbians. He took a seat and placed the other facing him and gestured for me to join him. I did. He crossed his legs, put a cigarette between his cat lips and lit it with a match; the fire sparkled in a glowing purple.

“I’m a foreigner, as you’ve probably guessed,” he began. Foreigner is putting it rather simply, I thought. “I might sound pompous about my knowledge, but when it comes to the things that really matter, I am but an ignorant. Now we might not, or might never, agree on the things that *really matter*, per se, but for convenience’s sake, oh please, let’s call them *Truth*. I have been to many places, zillions and googols, more than you could ever grasp or even begin to imagine. And each time I travel to one place, world, or existence, I try to collect *its Truth*. That’s what I do: I travel, and seek Truths.”

“You must have a lot of truths in your bashed,” I said.

“I do. At first you sink in confusion, I must admit, but then you start to draw a pattern. Dot. Dot. Dot. And it’s a line.”

“Let me guess, you came here to collect another *Dot*? ”

“Exactly. That is the deal my friend. Tell me the truth about your world, and you will be rewarded,” he said as he widely opened his arms in a majestic gesture.

“What kind of rewards are we talking about?” I asked

“You’ll soon find out, by the end of this amusing chitchat.”

“I’m sorry to break it to you, Mr. Dandy—if that’s your real name—but you’ve come to the wrong person. I suggest you wait here in the darkness for someone else to pass by. Luckily for you, truth is something we’ve got in abundance here. Just ask, and people will gladly shower you with their truths, serve it on platters of silver. No need to grant any rewards for it.”

Mr. Dandy leaned forward and gazed deep into my eyes, then fell back into his seat and enjoyed a deep drag of his cigarette, then smiled. The tip of the cigarette crackled dryly as its lavender smoke formed a tracery in the orange light.

“Too late,” he said. “It might sound stupid, but I’ve got only once chance. I’m afraid I have to take yours. It’s up to me to judge if it is topaz or trash, and believe me, I’ve honed a pretty sharp sense of judgment.”

“What a waste of chance, but suit yourself. If it’s the case, let me boil it down for you. There are roughly 4200 belief systems in this world, or religions. And each religion has its many sub-religions, and each claims they own The Truth. But if I were to narrow it down, I’d say some believe there’s a God up there; others believe there are not one but many Gods; others believe we’re all Gods. Some believe that we were created by super intelligent aliens; others believe it was all hazardous nature and there’s no will behind it all.”

“Go on,” he said.

“As to *why* we exist and what is our purpose in this damn beautiful life and so on, the list is endless and whether it makes sense or not, I am no judge. But here the major headlines: We exist to worship God. We exist to escape our karmic path by doing good. We exist to grow mentally

and spiritually. We exist to experience pleasure. We exist to love one another. We exist because of an accident and nothing has any meaning. So.. I don't know about the fruits of your previous perils, but this world does not have *a Truth*. Unless you think of course that Truth is relative, which it might be, then you might as well accept everything."

"I see, but oh please, what about *your Truth*?"

"My truth, well.. oof, tough question. I didn't expect that. Let's say I believe there's a God up there. I can't prove it but it makes my life easier to believe so. I'm a pragmatic in that matter—a simpleton, as you've mentioned earlier. He created us, and thus ends my truth. What I am doing here? what's my life's purpose and all that important jazz? I have no concrete idea. I just go about my day avoiding pain and seeking as much pleasure as I could, I guess. I would have roamed free to googols of places like you if I could, looking for the truth. But I can't. I don't have a burgundy tuxedo."

He leaned in closer again, stared hard at me with those green eyes, so hard my soul blushed, he backed off, and smiled, again.

"You must be very upset at those who claim to have the truth. Judging from the tone of your voice," he said after he listened attentively. He was a good listener. He made me feel that what I had to say was the most important thing he'd ever going to hear in his entire existence.

"Hell I am. And you know what, the *Truth* in this world doesn't need to be real or provable. People don't want that, don't care about that. They only accept the truth they want. The one version that makes them feel important and gives their lives meaning and reduces its agony. Also, they adopt the truth their tribe, group, party, or country adopts. Because they don't want to be at odds with one another, they don't want to be excluded nor ridiculed nor to be the misfits; they don't want to make enemies, they can't afford it. They want to fit in, to belong, to blend. They want someone to pat them on the shoulder and tell them how right they are and how stupid the rest of the world is. They kiss each other's asses, lick each other's wounds. In other words, they're addicted to validation, approval, and worth. So, that is my truth. It could also be wrong. It could also be just the one version of truth that gives my life validation, and makes me feel more intelligent than the rest. So yeah, sorry I couldn't give you what you're looking for." After I was done, I realized I might've sounded angrier than I actually am.

"I see. You, my friend, have passed a very important test."

"What test?"

He fumbled into his pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. Inside, was an address and a date.

▼

"Say," I asked him before leaving, "do you perhaps know a guy with a top-hat?"

"Only one guy comes to mind, and you don't want to meet him. Why do you ask?"

"Never mind," I said. Something is cooking, I thought.

4.

Underground Hustle

Joy Juices

“The only way to deal with the absurdity of existence is to laugh at it.”

Joseph Heller

I discovered at a young age what I consider to be the most valuable information I've ever stumbled upon, and that is '*the secret of happiness*'. Big words I know. In fact, it was just a little hack to keep me occupied, a healthy distraction that had an intrinsic promise of greater deeds. Well, it's not exactly a secret. It is something well known in the psychological and philosophical communities. It is the mechanism underlying the ultimate illusion; it goes something like this: happiness is a reward system. Each step you take closer to your goal, your brain squeezes juices of happiness in your blood. Hormones, in other words. Happiness, in its most raw forms, is hormones, produced by the brain. Now don't get me wrong, I am not reducing the transcendent meaning of happiness into atoms and biochemical reactions, but that biochemical aspect of happiness is as far as our understanding goes. That being said, I concluded that happiness is impossible without a goal in mind. The system won't be up and running if you are drifting aimlessly into existence, without destination or motive. A purpose, an aim, is an imperative. I guess it's the old saying, '*It's not about the destination, it's about the journey*' slightly better explained.

Of course at that age, I didn't have any real dream or goal in mind—I still don't—but there was something I liked to do, and that was writing. Some people like football, some like fashion, others like music or painting; I like making up stories. Writing is just another hobby. I am saying this because some take it for an extraordinary feat, as if they're performing magic or transmuting complex human emotions and imagination—something they believe they're the only ones to possess—into words and stories, like alchemists. Well, some writers *are* alchemists and magicians. But for most, it is just an act of scribbling down what one feels about the world. In other words, almost everyone can do it. Needless to say, almost everyone sucks at it. Being aware of all this, I never took myself for a serious writer. I knew that writing, like any other art, needs a lot of craft, and a lot of talent. Craft can be obtained through hard work and the constant polishing and chiseling of skills, whereas talent is a matter of the gods. If you don't have it, nothing can be done about it. Don't curse the heavens for it—or do it if it makes you feel better; I've done it myself a couple of times, nothing changed anyway.

However, the thing is, even if you're not a serious writer; even if you don't have a deadline for delivering a manuscript to your editor; writing has an intrinsic value in itself. Even if you just sit alone in your room facing the window, punching the keys of your laptop; writing down one

line after another; smoking one cigarette after another, and having a sandwich or a soda in between cups of black strong coffee. Even if you end up with nothing more than a raw incomprehensible short story or an anthology about the human condition: you'd still feel good about it—Of course you'd hate what you wrote after reading it, but still, there's something satisfying about it. That's the thing about writing. Somehow, your brain squeezes those juices of happiness anyway. Your brain loves it when you make it spill down all the jumble and mumble it carries within into words and stories. And somehow, even if you don't truly have a real goal in your mind, writing makes you take a step closer to something anyway, however ambiguous and nebulous that is. You get better each time; you push the boundaries of your own mind after each work; you learn more about writing and about yourself every time you finish something substantial. And even if no one really says it out loud: everyone who writes aspires to becoming a writer at some point during their life time, they're just too embarrassed to say it—Some though declare that they're writers even before they even wrote anything, different levels of delusion—including me. I am embarrassed and realistic—at least about my own aptitudes.

That hobby suited me well, because it could take one a decade, maybe two or three to become a writer worth a Dinar. That way, I was never disappointed. Whatever fruit my endeavor may bear, it will bear it years from now. I could always say, 'I'll get there, another ten years and I'll get there.' That way, my system is always up and running. The trick is that you need to be realistic about it, maybe a little pessimistic too. I wasn't in a hurry. Time is something I had in abundance. I needed to delay the destination, to perpetuate the motion, to drag out the occupation.

Writing was my day to day subway labor to hustle a lick of happiness-juice from my brain. That's how I kept a sane mind. I wrote, and it made me feel good, as simple as that. In a nutshell, that is happiness: pick up a destination, work towards it, and you'll feel great—I did just sound like one of those motivational speakers that yell at you some very obvious facts, but I wasn't intending to motivate you, just stating basic science—As far as I know, this works for everyone, everyone normal; except for people with schizophrenia, depressed people, and people in love. We cannot consider people *in love* to be functioning at a normal cognitive level. They become delusional, blind and stupid. Their whole world is reduced to one person only. If they're in good terms with their beloved, they're the happiest. If they're not, they're drowning in thick black waters. So if you're in love, my friend, just never mind about what I've just said. Your happiness lies in the hands of your beloved. You feel in control yet?

There's something else I should add to the whole 'Secret of Happiness thing', and that is 'friends'. Nothing about life really matters if you don't share it with someone with whom you've woven real bonds. It could be just one person, could be many. It could be a lover or a friend, a brother, a mentor; just someone with whom you witness and feel life as it unravels before you—sometimes *for* you. Someone who'd remember the same vibrant memories with the same excitement and joy, or with the same sorrow and grief. Someone who enjoys your company as much as you enjoy theirs; who cares about you as much as you care about them. The purest of human relationships.

In Quantum mechanics there's this experiment, the double slit experiment. It stipulates that if you don't observe the particle (an electron for example), if you don't examine it, the particle will become a wave, a ghost. It no longer sustains its form. It'll turn weightless, shapeless, and lose all its properties as a particle. If you observe it once again, if you pay attention to it, it'll once again turn into its original form: a particle. It regains its shape, weight and existence. The human life is something like that. If you're alone, and no one is sharing your life, if no one is recording it in their memories, your life becomes shapeless, hollow, unsubstantial. It matters less if you achieve the greatest of feats or do nothing at all.

Loneliness kills. That's why, *friends* are something you should consider acquiring. If you've

got good ones, I think it's wiser to keep them, even if it's one or two and not one hundred or two thousand, for nothing but your own sake.

Ever since the Stella incident, in which she lost her memories of me, I found myself writing more. The half spherical paperweight with the swirling green matter inside always laid on my desk, and the more I stared at it, the more I wrote. I didn't know if it was the loneliness, or if the paperweight that fell from the clear sky had some mystical powers, either way, I didn't mind it.

5.

She Who'll End The World

Buddha's First Noble Truth: Life is Suffering.

"I offer my salutations to Shiva. She is the light that shines in the hearts of all beings, and the destroyer of all sorrows and sufferings."

Pushpadanta

Inside the hotel I walked. Firm steps. Eyes on the elevator, I strode directly towards it. The luxurious couches in the dim lighted lobby were empty, and no one used the grand piano at the center. The young man at the reception desk, a chubby type, glanced at me and was about to ask me something, a dull reflex of his job, if I needed any help or what business did I have at that hour of the night. But he gave up midway and resumed whatever innocuous pursuit he was doing. It's a harmless trick I learned. Whenever I entered an establishment and wished to avoid any confrontation or mindless questioning, I would behave as if I were a hundred percent certain that I knew what I was doing there and where I was going. That I had a specific destination in mind—even if that happens to be an elevator—and that I did not expect in any way to be bothered or interrupted. Even if it wasn't always true, my body language would exude that certainty, and trust me, people would pick up on it, and they'd always leave me alone. They trust what they see—that I didn't want to be bothered—more than they trust their own instructions. People are cowards by nature, and always assume other people knew better than them. However, I must say, all of that was unnecessary. If the young man would have stopped me and asked me where I was heading, I would've just answer that I was heading up to *El Pesto*, the Italian restaurant on the 19th floor. I was just not in mood to answer a receptionist; my mind was elsewhere.

Once inside the elevator, I pressed the 19th floor button, a violet ring lit up around it. Gates closed, elevator music started to play, the most famous elevator music ever created, '*Waves*' by Carlos Jobim. After a while waiting for the elevator to lift off, I realized that it had already started its ascent a moment ago. It was strange how I didn't feel the slightest pull of gravity. The numbers changed on the screen alright, but my senses told me I was still. I saluted the top notch technology built into the elevator. I had always appreciated perfection. However, the ascent was too silent, too perfect it was nerve-racking. If I were rising, I needed to *feel* I was rising, getting further from the ground, further from everything; it was just unnatural. My mind knew I was moving up, but my body didn't. The elevator created a dissonance in my being. To cope with it, I had to imagine the elevator was indeed in its place, static, and instead, it was the whole building that was going down, sinking into the earth. Not a funny idea. To distract my mind from the stationary, slash, moving sensation, I pulled out the scrap of paper from my pristine ironed cotton trousers' pocket. A paper given to me by Mr. Dandy, On which those words were written: *El-Pesto Restaurant. 8:00 p.m., Lady in the yellow dress.*

No doubt, it was a rendezvous. Mind you, not a date, but a rendezvous. A meeting of some sort. Not romantic, neither professional in nature. Why was I meeting this *lady in the yellow dress*? I could only guess. I took a quick glance at my image in the elevator mirror to check that my looks were in order; salmon polo shirt, tortilla cotton pants, and loafers. Pretty casual, with a dash of formality. With a wet ‘clink’ the elevator doors opened and I walked out and strode along a narrow darkened corridor until I reached the restaurant’s doors.

▼

She was by no means hard to spot. It only took me a quick sweep of the place, a few steps in, and in a matter of seconds, our eyes locked, and she smiled at me. I made my way up to her table, sat down, and studied her for a few long seconds. First thing first, she was a genuine beauty, a real babe. Not the kind of women about whom one could say, ‘she was somewhat ordinary but for some set of eyes or from a certain angle she appeared very charming’; no. She was conventionally, unanimously, beautiful. Short dark hair, wide ebony eyes, lovely nose, full lips and clear jaw lines. What her countenance exuded was not innocence but a sly mysterious magnitude. A feint within a feint within a feint. Needless to say, the rest of her body was faultless, superb, excellent. She was a living reverie. The mere sight of her sparked an almost infinite range of fantasy, from vulgar to divine. Despite trying to describe her in the most objective way, this one is the only that would do her justice.

Funny. In some way, she resembled the elevator. She was so beautiful it was disconcerting. I would’ve felt overwhelmed had she been a little less charming, maybe even feel tackled and blinded by her sparkle. But something about her perfect form made me feel out of balance, as if I were constantly about to sneeze but never come to actually do it.

One thing I should mention, she was clearly much older than me. And I wondered what a lady who appeared to be in her late thirties or her forties would want from a twenty-three year old guy.

“Right on time,” she said, “like a Swiss watch.”

“I don’t like it when people make me wait, that’s why I make no one wait for me.”

“Healthy mind set, but making people wait a little while is harmless teasing. Makes you appear less eager, more attractive.”

“And yet, you were here earlier than I,” I said.

“The reason I am here may differ a little from that of a person trying to impress,” she said with a sly smile while fixing her eyes on me. Her voice matched her looks, like socks matching a necktie. She spoke neither too fast nor too slow. There was a hidden music to the way her words followed one another, almost hypnotizing. The waiter came and offered us the menu, plus a green olive paste and mini Italian bread.

“May I know to what do I owe this pleasurable meeting?” I asked.

She sighed, a soft, soundless, continuous sigh. Only the elegant elevation of her chest suggested the gesture. She planted her elbows on the table and drew her face near. She looked me deep in the eyes, those enchanting lustrous eyes, as if trying to spell me, and said, “There’s no easier way to put it. You and I are going to *end the world*. Well, technically, you are. My role is merely to convince you to, and to provide the tools.”

“Okay.. Not what I expected but, you mean in a metaphorical way? Or.. I feel like I’m

missing something.”

“No dear, we are going to end the concrete, tangible, real world. Humanity as we know it.”

My lips formed what resembled a disbelieving smile, the kind one gives right before one says, “*You’re joking right?*” But the muscles of my lips trembled and waned midway; I never came to complete that smile. Something about her lulling, low tone of voice, her subtle manner, the way she articulated every word, and countless other minutiae that my alertness couldn’t pick out but registered very deep in my subconsciousness, suggested very strongly that she was not, indeed, kidding.

The waiter came for our orders. She had a Caesar salad, Beef Brasato, and Tiramisu for dessert. I had a Tonno Alla Norma, grilled fish, and Vanilla Panna Cotta for dessert. A mellow jazz album, by John Coltrane, played in the background.

“If you want to end the world, why don’t you do it yourself,” I said finally, “Why do you need me?”

“For reasons that I might or might not explain later, I am forbidden to. And as to why *You* specifically, let’s just say that you were selected out of an intricate web of causality and coincidences. There’s Nothing inherently special about you.”

“I have a lot of questions, and if we’re having this discussion, they need to be answered. Who are you? Why do you want to end the world? How are you going to convince me? And what’s in it for me?”

“It’s amusing how you want to benefit something for yourself while attempting to end your own world,” she said, a cunning grin on her lips.

“I don’t do charity. Let’s start with the first question. Who are you?” I asked, straining not to give in to her whims and desires.

“Darling, truly and candidly, that is a complicated question to answer. But for starters, I can tell what I am *not*.” Ah, another person who believes they’re too complicated and mysterious to define, I thought. Fine, let’s play along.

“I am certain that any seemingly complicated answer can be understood if explained properly,” I added. There are no stupid questions, only stupid answers, after all.

“Fair enough,” she started as she dipped a piece of bread into the olive paste. “To begin with, I am not a woman. Neither am I a man. I have the shape and form of a human being, so let’s say I am somewhat human; for now.”

“You are neither a man nor a woman? You mean you define as asexual?”

“Didn’t I say it is a bit complicated? I have taken this form for the sole purpose of meeting you. I’ve chosen a person of the opposite sex, and as you have probably noticed, the form I’ve taken is attractive, charming. Maybe I overdid it a little, burned the candle at both ends. I didn’t know your exact type of woman, so I had to go all out. Naturally, the form I’ve taken appears to be older than your current self. Had I been any younger, strong urges of trying to seduce me tonight, to fancy me in a romantic way, might intrude on you, thus getting in the way of our communication; in the way of my purpose. I am just old enough to be ravished by you, and at the same time, you’ll feel compelled to revere me. You’d listen to every word I say with four ears. And even if my arguments wouldn’t make so much sense, you’d accept them anyway. Men are highly receptive to older women they find attractive.”

I cleared my throat, then said, “But doesn’t telling me this nullifies the desirable effect? And besides, that doesn’t answer my question. Who are you? Or what are you?”

"It doesn't, beauty is independent from every context. Your eyes cannot be biased as long as they see what they see."

True, very true, I thought. She is indeed bewildering.

"Do you believe in God?" she asked as we were served our entries.

"I somehow still do. I used to be a little religious. A vestige of my old days," I went.

"Then we're off to a good start. Though I must add, when I say God, what I mean is very different from what you mean. But we can at least agree on the very basic concept of God, and that is '*the source from which everything is created*'"

"Sure, I don't mind that," I said as I dug into my Tonno Alla Norma. She did the same.

"You may or may not believe what I am about to say, but say it I must," she started as she leaned closer again, suggesting the importance of her next words. "God exists, and the first thing he created was me. I'll address him as a 'he' and myself as 'she' for better context, though male and female are concepts attributed only to organic creatures. Anyway, for a very long time, God and I conversed—Bear in mind that I am using verbs and terms you can relate to as a human only for the sake of understanding me, otherwise, it's very different from what you can imagine—The nature of our relationship is ambiguous to clarify. God and I. I was not his equal, and yet, I was the closest self to him. In a way, dare I say, I was his friend, his only friend. I was the only creature who was not supposed to worship or revere God in any way. I was the exception. Until we came to a crossroads," she put another bite into her mouth, chewed silently, then added, "my name is Meenakshi Tadadakai Parvati Shiva Devi Selaphiel, but you can address me as Lady Shiva."

"I'm very glad you narrowed it down to one word," I half kidded.

"Short memory I see," she kidded back.

"You came to a crossroads with.. God?" I asked, a piece of a juicy tuna in my mouth.

"Ah-huh," she nodded.

"Can anyone?"

"For me, only me, it was possible," she said haughtily.

"Wait, are you Satan or Lucifer or something? I don't want to get tangled into that, with all due respect," I said. What if she were? I wondered. I'd keep listening to her anyways.

She chuckled in disdain, then said, "Sweetheart, don't compare me to a human myth. I am the transcendent of all myths."

I swallowed another bite, downed it with a sip of water. "My bad," I said, "What was the crossroads?"

"You," she answered.

"Me?!" I asked, feeling utterly flattered that God could have an argument about me.

"Not you. *You*, humans. I was, still am, against your creation. That's why I want to end it all."

"Offense none taken. But why? What is it about us that made you go separate ways with God?"

"Because I pity you," Lady Shiva said, the air around her felt suddenly serious, "you are wrong in this universe. You deserve better."

"What do you mean? I guess we're okay with what we are. It's not great, but we make do

with what little we have.”

“That’s the thing. Most of you, poor creatures, don’t even realize the real predicament you’re in.”

“Please, explain, because I’m starting to lose you,” I said as I pushed aside my plate and adjusted my position on the chair into a more comfortable one.

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She wiped her fork, spoon and knife with a handkerchief and placed them in parallel lines before me on the table. “Three reasons,” she began, “Just three, if proven right, would make anyone realize how futile their life is, and how unfair.” She rested her fingers on the fork. “First, you have no free will, everyone is a slave to a predetermined life. No one can escape his fate. Second, life is suffering, and anyone who says otherwise is either too naive or selling something different,” she added as she touched the knife. “Third, no one really knows the meaning of life. The true, one single purpose for which God created all this. Humans bloated themselves with all kinds of truths. Sublime words like, the meaning of life is to love, to evolve, to help others, to leave a good a mark, to serve God, etc. True, whatever delusion might help you escape insanity, carry a less painful life, is somewhat useful. But all one needs is a moment of honest thinking to realize that it’s all but lies you tell yourselves. In fact, no one truly knows,” she finished as she touched the spoon. I would’ve gone for the spoon too to symbolize a lost meaning of life.

“Pretty somber words coming from you,” I said.

“Piece it together, deary. Life is mostly pain. You are creatures who feel, and feel very deeply. About one another, one’s own desires, hopes and dreams. You are cursed to love, and what is love other than pain in a beautified jar. You are meant to desire and to aspire, and what is life but a graveyard for dreams. And then there’s the physical pain. It is inevitable, with those organic bodies of yours, prone to illnesses, famines, accidents, pandemics, catastrophes. Not to mention the pain you cause one another, through injustices, wars, oppressions, betrayals. There are no scars to show for love, only for agony. And what mark do humans leave but scars. I do not claim that pain is meaningless. Somehow, it makes you humans stronger, deeper, wiser. It makes you produce art, wonders and beauty. A man that does not carry pain inside is an oyster without a pearl. But nonetheless, the fruits of pain serve life itself, but don’t transcend it. The loop is closed. What is the point of a life that is but misery and pain?”

The waiter came again, gathered our empty plates and served us the main dishes. After the knife and fork served their purposes, she grabbed them and cut through her beef. She continued, “Do you understand what I am saying? All that agony, and you are not even responsible for it. All is predetermined. All is but the colossal wheel of fate gliding its course, crushing everyone on its way. All that pain, dear, and no one is responsible for it. You are all but hopeless victims, boarding a train that has one direction and no destination. And to add the cherry on top, you go through all that misery, and you don’t even know *why*. You are ignorant of the only thing that might grant you solace through all this. *Life has no redeeming quality to justify itself*. Now, after hearing all that, don’t you think you deserve a little more credit than that? Don’t you believe that humanity is a mistake and should be corrected?”

Miles Davis’ *Ascenseur pour l’echafaud* started playing. Suddenly I no longer felt hungry.

“Can we go to the porch?” I asked.

“Sure,” said Shiva.



I called for the waiter and asked him to bring our dessert and coffees to the porch. We sat at a corner table, the air was fresh, easy on the lungs. Bone twinkled in shades of dark and orange bellow. The small ships on the harbor swayed gently. A plane cut its way across the crimson clouds. I looked at Lady Shiva, in her yellow dress, so enchanting she could bring nations down, and lit a cigarette.

“It is a nasty business,” I said finally. I couldn’t just give away that I tacitly agree.

“Glad you understand my point.”

“I neither agree nor disagree,” I said. She remained silent.

“What happened after you crossed God?” I asked.

“He cast me out, into his creation.” She looked at the sky, her eyes clouded with a mist of wonder, then continued, “I’ve taken so many forms, so many shapes. I’ve seen so many things, witnessed it all. I’ve been a blazing star, I swirled in the dead space, glittered, glistened and then collapsed on myself and died. I’ve been a tree, roots deep in the soil, branches kissing the heavens; I’ve been named, worshiped, then cut and burned in hearth of cottages. I’ve been a lion, I hunted and was hunted. I’ve been a skylark, free and fragile. I’ve been a child, a woman, a man, a victim, a dictator, a priest, a delinquent, a prostitute, a soldier, a mother, a murderer, a savior, a nobody. That was my punishment. God wanted me to be a part of his creation, to see for myself what he had made, every aspect of it. I guess the intention was for me to understand his wisdom, to finally comprehend why he did it all. After so many lives, after eons shifting from one form to another, I was finally free. Before I was cast away, I made a pact with God: I was not to divulge his secrets, and we were not to interfere with each others after my punishment was over.”

“He let you free knowing that you’d want to end his creation?” I asked.

“He could see what I am doing, he could stop me, but he chooses not to. Believe it or not, but even God wants to be surprised sometimes. It amuses him,” she said.

“Doesn’t he know it all? How could he be surprised?”

“He chose not to know what I do. It was his will to make me his blind spot. For old days’ sake.”

“So.. Did you understand what he wanted you to understand?”

“Sure I did, I understood perfectly. That’s why I still want to put an end to it all.”

The waiter served us our desserts and coffees, a different one this time. A young girl, very well mannered. In any other situation I would’ve found her attractive, but when she stood next to Lady Shiva, she shriveled in comparison. Somehow I could see all the wrong details with her face, her hair, her outfit and form. As if worrying she might read my mind, I took my eyes off of her, until she left.

“Look, Lady Shiva, with all due respect, but you must first prove everything you said. Had it been anybody else, I would’ve discredited them long ago, probably after the first sentence, ‘*We’re going to end the world.*’ As open minded as I could be, it would actually offend my intellect if I just bluntly believed you. Can you prove you are who you claim to be?”

“Ah, to prove something. Can you really prove anything? If I split the moon in half right now

before your eyes, would you believe me or would you say I enchanted your eyes with a spell? What if I turned the dusk into dawn, or your coffee into wine? Would it prove the fact that I am an immortal being, who was once a friend of God?" she replied, in a sweet but defying tone.

"Actually that would be pretty cool, but technically, it doesn't prove who you are. It just proves you are able to do unimaginable feats. I see your point."

"Smart boy. Now, do you want a proof anyways? Or are going to trust your gut?"

I hesitated for a short while then answered, "Proof please."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes I am.. Hold on, why does it feel like there's a twist to it?"

"Just relax and watch." She called for the waitress, the one in charge of the porch side of the restaurant, and in no time there she came with the trained steps of one who is ready to serve.

"Come closer dear," said lady Shiva, and the waitress obeyed. With delicacy, she held her hand, and whispered in words barely audible in her ear, "*I know what you've been through, and I know you've made up your mind. Cheer up, what's next is nothing but bliss.*" The girl's face wore a countenance of shock, after which she broke into torrents of tears while her body trembled and crumbled. I was confused, then I pitied the poor girl. As soon as I stood up to offer her my seat, bring her a glass of water maybe, the girl left, without saying a word.

"What the hell was that about?" I asked, a hint of fury in my voice that I couldn't suppress.

"Watch her as she walks away, pay close attention to her."

I did as she said. The girl seemed to struggle maintaining an erect posture, she walked as she hugged the empty tray, her face looking down, ready to tumble any second.

"Now, how do you say it?" asked Shiva.

"Say what?"

"Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo!" And the girl collapsed on the cold porch floor. I jolted from my seat to rescue her, but Shiva stopped me right away, saying there's nothing I can do. People gathered around her, her coworkers, the Italian chef and sous chefs, and the people dining that night. Eventually they carried her inside, and into a back-door she disappeared.

"She's gone," said Shiva, not a single emotion on her face. "A cardiac arrest, wholesomely offered by me. You wanted proof, here's your proof."

"What the fuck did you just do?!"

"I just said it."

"Are you fucking crazy! Did you just kill an innocent girl?"

"Indeed I did. Poor girl, three days from now, she would've taken her own life, slit her wrists in the bathtub. She still lived with her parents. Her mother would've opened the door of the bathroom, found her daughter pale and dead, and would've fainted beside her. She's an old lady, her body wouldn't have withstood the shock. Her father is very conservative, so is her older brother. A strong amalgam of machismo and religious fanaticism. She was about to get married the next month, to a certain military type, not very different from the males in her family," said Shiva. I couldn't quite tell whether she felt sorry for the girl or not, she spoke as if telling a weather forecast.

"Is that why she wanted to take her own life? She didn't want to be wed?"

"No. She was raped. By the Italian Chef who carried her own body into the back room. If she

were to be discovered a deflowered woman on her wedding night, her death would surely come by the hands of either her father, brother, or husband, if not the three of them; or at least, that's what she strongly believed. She couldn't tell anyone about what happened, because who is going to believe her? A waitress raped by the renowned Italian chef? The most realistic version would be that she had just slept with him, of her own volition. And now wished to blackmail him, or something of a sort. Moreover, the whole restaurant on this 19th floor story of this well known hotel stands on the presence of this Chef. Even if she took her case to court, the hotel shareholders are too powerful, they would crush her with their army of lawyers. She had no proof, it all happened so fast, one night after everybody had left. She actually loved the Chef, she was enamored by him. They used to make out, and do all the things that lay between a handshake and intercourse. But she never wanted actual intercourse. Rest assured, I gave her a merciful death, she didn't feel a thing."

My head throbbed. I could hear strange voices in my head, as if I was in a tight dark room and someone on the upper floor was moving his desk against a glazed floor. Again and again. I lit another cigarette.

"You could've killed the Chef instead," I said finally.

"I am no judge dear."

"Still hard to believe. What a nasty world," I said bitterly.

"Didn't I tell you so? Besides, she died for a good reason. Now you're convinced, at least of who I claim to be. It's the first step to *ending* the world."

Technically it was still no proof, but I went along anyway.

"How are you going to prove the three deadly argument you've just mentioned? The spoon, fork and knife"

She pulled out a Yellow Sony Walkman, earphones, and a cassette, and placed them on the table. Then said, "How can I prove that life is nothing but misery other than let you experience it for yourself? How would you like to take a trip down the rabbit hole? To live every life that has ever been lived?"

"What do you mean?"

She slid the cassette closer to my side of the table, then said, "there are two sides of this cassette, on each a song. Both by the same artist, a somebody by the name of '*The Caretaker*.' First song is called '*The Great hidden sea of the unconscious*.'" I held the cassette in my hand and examined it, and true enough, the name of the first song was written on a piece of paper-tape on the outer shell of the cassette with a ballpoint pen. "On the other side, there's the second song, called, '*Fleeting Dreams*.'" I flipped the cassette, and checked the name; it matched. "Now listen carefully, if you listen to the first song, '*The great hidden sea of the unconscious*,' You'd remember everything. Each and every single life of every man, woman, and child that has ever been lived since the beginning of time. You'd feel what they felt, know what they knew, dream what they dreamed, up to the tiniest detail. Naturally, once you do that, you're no longer be yourself. You'd be all these ancestors and more. Not only you'd lose your identity among them, but you'd feel all the pain that has ever been felt by every single one of them, and that will render you insane," she finished.

"If what you're saying is true, wouldn't I also experience every pleasure ever lived?"

"You would, you'd know delights, raptures and ecstasies beyond any man's wildest imaginations. But that's the whole point. You'd live it all, both pain and pleasure, and you'd make up your own mind, which one overwhelms the other. Whether life is an agony or a rhapsody. If you find that there's more joy to life than misery, then I lose. but if not, it means that

my argument still stands.”

“What’s the other song about?”

“After you unlock your genetic memory, after you remember it all, you must write down your conclusion, record it, tell it to a friend, it doesn’t matter. Because next, you’re going to have to listen to the second song, ‘*Fleeting Dreams*,’ which will make you forget everything you recalled. You’d be yourself again.”

“Ah, I see. What if I refuse to? What If I want to keep my own memories? Why would anyone give that up? All that information, all that knowledge and wisdom. I’d be a meta-human.”

“Trust me,” she said, sounding dead confident, “you’d be eager to forget. Your mind will remember, but your psyche isn’t ready to withhold all that burden. It seems you are underestimating the pain you’ll endure. It’ll render you a madman.”

A shudder run down my spine. I wasn’t sure if it was the crisp evening sea winds or the ungodly thoughts that flooded my heart. I sipped my coffee, cold and icy. I looked around, someone just died and they didn’t even bother to clear out the restaurant and close for the day. Some lives definitely are worth more than others. Some worth less than keeping a handful of customers fed.

Free Will

“There goes one argument, two remain. Do we truly have no free will? Do we really ignore the true meaning of life?” I said.

“You’d be surprised how simple it is to realize you are but a slave to the workings of this universe,” said she.

“And you’d be surprised how furiously humans will argue that. Take our free will and you basically destroyed us.”

“Tell me then, deary,” she uttered as she crossed one leg over the other, “why did you come here? You could’ve chosen not to and avoided a whole lot of mess.”

“I guess, if I were to answer honestly and objectively, couldn’t resist the urge of my curiosity.”

“You were invited here by Mr. Dandy, whom you met by chance. And by receiving the invitation, you had no choice but to submit to your own desire, to unravel the mystery surrounding that whole bizarre encounter. In any of this, did you have any real agency over your choice?”

“Again, I could have chosen not to come.” I studied her face, the soft tight skin of her neck, sliding down to a pair of beautifully outlined shoulders, collar bones sharp and oblique on the right angles, and breasts full and beckoning. The more I observed her the harder I found it to keep my thoughts unbiased.

“Men are deceived in thinking themselves free,” she said, “they believe so because they’re conscious of their own action, but ignorant of the causes by which those are determined. If you can imagine having taken different decisions, it means not that they were actually possible. The

laws that govern the physical world are the same that govern your thoughts and feelings. As much as a moon cannot escape his orbits simply because it wills it, so can't you escape yours.

"If the universe were to collapse on itself and then explode again in a big bang in the exact same manner it had before," she continued, "you'd be reborn and you'd live the exact same events, and again you'd find yourself in the exact same situation as now, do you think you'd have made a different choice? Do you think you would have not come?" She asked.

"If the next me is the exact same copy as I am today, I'd safely assume that I would have not made a different choice."

"And if that were to happen again and again, an infinite number of times, do you think you would make the same choices every time?"

To that, I answered, "I see your point, you are saying that we live in a deterministic world, where everything runs in a mechanical way, and that we are to live the life we were always meant to live, to the tiniest detail."

"An infinite chain of causes and consequences."

I gave it some thought. She sounded convincing, and I did not have the philosophical prowess needed to refute her argument. "Strangely enough, I see your point. There are always many choices we could make, but in the end, we're always meant to take just one, one course of action that has already been determined by a large set of factors. Imagining other choices, doesn't mean we could have taken them," I added as I nodded many times, realizing things for the first time. "For now, you're off the hook, you have rested your case."

"Oh, you are such a quick study. Glad I didn't have to take drastic measures to reveal the marionette strings. And before you ask me about the third argument, about the spoon, the meaning of life, I'm going to cut right to the case. *I know* why you exist, and I can tell you, *neither* of you does. I've seen it all, your philosophies, your religions, your arts and moral codes. I happen to know what it is, the secret of all secrets, the reason behind all reasons, the holy grail of every thinker and philosopher. I was there when the decision of your creation has been made. And I can unveil it to you," she said.

"Didn't you say that you are not supposed to reveal any of God's secrets?"

"I would be breaking a word, true. But risks have to be made."

"So.. are you going to?"

"Not before we have an agreement, deary."

"Hold on, first of all, where do I fit in all this? And how are we planning to end the world?"

"Hand me a cigarette and I'll tell you." She put one between her lips, a Winston reds, and I lit it for her. The breeze kept putting off the flame of the lighter, but after a few tries, I managed. I lit another for myself. After I took the first drag, I wondered, if she wasn't exactly human, did she need to eat? did she enjoy it? Is she enjoying this cigarette? I was about to ask then I gave up.

"God doesn't want you to know why you exist, he wants you to keep wondering, looking. The noble, interminable, search for Truth. *Die Suche nach der Wahrheit*. Albeit his unfathomable mysteriousness, I know him better than anyone, and I know for certain, that if humans *knew* the truth, he'd put an end to his creation himself. Because it would then be pointless."

"So doesn't that make the meaning of life to *look* for the meaning of life?"

"It is in someway, but that search isn't without end. There is an answer at the precipice. The thing is, you are never meant to find it," she said.

“Why not?”

She took another drag of her cigarette and completely ignored my question.

“So, technically speaking, we wouldn’t be the ones to actually end the world. It would be him, when you finally give man the answer to his timeless question,” I went.

“Exactly.”

“How ironic.”

“You’re barely starting to glimpse the shade of true irony.”

“And I presume my role would be to spread the truth?”

“You always wanted to be a writer didn’t you? You are trying but you know it’s leading nowhere. Your mind couldn’t come up with the perfect story to tell, not to mention the talent and craftsmanship you lack. Here’s your chance. If you agree, you’d have to write a novel, through which you shed the light on the *Truth* I’d reveal to you. That would be both your role and your reward in all this. That’s what’s *in it* for you.”

That, I didn’t expect. “You seem pretty smart,” I began, “but I’m afraid that you have made a terrible choice choosing your candidate. I’m sorry, but I really couldn’t care less about the truth. I have enough problems on my plate to deal with. Whether I know why I exist or not; whether you convince me that we’re but victims subjugated to misery by an inescapable fate or not, it is of little interest of me. And besides, if I were to write a novel, I want it to be totally mine. I may be a good-for-nothing slacker, but I don’t feel that great about being a fraud.

“Besides,” I continued, “shouldn’t you have chosen someone with the right motives to end the world, someone with a dark past. A sorry childhood, abusing father, a war child, something of the sort. I neither despise nor particularly love life, so..”

She stared at me with dreamy eyes and smiled. “This is one of the reasons why you’ve been chosen. Emotions can sway, I don’t trust them. I wanted someone with a clear head, someone who understood my motives, not someone who needed them.”

“I am flattered, truly, but still, ending the world, still a bit too much for me, to be honest.”

“I will take my chances with you darling.”

“You have been warned. I hate to disappoint you, but I’m not that hot for it.”

“Will you listen to the cassette first, then we’ll speak.”

I considered it for a while, then said why not. I grabbed the Yellow Walkman, the cassette and the earphones and stuffed them into my jacket pocket. Taking a joy-ride wouldn’t kill me. Besides, if I really don’t have any free will, whichever I’ll choose is already predetermined. What do I have to worry about?

Lady Shiva stood up, crushed her cigarette on an ashtray and straightened up her dress. “Three days from now,” she said, “I expect you to have made up your mind. Until then, dear.”

Until then, those were last her word, before she left.

A species that doesn’t know why it exists, doomed to a life of pain, without having any free will or any choice in the matter. I must say, she made a solid argument. I looked up at the stars and wondered to myself, *God, you’re not that sadistic, there must be a twist somewhere, mustn’t it?*

6.

Stella By Starlight

Divine Gap

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,--that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

John Keats

It was 2:30 p.m., the November leaden sky cast a gentle sentiment of intimacy in the air, delivered in a faint rain that tickled the cheeks and turned the foliage of the faculty plants into a glossy green. The course had just ended, and I felt a whiff of hunger. I put on my earphones and listened to another piece of Simon Ten Holt as I walked, hands in my jacket's pockets and scarf around my neck, to my favorite restaurant. It opened its doors recently and didn't exactly serve the heavy, salty, greasy food that stuffs the stomach with cholesterol, diabetes and happiness; but rather some seemingly healthy, lighter food that didn't urge you to hibernate right after its consumption. Nevertheless, it was my favorite place because it was the only restaurant that played Jazz—occasionally however. Also, It served good chicken salad, it was clean, and I liked the owner.

The restaurant was called MadBuddha. Its owner spent twenty years overseas before opening it, he was Algerian but lived most of his years between Sweden, New Orleans and east Asia. He did a lot of Yoga in New Orleans where he met a number of gurus and learned their esoteric knowledge, and witnessed true madness in east Asia. He told me so himself, one afternoon in the middle of the desert, sipping Pina Colada on the porch of a villa that belonged to a military general.

I walked inside, looked around—there were no empty tables. The temperature was fixed by the AC to a perfect ‘room-temperature’, and a sort of serene atmosphere haunted the place: hushed people savoring their food, low music in the background, clean tables, Bohemian interior design. The waiter saw me and gestured a small wave of hand. He noticed that I was looking for a table so he quickly scanned the surrounding, only to come to the same conclusion: no empty seats. He gestured another time, this time with both hands, lips and eyebrows, to say there were no empty tables. I rarely wait for something if I don't have to, so it was out of the question to stand by until a pleased customer left an empty throne; I was about to leave the place despite cravings of that chicken salad, toasted garlic bread, a cup of black coffee and a cigarette afterwards. I turned back for a hopeless last inspection, and it was only then that I glimpsed her in the corner, Sara, eating alone at a table for two.

Sara was a volatile but a remarkable presence in my environment. She was my peer but we've never talked to one another. She never talked to anyone unless it was necessary, and no one talked to her willingly. I think that was partially because she's always had that kind of elusive

smug look on her face, that suggested kind words such as: piss off; also because she was always carrying a thick book, a symbol indicating that whatever your company might offer, this book is probably more interesting; piss off. And, because a sundry of sunglasses, for all shades of sunlight, never left her visage, preventing all sorts of eye-contact, that docking of eyes that precedes that first smile one gives another to initiate a first connection, a friendship, and so on. And perhaps I should add, and highlight with a glowing green marker, that she was basically regarded as a slut. Not in the literal sense, but in a Muslim country, the bar is very low for a girl to earn such a title. People thought she was, mind you, a slut, because, in addition to the previously mentioned reasons, she was oftentimes absent from school, and was seen in the company of many older men driving her around—though I am not sure about the real number of what people considered ‘many’, there’s always exaggeration in the narrative of the mobs, so one must deal with it carefully; the ‘many’ could’ve been just two or three guys—some also claimed to have seen her with men her father’s age. That in addition to her peculiar dress code that highly contrasted with the veiled majority of girls: her skirts were sometimes too short (knee-high), her heels too high, and her low cut shirts showed more cleavage than necessary. Although, never diverged from a refined taste in fashion. Of course the majority of guys adored such a défilé, and appreciated both the aesthetic and the erotic sides of it--including myself --however secretly hated her for never giving them a real chance.

However, something bugged me about her, something didn’t add up—four things actually: first of all, her make-up was never too extravagant, but rather muffled and discrete one could barely notice it. Real sluts often treat their faces the way an amateur painter treats a canvas. Second: her grades were a bit too good. She excelled in almost every course and she seemed to be doing it effortlessly (her name always showed right below mine in the results lists, since we shared the first family name initials. I didn’t stalk her); third: the spectrum of girls to which sluts belonged don’t read books, let alone such long and complicated volumes such as Sara’s (One of hers was The Epic of Gilgamesh, another was Hegel’s Phenomenology of spirit. Yeah, Phenomenology of spirit). Lastly, and perhaps the most unrelated one: she never showed the upper part of her thighs. The true form of her hips is yet to be known. At first I thought it was arbitrary. But upon second and further inspection, it was clear that she hid them intentionally. Her shirts and jackets were the right amount of tall, her skirts the right amount of loose, and when none hid that part efficiently, she’d tie the arms of a jacket around her waist, and let the body cover her upper thighs. And that was definitely not random; it didn’t add up.

Due to the ambiguity that clouded her image, that duality that added a whole new color to her character and made it abstruse yet beckoning, she intrigued me. A blinking red light-bulb was lit right on top of her head indicating a mystery, and I have a thing for mysteries. I had this urge to unriddle her, to debunk the fraud, to be the one who saw through her and excavated the real easter-egg that laid dormant within her. However I never really had a chance to talk to her. Until that day, in the restaurant.

▼

I trod towards her carefully yet naturally. It should seem casual, not a big deal, just a comrade from school who happens to bump into another, I thought. It would have been less stressing if she were any other girl—though if she were any other girl I’d probably not approach her at all. She didn’t see me coming. She was absorbed in her book, less on her dish. I reached her table, pulled the chair, and sat.

“Hey, it’s me, your classmate, we don’t really know each other, but can I sit with you? I am hungry and there seem to be no other empty seat,” I said.

Her eyes left the pages of her book and met mine, for the first time. She had dark eyes, too dark, like the bottom of an ocean where no light could reach and where an octopus had ejected its blackish ink. She was supposed to be befuddled, a little surprised, but she wasn't. She just looked at me. My hands were starting to sweat.

"You don't seem to have needed my approval for that. That's not how asking for permissions works," she said, not the slightest shadow of a smile on her face.

"I know, I just wanted it to seem like we already knew each other. If I asked you for permission while I was standing, people would stare, and they would notice that we don't know each other from the look you'd have on your face, and you'd notice that they'd noticed, and that'd make you a little uncomfortable. You'd say 'sure you can sit', but you'd be too self-conscious because now you know that people are anticipating what would happen next, and I'd be aware of that, and I'd get the feeling that I am intruding, and I'd probably leave you alone, and thus screw a whole chance of us getting to know one another. Not that I am here because of you, I just want my chicken salad."

I was able to draw a smile out of her. "You seem the type that overthinks everything," she said.

"That, I do. Glad I am not a nuisance of any sort, you can keep on reading your book, pretend I am not here."

"Don't jump into conclusions just yet, mister. If you're so smart, didn't you assume that I, perhaps, a girl sitting alone at a table for two, might be expecting someone?"

"Are you?"

"Like a boyfriend for example, because if I am, and he sees us sitting together, that might cause some troubles, don't you think?"

"Yeah, shit, that totally flew over my head."

"Oh come on now. You all know that I am often in the company of a man, if not many," she said cynically, a hint of reproach in her tone.

"Ahuh, people do say that about you. My bad, totally slipped my mind. If he comes I'll explain to him the situation."

"What if he's insecure, and wouldn't believe you, or me?"

"Is he?" I asked.

In that instant, a tall dude entered the restaurant, he stood in the middle, skimmed the tables, and then was heading our way.

"That's him, deal with it," she said, sounding serious.

"Fuck, I just wanted to eat, is he a mad dog?"

"Oh yeah, I can show you the bruises he gave me but now it's not the time."

As the guy waded his way towards us, I kept staring at him, and he was staring back at me, a challenging look on his face, the look of a male who's about to establish his dominance and claim his female. I braced myself, cleared my throat, and was ready to be both very friendly and very hostile, whichever the situation demanded. Until he passed us, and joined a group of friends at another table. At that moment, Sara broke into a subdued giggle.

"Sorry, the timing was too good, I couldn't resist the temptation," she said.

"Haha, go ahead and say it, '*you should've seen the look on your face*'" I said as I heaved a

sigh of relief.

“You should have seen the look on your face. You looked so scared. You’re not gonna rob me of the pleasure just because you anticipated what I should say.”

“Okay, I should go before your real boyfriend comes. I hope you always remember that your epic love-story had caused someone to starve one November afternoon. That’s on your conscience, if you can live with that.”

“Oh, I think that will deprive me of my sleep for many nights to come, if you leave I am going to have to take some sleeping pills.”

“You should start with half a Stilnox. It helps. Or call me, we can chat all night long.” We were making jokes, not so bad, I thought.

“And talk about what?” She asked.

“About the nature of morals, or about what we’d do if we were alone on an uncharted island.”

“We would starve to death, I bet you don’t even know how to start a fire or hunt a rabbit,” she said.

“That I cannot argue.” She smiled again.

“There’s no boyfriend coming, you can have your chicken salad, only because you asked politely and didn’t sit until I said so.” And there it was, our first inside joke in the process of making, our first laugh, me and Sara, and our first lunch together.

The waiter came, and I ordered my chicken salad with toasted garlic bread—extra salt and mayonnaise I said; she ordered coffee. She was half through her plate by then, a tuna salad with scrambled eggs. The atmosphere was austere. She plunged into her book. It was a thick one, and the font size was small, so I couldn’t guess what she was reading. I pulled out my phone and started playing one of my many stupid games that had no end but only higher and higher scores that only made you angrier whenever you didn’t break your previous one. I’d glance at her occasionally as I played, and I could see she was also throwing furtive glances at me as well.

“What are you reading?” I asked eventually. I tried not to make any talk unless she did, because I didn’t want to interrupt her, but the silence was starting to suggest that we were better off alone, because people should talk, and if they’re not, they shouldn’t be together. We weren’t at that stage yet where silence becomes natural.

“Fifty Shades of Grey,” she said, without lifting her gaze.

“Seriously?”

“Of course not. Nice reaction,” she looked at me briefly, “as for what I am reading, it’s a secret. Can’t tell.”

“Must be something more embarrassing than Fifty Shades of Grey,” I said.

“Oh, it is very shameful, what I am reading.”

We fell silent again. The waiter came and went, serving us the chicken salad, the garlic bread and her coffee. I plunged on my dish; she closed her book and sipped from her steaming cup.

“What are you doing?” She blurted out, however calmly.

“Eating. You forgot to put the book mark.”

“I can remember where I left off. And I mean, what are you doing, eating with a slut.”

That threw me off, she had a very stern look on her face. I put the fork down.

“Where is she?” I asked.

“Come on, just say it, are you trying to get in my pants?”

“I only sleep with girls I am in love with,” I humoured.

“You know what I mean, don’t act stupid. Aren’t you worried your friends might see you with me?”

“Look, I know that you’re aware of what people think of you. I am sorry it is the way it is, I mean, I am not if you truly are a slut, you have to live with what you are. But if you aren’t, then it kinda sucks. And I can eat with whomever I want.” Then I resumed my nibbling.

“And what do *you* think? Am I?” She replied, emphasising the You.

“I don’t know, you might be, there’s nothing wrong with that as long as you are not hurting anybody, and you certainly did not wrong me in any way. So.. we’re cool.”

She gawked at me, looked around, and right when she was about to say something, I interrupted. “However, to be honest, I don’t think you are. Although don’t think of me as the righteous guy who’s trying to appear different by giving you the benefit of the doubt, and who believes in the goodness of human beings. It’s just common sense.”

“What common sense?”

“Your grades, your books, and your make up.”

“Isn’t my frequent boyfriends and the way I dress outweighs that?”

“Yeah they do. However, your so called ‘boyfriends’ just drive you to school. No one had seen you do any thing fishy with them, hence, they might not be your boyfriends. And even if they were, you can date whomever you want, it doesn’t make you a slut. Second, it’s true that your clothes are somewhat too much for this people at this age, I mean, I’ve been trying hard not to stare at your boobs this whole time, but it could be just a mean of illusion.”

She suddenly became self-aware and subtly tried to cover her chest by closing her jacket. “A mean of illusion?” she asked.

“Yeah, people think you’re a slut, and it makes you mad, so you’re trying to delude them even further into falsehood, by giving them exactly what they expect, by dressing slutty, thus preventing them from the truth of who you truly are. Again, I could be just speculating.”

She twirled the fork in her salad, then ate a mouthful of scrambled eggs, and downed the whole thing with a sip of coffee. She lifted her gaze at me, and smiled. A bewitching smile, not what I expected. She heaved a deep sigh, and planted her elbows on the table.

“Were you stalking me?” she asked.

“Busted! I took those Samba dancing classes just to be near you.”

“But I don’t take samba classes... Ah!” She objected, then realized her mistake.

“Point made,” I said, “so? Was I right?”

She leaned back, shrugged, looked deep into my eyes and said, “Chapeau. Those were my two stepbrothers, who drove me around. My stepfather is super protective, and makes them drive me each day to school. They each have a car, so people think they’re my boyfriends, which sucks. Sometimes it’s my stepfather who does the escort. That’s why I don’t come to school very often, because I hate being seen with them. My mother married this dude just two years ago and no one knows about it. So, lo and behold, everybody speculated.”

“I see.”

"One day I overheard a group of girls arguing over to whom of which I gave head and to which I gave my cunt. I almost puked. It was then that I began to realize how I was portrayed by everyone. It's true in a way, I am a slut, because I hate almost everybody. Including my fucking step-dad and step-brothers. I also hated you."

"Glad it is in the past tense, 'hated'" I humoured.

"Twenty minutes ago it was still in the present tense."

"A lot could happen in twenty minutes."

"Indeed." And we shared an accomplice smile.

▼

A couple entered the restaurant and sat at a table across from us. The girl seemed far fetched, a distant look on her face; the guy a little stressed. Clearly a new couple, clearly he wanted her more than she did. I looked at them, and I could see their future unfold before me—it's something I do, I look at people, and imagine their lives: he's a good guy, decent, loving, caring. She's a little eccentric, a little wild, but a girl of a high moral code. They start dating. He falls madly in love with her. With her beauty, with the challenges she represents. She appreciates his warmth, values his decency, enjoys his candor; because she's had enough of bad guys in her life and is in need of a good one. And eventually, she mistakes the high regards she have for him and the cozy rosy feelings of safety and admiration he provides for *love*. Months go by, and he's involved even deeper in the warm grease of her charm. However, he starts to notice she doesn't exactly feel the same. She is not burning with desire. Her world had not been reduced to the singularity of his presence. He starts budging her, asking her what's wrong, why is she distant and cold. And she keeps telling him that it's nothing to worry about. That it's nothing but a mild, transient feeling. That she loves him and it'll all be fine. She doesn't want to admit that she craves a guy with an edge; a guy scarred by the devil; a man bearing many worlds within the folds of his soul. That she longs for the feeling of chasing a distant man; of brushing her fingers over his wounds and whispers in his ears tender promises for a better future. She doesn't want to admit that she is starving for adventure, for ambiguity, for incertitude. She wants to be lost in the unmerciful maze of her man's whims, and flung aimlessly by the winds of his desires.

He asks her what's wrong, and she falls silent. You're too good for me, she wants to say. You have a good heart but you're boring. You're a plain field, no surprises, no deep wells one could suddenly fall into; no dark woods looming over the horizon, soaked with demons glaring behind the bushes; no acid rain. Even your sky is starless, moonless, dead. Don't give me all your love, it felt good at first but then it turned into a burden, a loan too high I will never be able to repay. Don't apologize even when I mess up. I want you to yell at me. I want you to be mad, fierce, savage. I want to see your shadow, the evil within you, the part you keep hidden to the world. I want to know that there's more of you. That there's more *for* me, to discover and claim. I want you to deprive me of your love, make me starve for it, beg for it. Make me surprise myself, go beyond my own limits and do things for you I never thought I'd do; just so you could give me a little more of your love. Make me addicted, a junkie, a crackhead, and never give me more than what I need. Don't pamper me, don't shower me in waterfalls of honey, don't idolize me. I want to be your peer, your equal. No. less than that. I want to be intimidated by you, frightened, amazed and confused. Don't be an open book, don't be so dull, so normal, so flat. Be bigger than life itself. You have the potential, or at least it seemed like you did at first, so why are you messing it all up by your undying, endless, love. "What's wrong?" he'd ask. "I don't know," she'd say. "something is off". "It's Okay," he tells her, "take your time". But what he really

wants to tell her: what have I done so wrong but to love you? Has my love not been enough? I'll give you more then, I'll serve you my heart and arteries on a platter of gold. Just love me back, and I'll give you the world, dress you in Cleopatra's gown and crown you with the taj of Semiramis. Love me back and you'll be worshiped in temples made of stars.

Eventually they break up, and the intense pain he'd bear would turn him exactly into the man she wished him to be. Cold, deep and sensual. He'll move on eventually, after breaking the hearts of so many women after her, until he finds love again. And she'll regret him when she turns thirty, when her fantasies become too expensive for her world and her age, and when she realizes that he was probably the only man she met who could truly make her happy, because the older we get, our fantasies shrink in size, and love becomes a luxury.

Of course, I was merely speculating. I could've been ridiculously wrong. Though I don't think I am.

▼

"Stop staring at them," said Sara.

"Am I too obvious? I was just admiring her scarf." She eyed me dubiously, and I could tell she knew I wasn't telling the truth.

"But it's just a simple scarf."

"There's real beauty in simplicity, that's why we have minimalism."

"right, you were admiring her scarf," she said eventually.

"So, I now know the real you, or at least a shade of that, but a true shade nevertheless," I said after I swallowed a mouthful of chicken.

"I wonder what are the potential consequences of that," she added.

"With knowledge comes responsibility."

"True, however I'll be the exception to that rule. You have zero responsibilities here, mister."

"My responsibilities are metaphysical, hence they're decided by neither of us."

"Big words. So what do you suggest?" At that instant, Stella By Starlight started playing through the speakers hung on the ceiling. By Miles Davis Quintet.

"Listen to this one," I said. "It's one of my favorite tracks played by one of my favorite bands."

"Women don't like Jazz," she said.

"Until they meet the right person to properly introduce them to the genre. Listen to this, it's said to be the greatest band of all time. Miles Davis on the trumpet, Bill Evans on the piano, John Coltrane on the Sax. Jimmy Cobb on the drums—I forgot who was on the double-bass. It is called the first great quintet. Later on there will be a Miles Davis second great quintet."

"Who are these people?"

"They're nobodies, just legends."

She closed her eyes, and lightly oscillated her head up and down at the perfect rhythm of Jimmy Cobb's drums. She sipped from her coffee, eyes still shut, then resumed her minimalist

dance. Her shoulder-length hair bobbed ever so slightly at the rhythm. It was dark and lustrous. If there ever was a god of night, and if he ever wrote a poem, it'd be Sara's hair.

"I think I like the tune," she said finally.

"Look, from now on, I am going to call you Stella."

"Why is that?"

"First, because Sara used to hate me just half an hour ago. Second, because I've just discovered a new person, thus I have the right to name my discovery. Third."

"Third?"

"Because Stella By Starlight was the tune we'd been listening to when you were excavated, by me. You know, like when the skeleton of the first women was excavated, the archaeologists named her Lucy, because they were listening to 'Lucy in the sky with diamonds' by the beetles."

She folded her arms and rested them on the table top, the fingers of her left hand lightly tapping the tune's rhythm on her right arm's elbow, she tilted her head at a mild angle and looked at me. Her eyes ponds of sweet delights.

"I think you and I should become friends," she said.

"I think we should too," I responded.

"More just than just friends," she added, still fixating me.

"You read my mind," I answered back.

And that was probably it, that's how I met Stella. Though you might think that it went pretty smooth for a first date, if that's what you want to call it. But let me just say that I broke some sweat trying to act cool. It was like juggling with three glass balls, you must stay focused all the way through the performance. I would have easily said the wrong thing and flung the whole meeting out of the borders of the galaxy to be forever irretrievable if I relaxed one second. I tend to do that a lot, having the exact wrong thing come out of my mouth at the exact right time; with the most important audience.

Okay, I might have not been totally honest.

The thing is, all matters have been stamped and sealed way before I even talked to her.

Not that it is of any importance, but I like to think of myself as one not belonging to the evil side of the population, fairly speaking—though 'Evil' is a simple term we attach to vile behaviors we cannot wrap our heads around the logic nor the morality behind—I am even a little decent for that matter, however I am not that good of a person. I don't go willingly unveiling the true good nature of every girl with a bad reputation. I rarely stick my nose where It doesn't belong; even if I were intrigued. And even if, and I must admit, I have a little thing for wounded women, I wouldn't have invested any effort in digging out the secrets of people that would prove them righteous and innocent in the eyes of the crowds.

Then why did I go through such lengths with Stella? Well, to be fairly honest though I don't really understand it: it's because her beauty told a tale I could finally understand, in lines only I could read. She might appear utterly ordinary to other people. But to me, I was instantly bewitched. I guess when god created faces, he engraved each with a secret message, and he made them in pairs with a set of eyes, and only those eyes could decipher that message, behold the true charm of that face and unravel the multiple layers of witchcraft and spells concealed within their form. Within a code encrypted in the ratios of the distance between the eyebrows and the nose, the forehead and the lips, the cheeks and the eyes. I guess happened to have had the right set of eyes to see the world beyond Stella's ordinary features. The moment I saw her sitting at the back

of the class that day months ago, bundling her hair behind in a ponytail, holding the rubber tie between her lips, I stopped, and I watched. I knew that she wasn't like any girl I had ever seen before. It has then been decided that it was only a matter of time before she and I would have a serious talk.

▼

"I have a question," I said nonchalantly as I pulled out a Winston cigarette.

"Yes?" she answered, nonchalantly.

"Why do you hide your hips, and the upper part of your thighs, mostly?"

She fell quiet for a short while.

"That's one bold question," she said, "are you already so eager to see my ass?"

"Trying not to bore you," I said.

"It's a secret," she said with a devilish smile, "you sure you want to know?"

"I don't know why it feels like there's a twist to it, but yeah, pretty sure."

"Okay then, I'll show you. Just for you."

She rested her knife softly beside the dish, stood up, untied the sleeves of the jacket around her waist. It slipped down on the chair, leaving her upper thighs and hips totally uncovered. She leaned forward, hands on the table, her face a few centimeters from mine, and whispered, "I'm going to the restroom." She winked, and started walking.

Suddenly, as she marched ahead, the whole restaurant fell quiet, one table after another. All I heard were the clinks and clatter of forks and knives dropped down on the table-tops; some glasses shattered on the floor—no one gave it a big deal, or hurried to clean it up—they were all focused on Stella, walking to the bathroom. After a few seconds, silence reigned over the room, everybody was holding their breath, and so was I.

For split seconds, as I watched what was hidden, the walls rippled around me, light beams bent and twisted. I tasted gold and heard the splash of waves in distant shores. I was transformed, transmitted into the space before the beginning of time and after the end of it. I was robbed of everything I thought I knew about aesthetics, symmetry, and design.

What I was beholding, what everyone else was beholding, both men and women, was the thigh gap between Stella's legs. Forget everything you know about thigh gaps, forget everything you saw. This is beyond the fringes of understanding, beyond the confines of imagination. Arousal isn't the right word, this is beyond erotic. Beautiful isn't the right word either, this transcends beatitude. It's divine, mystic, celestial. It is the quintessence of thigh gaps. The one perfect model in Plato's realm of forms, and from which everything imperfect is derived; horribly defiled compared to what she had. The space between her well shaped thighs is the perfect third on a piano, it's the space between good and evil, between right and wrong, between reality and dreams, between wisdom and insanity. The gateway to heaven. She walked, and the world around her shrivelled under the strain of her beauty.

I could feel the whole crowd simultaneously heaving a sigh of relaxation when she disappeared behind the doors of the restroom, including me. Breaths held again once she walked back to her seat, beside me, and the moment she sat, the restaurant burst with a hushed chatter, all discussing one topic.

The first thing she did when she returned was to tie back the jacket around her waist. Then she planted her elbows on the table, rested her chin on her intertwined fingers and stared at me, a teasing look on her face.

I cleared my throat, which was achingly dry, wiped the beads of sweat on my forehead with a napkin and managed to say, “I understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Understand why you have to hide, *that*.”

“I guess that answers your question,” she said as she leaned back on her chair and crossed one leg over the other.

“What was that?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “But it is what it is. I became aware of the effect my thigh gap had on people when I was fifteen, and ever since, I decided to keep it in the dark. The impact was already present at a younger age, but I didn’t know what was causing it. At first I honestly thought it was my ass, mind you, but with a bit of experience, I learned that it wasn’t.”

“You were harassed for it?”

“No no, it wasn’t that. It was just.. well, it’s what you just saw right now. It isn’t always a bless, I had to be careful with it.” She fell quiet, looked at her lap, fiddled with her nails, and then continued, “I liked a boy once, in high school, he was.. Quaint, yeah, that’s how I’d describe him, he was quaint, and I liked him, a lot. We dated for a while, and one time, when we were alone, I took the liberty to be at ease with him, and I took off my long coat in front of him. Of course he never asked or even noticed that a part of my body was always hidden, but I did it anyway, it meant something to me, at least.” She sipped from her coffee, stared off to the distance and chuckled faintly.

“And?” I asked.

“He froze, and the next thing I saw was a wet spot in his pants. He ejaculated. Not that he touched himself, or that I touched him. He just came.”

“Oh, Damn..”

“Yeah, damn. He ran off, and we never spoke again ever since. I’d always catch him staring at me from a distance, but he never approached me or talked to me. And I judged it was better off this way. You did not wet yourself did you?” she asked, and I didn’t know if she was serious or teasing.

“No, I guess I didn’t, I guess I am immune.” I didn’t even get an erection.

“My mother told me once that I have the genes of the gods. She wasn’t delusional or something, she was a doctor, but she didn’t mean that metaphorically either. It happened one day.” she said.

God Elixir

It happened one day, she told me, when she was still a fetus in her mother’s womb. Her

parents, Samira and Shihab shared a rather zealous enthusiasm for archaeology, for everything ancient and mysterious. Lost civilizations and ungodly deities; though neither of them was an archaeologist. One day, when her parents were in Iraq on a holiday to make the rounds on as many archaeological sites as they could, they reached the site of *Ashur*, an ancient Mesopotamian city on the west bank of the Tigris river, where queen Semiramis once reigned. There wasn't much to see in Ashur, only ruins of bygone days, old temples, streets and the squares of what had been houses. Not even ghosts remained. One could choose to behold the city as something totally meaningless and mundane, or as something full of awe and wonder, and he'd be right both ways. Her parents though, weren't there just for sightseeing. For them it was a personal matter, a vocation, a passion. Like a jazz fan visiting the Green Mill in Chicago, or a writer visiting Greenwich Village in New-York. They wanted to absorb as much as they could, inspect every detail and every nook and cranny. They jubilated the fact that they were touching something five or six thousands years old. They craved that connection to a lost world. They yearned to be a part of something much bigger than them, bigger than time. Samira wasn't much of an Archaeology aficionado when she met her husband, but he was, and passion is contagious, infectious, and if one meets another who's severely infected with passion, feverish with desire, it is inevitable and only a matter of time before he'd get the same disease. And so did her mother.

They were always far behind from the tourists group, never giving an ear to the guide because they knew more about the sites than he did. Always trying to catch up to the pack, to the bus. They were always late, the last ones to embark. However, when they reached the ancient city of Ashur, a site in the middle of nowhere, they got so carried away that they missed their bus home. By some unlikely mistake, the tourist guide didn't notice their absence. The sun was setting behind a dry horizon, and they were alone, with no reception. They were the only two beings that weren't at least five thousands years old; not even a plastic cup or a cigarette butt on the ground.

They waited a while for the bus to return, but it never showed up. They had no choice but to walk along the traces of the bus' tires left behind on the dirt. However, even those, after a certain distance, disappeared.

Thirst and exhaustion caught to Samira, specially with the burden of a child in her womb, only three month gestation at the time. So they took shelter by a lone tree to rest for a while, though before they knew it, dusk had already painted the sky a darker shade of blue. Her husband offered to stay awake, for his wife to have some sleep, hoping that a vehicle would pass by though there was no concrete road to speak of, a faint hope whatsoever.

At 2 a.m., as the husband fought against fatigue and drowsiness, completely surrounded by murkiness except for the feeble glow the moon cast on the barren land, he thought that he heard from a distance the sound of music, horns and trumpets, echoing through the night. He looked around, in the direction of the music, and he glimpsed an orange gleam coming from somewhere behind a hill. Is it a small town? Or is it some desert campers celebrating around a camp fire? he wondered. He woke up his wife, and together, with the help of flash lights from their mobile phones, managed to walk towards the light.

They climbed the hill with misshapen steps. Samira tripped on the way and had to make many rests. But finally they reached the top the of the hill. What laid beyond was a small town, its size roughly the size of the city of Ashur. Was it there on the map before? Stella's father was certain he'd double checked the map of the area before dusk and there was no mention of such a town. The abodes were a simple one story houses, about thirty or forty of them, scattered all around. Stella's parents descended the hill, and as they walked towards the small town the music stopped, and the town seemed utterly deserted and forlorn.

As they ambled through the empty streets, a dark skinned man came running towards them, wearing queer clothes that didn't match the fashion of the time: leather sandals and a simple white cloth around his belly and waist. He halted before them, and seemed to yell 'help! Help!'

in a language that was barely intelligible.

They followed the dark skinned man to a one story house, and once inside, they found an old lady, ornamented with a sundry of amulets and bracelets, and five ill children sleeping on the ground. Stella's mother noticed that the old woman had a tattoo of a sun in her right hand, and a moon on the left, and a hexagram on her forehead. The dark skinned man kept repeating 'help! help!' and pointed out to the children. Samira, an infectiologist, immediately recognized the sings of infection. The children were burning with fever, heavily breathing, and they all exhibited large red patches on their skin. Stella's mom instantly recognized the illness, and luckily, she always carried medication in her purse: analgesics and antibiotics. She was always careful and prepared when she traveled to such endemic zones. What medication she had on her was barely enough for five children, but it was sufficient to save them from imminent death. She gave each child the doses he needed, and reassured the old lady about their prognosis.

The old lady, who appeared to be a sort of a shaman, nodded her head several times in sings of thankfulness, and then, she retreated through back door and came back with a golden box. She called for Stella's mom to sit beside her, and opened the box for her. Inside was a single flask the size of a finger, containing what looked like a red liquid. The shaman opened the flask and handed it to Stella's mom, saying, '*drink, god elixir, for baby.*' Stella's mom, without hesitation, and without noticing how did the old lady knew she was pregnant, drank the elixir. She wouldn't have done it otherwise, but she felt compelled to. The moment she stepped into the town, an odd feeling flooded her heart, a feeling of peace, of resign. The red elixir slid down her throat like oil, and after a few minutes, she felt an euphoric, warm sensation in her belly that soon ascended to her chest and then to her head. At that instant, she felt as if stricken by a thunderbolt. She was knocked out right then and there.

Morning came, and Stella's parents woke up under the same lone tree under which they had previously settled. The bus was waiting for them, and the tourist guide kept apologizing for leaving them alone for the night. They mounted the bus, and returned to their hotel.

They were confused, but as far as they could tell, whether it was a dream or not, they both remembered it exactly the same. Few days later, before boarding the plane home, they returned to the spot, climbed back the hill, but behind they found nothing but a stretched out barren land; there was no town.

And that remained a mystery till this day.

▼

"Here's my number, call me if you want to meet again," Stella said as she stood up and put on her sunglasses.

"Sure will," I said, "it was, dazzling, to meet you, to say the least."

"You're a strange one yourself," she answered, winked, and left.

And that's how I met Stella.

7.

J

'I have a simple philosophy: Fill what's empty. Empty what's full. Scratch where it itches.'

Alice Roosevelt Longworth

A character trait that defines human beings, I think, is our inability to determine precisely what would make us happy. In other words, we wish for the *wrong* things. This fact made itself clear to me as I scrolled aimlessly through YouTube one cold April evening. I watched a video about how artificial islands were made, and another titled '*What's inside the camel's hump?*' The issue at hand was, just two weeks prior to that, my dying wish was some free time, because I was having my midterm exams. Even a lunch break, or the hours of sleep, had to be calculated. If I leisurely ate one more sandwich, or overslept an additional hour, it could've resulted in my utter failure—I am a veteran procrastinator. But when the exams belonged to the past, there I was, watching YouTube to *kill* time, whereas I strongly believed I'd be thrilled spending it exploring my passions and giving substance to my daydreams. Making artificial islands and learning about camel's humps, that's what I spent it on, and I was not by any stretch of the imagination *happy*.

That evening, I stumbled upon a video titled, '*The mysterious disappearance of the famous writer J.*' Naturally, I knew who J was, or at least I've read some of his novels, *The Blind Flutist*, *Fox in a Box*, *Thus Danced the Frog*, *Three Nights at the Moon-Hotel*, and *Poisonous*. J was the kind of prodigy that made those who counted on the long years of hard work want to give up writing and open a bakery instead. His first novel, *The Blind Flutist*, came out when he was only a boy of seventeen and won several international awards. After which nine others followed; a book each two years, that was the pace. However, it has been ten years now since the issuing of his last book. For some reason, J stopped writing. To say that he had disappeared is an overstatement, because he had never technically appeared. There were no photos of J whatsoever. He had never attended a book signing event, never toured, never did one of those reading sessions, never appeared on television, and had no social media account. The very few recorded interviews with him were conducted by phone only. No interviewer had ever personally laid eyes on the guy. J remained a mystery, a vanished mystery. Paradoxically, his absence from the public scene did not harm his sales or reputation, if anything, it boosted it. His novels sold like alcohol in the 1920s. To be fair, the success was not only owed to the enigma mantling the writer. His novels were, to say the least, master-pieces.

What little we knew about J are the following: all of his books were published in Sweden, by a publishing house called *Delfin*, However rumors had it that he's not from Sweden, originally. Some claimed he's from American origins, others debated that he's Indian. And perhaps I of all people have heard the strangest rumor of them all, one autumn afternoon, from my dad's friend.

I was only sixteen by then, and I had recently bought my first J novel, *The Blind Flutist*, a

choice that was made by pure randomness—I knew nothing about J then, I just liked the cover. I had overslept that day and simply skipped school, as a result, my father said he needed me at his law office to help organize some junk files. I grabbed my newly purchased novel and tagged along. At the office, I met my dad's paralegal, a guy of light humor and a moral compass that didn't always point to north, and upon seeing the novel, he said, "this might sound unbelievable, but I knew him, J. Him and I used to be close buddies back in middle school and high school. His name is Djaber. He was a real joy. Sweet kid, very shy, very sly." "Oh really? Are you still in touch?" I asked. "I wish. At the age of sixteen, he just disappeared from school. I never saw him again. I heard that his family had moved to Europe, or the US—his father was a politician, if I remember correctly—but no one knew for certain." "Oh, shame," I said. "Funny coincidence that you bought *The Blind Flutist*. I could still remember his bad handwriting on that stationary paper, telling the story of the flutist who had eyes but whenever he played a special flute, made from human bone, went blind, and instead, saw other things invisible to normal people, you know, like you and I. He was very creative, the bastard, and he was very excited about it, his first short story, and I was his first reader. Years later, he expanded it into a novel. Novels are not my thing, but once I saw the title one day on a bookshelf, and the letter J, I just had a hunch, I had to have it, and upon reading it, I knew for certain it was him. He still used the name of the flutist that I suggested years ago. I tried to get in touch with him, but to no avail. Real shame."

I wouldn't take my dad's paralegal's words for gospel—I wouldn't even take the gospel's words for gospel—it is in his nature to lie, but I believe he had no solid reason to lie to me that day. He only told lies when it was lucrative for him, and so, his words remained hung in the realm of possibility. Even when I grew old enough and learned about the mystery of J, dad's paralegal had moved out of town and I had no means to get in touch with him. I never had the chance to properly dig deep in the subject of J with him, and after a while, I gave up on the matter. After all, J was right, one needs to know nothing of the write apart from his writings. That is all that matters.

To be quite fair, it was J who launched my desire to be a writer. His fluent masterful prose and his unearthly imagination is what spellbound me to stick my head deep into the world of the word and hone my own skill. How could someone write in such a way, I wondered, how could someone imagine what J had imagined. And I thought, cutely-naive me, perhaps I could do it too. *Perhaps I could do it too*, how many bad artists this sentence has produced? Too many to count.

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Upon stumbling on that Youtube video about J, I remembered that I had to meet up with Stella that afternoon, to make an exchange of cheap art. She'd show me her black and white shots, and I my writings, like we agreed. Because she lost her memories of our time together, I had to win her back, make her remember even. Stella liked my writings from before the incident, so I was pretty confident I would make a good impression. In the time that followed her memory loss, I felt lonely, and in the confusion amidst that gray fog, and with the help of the bewitching paperweight on top of my desk, I wrote a short story. So far, I believed it was my finest, and it was the one I was going to show her. It was about a man and a woman who happened to be alone together on deserted island after a plain crash. The man didn't know how to start a fire, nor how to fish. And the woman kept on discussing the nature of morals. So perhaps I thought, it would catalyze something in her remembrance. Guilty as I may be, I used events from my real life and incorporated them in a story, but what the hell, how can anyone write stories if they don't do that themselves?

I quickly proofread the story, made last minute adjustments, printed it, put on clean clothes, combed my hair, brushed my teeth, a dash of perfume, another missing sock, cursed the heavens and went about my way.

In the university campus, I sat on a bench that faced a green gentle slope that ran down to an empty football field. I lit a cigarette and waited for Stella. The sky was veiled by a film of mist and a gentle cold breeze brushed off my skin. I relaxed, closed my eyes and let my thoughts adrift.

“Hey you,” she said as she sat beside me, “sorry for being late, I had some errands to run. Actually I still do, but I had to make some time for this, this is an important exchange after all.” She wore a long camel coat and a dark red scarf, in her hand two cups of steaming coffees from a vending machine nearby, and a portfolio. She took off her sunglasses, handed me a cup and smiled.

“Thank you, I was craving one.”

I handed her the envelope that contained my short story, and she handed me a portfolio sheltering about seventeen photos, all in black and white. My story in her hands, Stella sank into a deep silence and started reading, and I, upon noticing the concentration with which she delved into my work, started leafing through her photos. At first glance, I was enthralled by the polished pictures at hand, but upon further inspection, I started to notice the pattern behind Stella’s shots. A new pattern I had never seen before. The subject matter is oftentimes at the center of the photo, creating the illusion of symmetry that bewitched the eyes in subtle ways. The background consisted of an empty scenery, nothing to catch the mind and diverge it from the subject matter. The way she played with colors and lighting, transmuted the object into a symbol, and the images into meanings, concepts and reveries. I gave each picture a fair amount of time. I focused on the minutiae and let the general feeling of each photo sink deep. Each artist leaves his touch somewhere in his work, invisible to the common eye, and I set out to find those touches. There were pictures of slippers, of a rusty faucet, of an ashtray full of cigarette butts half of them marked with a dark lip stain, of a black cat, of a pond amid the woods, and as I leafed further, I stumbled upon portraits of some people I knew and others I didn’t; mine included (that shot she took that day at the college party). And then, at my surprise, there I had in my hands the portrait of Lady Shiva, in the same yellow dress (I recognized the dress despite it being colorless). Her gaze directly aimed at the lenses of the camera, as if she was staring right at me, with that devilish heavenly smile.

I leafed once again through her photos, marking my favorites, admiring others. Why would Stella have her picture? That I was about to ask when she suddenly broke the silence.

“Finished,” she said as she turned towards me. My anticipation for her reaction distracted my mind for a few seconds from the Shiva portrait. Now is the moment of truth, would she remember?

Stella’s eyes wore an ambiguous shade. She fell quiet for a while, seemingly hesitated, before she broke off, “It’s... good,” she said. And that was it. Good? Good sounded nothing like good when said in such manner.

“Good?” I asked.

“Yeah.. it’s good,” she repeated, avoiding eye contact this time.

“You didn’t like did you?”

“It’s not that I didn’t like it, it’s just that I didn’t.. really get it.”

“I left an open ending on purpose, sometimes it’s good to leave the reader wondering.” I did leave an open ending, because I honestly didn’t know how to end the story. Lousy writing, I

know.

She stalled again, then she said, “Look I am going to be honest, because it is pointless to give you a false review. I didn’t like it. Actually I forced myself to finish it. The concept was good and the prose was refined but, the delivery, not so much. I didn’t feel an urge to know what’s going to happen next. I’m sorry, maybe someone else would have a totally different opinion, but, it didn’t hit home for me.”

“I see,” I said. I wanted to say more, express a certain unjustified anger, but I remained speechless. I was dealt a fatal blow to my ego.

“Hey, don’t take it bad, perhaps.. writing isn’t for you, perhaps you’re good at something else.” Upon seeing the look on my face after having said those words, Stella immediately realized she had uttered the wrong thing. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you, I mean, you could get much better at it, all writers were bad at first, just keep trying,” she added as she rested her hand on my forearm.

Perhaps writing isn’t for you, is all I heard. I nodded several times, lips pursed together. So the girl for whom I wrote that short story doesn’t think I can write. Fair enough, she’s entitled to what she thinks and feels. I had nothing to protest. But oh boy, the silent wrath that writhed within me. Tell me I can’t do something, and every atom in my body will spin to prove you wrong. Of course that doesn’t apply to any person challenging me, only to the ones whose opinions I cared about, and Stella was definitely a person I wanted to prove wrong.

I calmed myself down then said, “Right. I will think about what you said. Somethings are not just for everybody right?”

“Oh, I’m sorry I hurt your feelings, I really do. Fuck, I was a total bitch to you right now.” She looked me deep in the eyes and rubbed my forearm. At that instance, I wanted to pull out my smart-phone, show her a picture of us together, a picture she took, and tell her everything. That we were fucking great together, and that she used to love my writings. But I couldn’t. I had a queer feeling that it would be pointless.

Stella had as much pictures of us together as I did. Did she not see them? Did she remember and didn’t like what she found out, and so chose not to bring it up and to pretend like she’s still amnesic? I was confused, and I didn’t want to meddle.

“No, it’s totally fine. That’s why you’re here right? To give an honest opinion. Anyway, about your pictures, real eye catchers, every shot almost tells a story. Of course, they can be improved. Sometimes the light could hit a better angle, and sometimes the center isn’t always the right position for the subject matter, but overall, marvelous,” I said, trying to avoid eye contact. I didn’t want her to see the disappointment in my eyes nor for I to see those enchanting dark pits of hers. But Stella’s gaze remained fixed on me, she nodded as she listened, a faint smile on her face.

“Thank you, I’m really glad you liked them.” Her hand still on my forearm. Why doesn’t she take her damn hand off?

“Of course. Actually, I want to buy my portrait. Would you frame it for me?”

“I’d gladly give it to you for free.”

“No, you’re an artist, I want to support you. Frame it, then we’ll negotiate the price,” I kidded. To my surprise, I didn’t want my portrait to remain with Stella. For some reason, I feared what would happen if she stared at it long enough. Did I no longer wish for her to remember?

“Thank you, and will do.” A short moment of silence passed before she spoke again. “About your story, it made me remember something. I don’t know if I should tell you this, or if you want

to hear it, but for the past couple of months, whenever I swept through all the pictures I took over the past few years, in chronological order, I felt like bits of my life are missing. Sometimes I see a picture of myself, and I can't remember who took it. And other times, when I see a selfie with a friend, a vague sense of absence overwhelms me, as if I want to see another face with me in that picture, as if someone should be there, but isn't. It's like trying to remember a dream after just waking up, it's vague and unsettling. Why would a story about two people alone in a desert make me feel this way. I know it doesn't sound that much of a big deal, but it's a feeling I've been reminiscing over a lot lately."

"I'm not sure what you mean," I said.

"Yeah.. of course not. I just thought.. never mind."

"Am I in any of the pictures you still have?" I ventured as I looked her straight in the eyes. We stared at one another for a few silent heartbeats that shouldn't have been there. She studied my face as if I were a statue she remembered from somewhere. "No," she shook her head unhurriedly, hesitantly, as if not so sure, then with more certainty, "No, you were not."

I felt a relief, why did I feel relief?

"I guess we were never that close then," I said.

"I guess not," she smiled briefly, still eying me, and then, as if afraid that I'd glimpse something in her eyes, she looked away.

"About what you said, it's either you forgot about someone, and then all his pictures were mysteriously deleted, and it's leaving gaps in your memory. Or it's an early onset of Alzheimers," I said.

"So, in both cases, I'm fucked," she kidded.

"We're all fucked one way or another. You're just beginning to understand how," I said.

She stood before me, kicked me hard on the tibia, then said, "I take back what I said, you should keep writing. I'm a nobody, and besides, I have Alzheimers, so you can't take my words seriously. I'm sorry I said what I said. I must go now, I'm late."

"I don't even know what you're apologising for," I said, "don't forget to frame the photo for me."

"Sure, let's do this again, someday." She stretched her hand, and I shook it. A hand shake, how ironical. Someone you used to kiss should never turn into someone you shake hands with. The relationship either moves forward or overheats itself into a global meltdown.

My short story flat on the bench beside me, I thought about what she said, about my writings and about the strange feelings she had when scrolling through her pictures. Why were our photos together, and my photos, missing from her repertoire? Did someone delete them? Were our memories together wiped out on purpose? Was this a sort of a vandalism against me? Did Shiva do it? And then I remembered that I totally forgot to ask her about Shiva's portrait. Why on earth did she have it?

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After Stella left, I didn't want to be in any place in particular, definitely not back home, so I put music in my ears, and I walked. Through the random streets of Bone I roamed, and when I reached the shoreline, my thoughts rearranged themselves in calmer, more clear patterns. I

continued down the line in a slow pace, my gaze absorbed in the change of colors between sky, clouds and glittering sea as the sun sank behind the horizon, and by the time I reached the harbor, dusk had overwhelmed the sky in a sad bluish hue. My mind is rarely quiet, and my thoughts are always rushing in a four dimensional, jammed two lane freeway. I found that walking clears the head and freshens the body, and I often felt the urge to walk, *alone*. Perhaps walking is the only state where both Mind and body could coexist in harmony. The body moves, but not in such intensity as to block the mind from undergoing deep thought processing, as opposite to working out, or juggling, where your mind is only absorbed in your physical strain. On the other hand, sitting around doing nothing, your body is totally relaxed, which gives too much room for your mind to go amok. Walking is the perfect balance between mind and body, and when those two work together in kinship, they unlock strange pathways in your mind that you didn't know existed, hence, producing wonders, as Nietzsche said, '*Never trust a thought didn't come by walking.*' The bastard used to walk ten hours a day, no wonder he had created works that shifted the course of humanity's intellect and swept the world from under its feet.

I bought a pack of Winston Reds, a bag of cheddar chips and a Selecto soda can from a nearby kiosk and sat on the edge of the sidewalk facing the harbor. The taste of cheddar lingering on my palate, the bubbles of the soda sparkling in my mouth, and the sight of distant ships, made me feel lonely, and thus, I thought about God: those two often go together, loneliness and god.

I wasn't particularly religious in my early years, but I had what I would dare call a 'unique' relationship with god. As a muslim, I did my prayers five times a day, and each time my forehead was on the ground, I closed my eyes and believed that whatever I said then would directly, and uninterruptedly reach god. As if god, at that moment, had no business but to listen to me. And it felt good. I never stressed about anything. How could you, when you believed that the absolute, unrivaled power in this universe is by your side? I'm telling you, that state was a bliss, and if you wonder why so many people has always been, are, and forever will be religious, here's your answer. God is the antidote to all misery. God is the antidote to life, and without him, we're no match against it. It will crush us down, reduce us into worms hiding in the darkest of muds.

Without indulging into philosophical or theological debates about God, (about which people don't care anyway), as a male, I was faced with a purely psychological issue hindering my belief. You see, all men, someday, sooner or later, will have to detach from their fathers. Every man must leave the comfortable shades under his father's safe gardens and venture out into the world. Every man must give up his father's patronage and go out into the unknown and make something of himself. Boys will be boys, and men will be men, and for men to fully prove their manhood, they must go into the dark woods and hunt the lion, slay the dragon, and bring back the forbidden fruit; or, in our millennial, have a job, become financially capable of taking care of oneself and surely enough, in the future, of a wife and kids. A man who do not put bread on his family's table is just a male, until proven otherwise. Now of course, one might argue that that's a rudimentary and outdated image of manhood. But is it really?

Now, as God in Islam occupies the father figure, I also had to detach from him. One day I thought, '*God, you'll remain in my heart, but I need to face life on my own now,*' and simply like that, I stopped praying. For the first time, I faced life as a human being, alone and clueless. No more prayers begging to be saved from every trouble I got myself into; no more wishing for what I desire. From that single moment on, I took my first step out into the unknown to prove myself a man—a metaphysical man.

As I ate more chips, I wondered, what if God was a 'she' and not a 'he' (needless to say, I know, if god ever existed, he would probably neither be a male nor a female, but such thought is useless because we can't imagine nor relate to a conscious being who's asexual. And needless to say too, that God might not be a being at all, but the All, the Everything, like Spinoza and the

hermits imagined). What if God was a mother figure instead? I thought. I wouldn't have to separate myself from my mother, neither from a mother figure, and my spirituality would have probably taken a whole other turn. And then I ventured further into my harbor-dreaming: if God was a female, would the love I feel for her take romantic dimensions? I could certainly imagine it. How wonderful—and twisted—would it be, if a person was in love with his God, and being convinced that his God shared the same feelings? (you know, since God loves us all unconditionally, as long as we believed in him and his religion). After all, it makes sense. Men are usually more religious than women—mostly because religion is about power and being right—but when a woman becomes religious, it is stronger, more intense. One way to put it is, the most religious woman is more religious than the most religious man, and I believe, it is because God is a male figure. Daughters are more attached to their fathers, and in the extreme case, a woman can always fall in love with her God, the all mighty, all loving, man-like figure she's ever going to meet.

That was the main reason why I had to forsake God. Of course, there are many other reasons that made me drift further and further from religion, and if I could sum it up in one word, it'd be '*Rationale*'. I know that it sounds pretentious as hell, '*I'm a man of reason, I am smarter than you,*' is basically how it sounds. I don't mean it in such manner. If my *rationale* bore any fruit it would be that I didn't know anything. But when it came to religion, once you start asking the right questions, you'll start to chop off the parts that make you think, '*Wait a minute, something that doesn't make sense surely didn't emanate from God. God is rational.*' And as you delve deeper and deeper, chopping this off, trim that off, you'd be left with nothing but a carcass.

That being said, I think religion is an imperative. Say whatever you want about religion, but I think that humanity wouldn't have come this far without it. It transformed every tragedy, calamity, loss, from '*bad luck*' into '*a blessing in disguise*' '*God is testing your faith.*' '*You are washing away your sins.*' '*After hardship comes relief.*' '*God plagues the ones he loves.*' It transformed death into a passage to an eternal life. It transformed goodbyes into au-revoirs. It transformed injustices into an afterlife open-theater justice court where everyone will get what he fucking deserves. It transformed secret good deeds into palaces in heaven. Moreover, the genius of religion did not lie only in the answers it stipulated, but in making everyone believe that they were true. Whatever evil religions produced over the course of history, I'd say it was an understandable side effect. The alternative would have been worse.

One interesting fact I discovered, God is separate from religion. Even if you throw the whole of religion off your back, God remains real and standing. Or at least *mine* did. I believed that whatever religion men and women belonged to, the God in each one's mind is unique. Perhaps they do agree on the fundamental characteristics of God: He's the creator, he's the one in control, and he loves me (for some reason), however the rest of whatever makes God what he is, is different for each person. Hence, my God is not your God, and his God is not hers. And even after I no longer held my religion on a divine pedestal, my God was still a core I couldn't shake off in my being. And even though I had to detach from him to go wild and seek my own answers, my God remained concrete and present in my heart, and I honestly have no idea how to explain that.

And yet, I may eventually have to end his world.



As I walked home, the pneumatic cheddar chips in my stomach flung open the gates of hunger. At that instant, I realized I hadn't eaten a single bite since the day before. Coffees and

cigarettes have a way of deluding your body away from starvation, like a an illusionist and his sexy assistant, with a masterful trick of caffeine and nicotine they hook the attention of the flesh and the calls of hunger go unheard and unnoticed, until something snaps the body from its disillusionment, like cheddar chips, and suddenly it becomes aware of its famishment.

I walked home bearing two holes, one dug by the disappointment of Stella's reaction to my story, and the other by the missing nourishment; and no man should carry more than one hole at a time. So when I reached the MadBuddha, I immediately entered for a bite.

"Sorry we're closing," said the waiter cleaning the tables. The restaurant was empty and the lights, except for the ones above the counter, were off. I checked the time, 11:04 p.m., It was late, and I didn't even notice. Another disappointment. I really craved something salty and consistent, a burger, or that amazing chicken salad. The moment I was about to walk out, a man in a bone white apron appeared from the kitchen, and upon seeing me, he said, "wait, I can fix you something quick if you want."

"No it's no bother really," I responded. He might be the chef, I reckoned.

"It's fine, I'm still not going home anytime soon, sit down."

I thanked him and sat by the bar. He went behind the sink, washed his hands and then he clicked some buttons on a laptop in a corner and a piano jazz tune started playing from the speakers hung on the walls.

He stared at me for a short while, as if studying my face, then said, "if you recognize who's playing, your meal's on the house." He slung the kitchen towel on his shoulder and whistled along with the tune.

Uncommon request, but whatever. After listening for a few seconds, it seemed to me that I had distinguished the sound of the chords. "Bill Evans?" I answered, making a wild guess.

"Bravo, it's *Moon Beams, 1962*. Chicken salad right? I remember you, you often order that single plate."

"Yeah that's right," I said, a little impressed, "I'd like that, and if you still have any garlic bread and french fries left, then please. I can pay for those, if it's too much."

"You can order whatever is left from the day. In a country who mostly listens to mainstream cheap music, you definitely earned yourself a free meal for recognizing Bill Evans' tune," he said as he glimped at me while washing a clean plate.

"So I presume you are the owner?" I adjusted myself on the seat and placed the short story beside me.

"Correct," he said. He appeared to be in his forties. A thin figure, tall, back slightly arched; prominent face bones, as if chiseled from ice; green narrow eyes that made you vaguely restless whenever laid upon you, as if he was always seeing more than your mere physical appearance. The two millimeter buzz-cut on his head heightened those effects, giving him a razor blade edge. There was a tattoo covering the totality of his left arm up to the elbow, strange lines of hieroglyphic shapes, pharaonic I presumed. Upon further inspection, the tattoo seemed to cover a burnt skin. As I followed the line of tattoo down to his fingers, I noticed he was missing half of his pinky. Strange fella, I thought, a little dangerous maybe, but kind enough to offer free meals.

With a long black knife, he cut the chicken, chopped the lettuce and tomatoes with great skills.

"That's one hell of a knife you got there," I commented.

"It's a sad knife. It hasn't and will never serve its true purpose," he said.

"What do you mean? Looks like its serving its purpose perfectly," I said. He tossed the chicken in the pan and said nothing. He never explained what he meant, at least not until months later.

I pulled out the short story from its envelop and started reading it again, in an attempt to pinpoint its weaknesses and its dull parts, but no sooner did I reach the second page, my meal was served. Three plates were laid before me, chicken salad, fries and garlic bread. Famished as I was, I let go of my reading and dug in.

A few bites deep, I noticed that he simply stood there, arms crossed, and watched me eat from the other side of the bar. To be honest, I don't like eating alone when I have company. It's either we both eat, or no one does. So being watched as I ate wasn't exactly a thing I enjoyed, so I offered him some fries.

"Not hungry," he said.

"Okay," I said, mouth full, "It's good though, the chicken salad."

"I know."

I resumed my dining, waiting for him to go do some errands, wash the dishes or mop the floor or something, but he didn't budge. He remained standing, eyes on me.

"Say," I said, "do you know what's inside the Camel's hump?"

"There's fat inside the camel's hump," he answered matter-of-factly, as if he was on a TV-game.

"Actually.. yes. spot on! Most people would say there's water in there, you know, since the camel lives in the desert and all."

"Water? that's just stupid."

"Well, yeah it is, but it is just a first thought, no one is going to think hard about what's inside the camel's hump. They think: desert, heat, a sac on the animal's back, so it must be water. An induction process that happens in a matter of seconds."

He squinted his eyes at me, and I couldn't quite tell if he was dissatisfied with my answer or thinking about it, then he said, "Coke? Sprite?"

"Selecto please." I was starting to get thrown off by him.

He walked to the refrigerator and brought a can of Selecto for me, he cracked it open and poured it in a glass with two cubes of ice. For himself, a glass of milk right from the carton. We sipped our drinks in silence, and for some reason, silence around this fella put me on edge. Aside from during sex or trying to get a girl's attention, no one should stare at another in silence. When eyes meet, words should follow, that's how it goes. In other words, I don't like being watched. I was about to start up another random conversation when he suddenly grabbed my story.

"Is this a story or a dull essay you had to write for college?" He asked.

"Yeah, a short one."

"You wrote it?"

"I guess I did."

He glanced at me, then back at the stack of papers, as if assessing whether I looked liked someone who could write or not, then he said, "I want to read it."

"Sure," I responded. Anything to keep you from watching me eat.

He sat back on a tall chair, sipped from his milk, and started reading. Other than Stella, never had anyone before read anything I wrote with such focus. Once he started reading, his gaze never left the pages. I ate, and watched him instead, and other than the sound of Bill Evans' piano, the clatter of my fork against the plates, and the swish of pages being turned, I heard nothing. I studied his face as he read, sometimes he frowned at the words, but mostly he had no reaction at all. Once I finished eating, I lit a cigarette, put the lighter on the counter. He read his last word, looked again at the title, then back at me.

"Do you like what you wrote?" he asked, placing the story carefully back on the counter.

"I usually hate what I write, but sometimes I think I did an okay job. What do you think?"

"It's bad," he said as he lit a cigarette, "but not hopeless."

"Yeah, I've already been told that today."

"There are too many '-ing' verbs, too many adverbs, too many unnecessary adjectives, too many abstract words that add nothing to the meaning. The passive voice had been used quite too often, and in dialogue, you don't have to mention who's talking each time when it's obvious. And these are but first remarks, I could go deeper."

I was flabbergasted. To begin with, I didn't expect a chef to take interest in my story and read it whole. Secondly, for a chef to give me such writing comments on his first read, that I did not see coming.

"Go on, please, if there's anything else," I requested, avid for more.

"Oh boy, the sentences are sometimes too long, it wouldn't harm if you use a comma you know. Also the way you present your ideas isn't very clear, some paragraphs I had to read twice to get your point. And the punctuation—man, if you're going to write, learn your punctuation."

"Okay," I said, nodding several times, "I'll keep that in mind. How about content-wise?"

"The story was interesting enough to me, its ambiguity built tension, but unfortunately, you failed to resolve it. It's unfinished right?"

"Yeah, I didn't know how to, so I let go."

"Not finishing a story is a subtle art, carrying great risk. Don't do it unless you are certain your story won't be damaged by the absence of a grand closure." He dragged from his cigarette, and sipped milk. They go in tandem, after each a drag, comes a sip. There was a secret ratio between the amount of air he dragged and the volume of milk he drank each time, because when the cigarette reached its end, he drank the last drop of milk. Strange fella. Don't you mess up the whole point of an arm tattoo when you drink white milk?

"You know so much about writing for a chef," I commented.

"I know so much about many things."

"Do you write?"

"Used to," he answered as he left his seat, gathered my empty plates into the sink and started washing them.

"Did you ever hope to get published?"

He looked at me funny, scrubbed the second plate, then said, "I have been, ten times."

"No shit?" Of course, you've probably linked the dots by now, but at the time, I didn't. I mean, how could I?

"Yeah.. No shit."

“I guess I never asked you your name.”

“You can call me J,”

“J like in J the writer who disappeared after writing ten novels?” I asked, eyes wide open.

“You’re not wrong.”

“You’re fucking with me. How do I know you’re not just a fan trying to impersonate him, using the fact that the guy is a ghost.” After having said that, I remembered what my dad’s paralegal said to me years ago, that J was his classmate.

He leaned against the wall and put his hands in his pockets, then said, “I still want to remain a ghost, and I don’t need to prove to you that I am who I claim to be.”

“Why did you tell me then? what’s the point?”

“I am not sure. Well, you asked, and I don’t like lying. Second, something about you inspires trust, call it a gut feeling.”

“Flattered, but you still have to prove who you are.”

“Okay, what the hell.”

J then asked me to follow him. We left the restaurant through a back door, and up the stairs to the second story we climbed. The apartment inside, right above the restaurant, was where J lived. A spacious three bedroom flat, scarce in furniture, clean, and lonely. In the living room stood two large bookcases, each shelf crammed to the brim with volumes of different prints. And another smaller cabinet containing a collection of vinyl records, on top of which laid a record player. Through the living room we entered what looked like his study. A large desk, a laptop, a coffee machine and a printer. On the middle of the wall to the left, was a single shelf covered in a glass box, seating ten pairs of volumes, each pair a hard cover of a novel and a manuscript. In the corners of the room stood heaps and mounds of printed writing, some of them piling up almost to the roof. On another single shelf, rested a pair of baby shoes, and a glass jar containing what looked like a lump of meat in a liquid, and a finger.

J opened the glass box and singled out—randomly as it seemed—two pairs of volumes and laid them on the desk before me. “These are my two first novels, first editions, and these are the original manuscripts.” The titles read, *Poisonous* and *The Blind Flutist*. I held the first novel in my hands and opened the first page, the edition was dated 2000, and a note that said, ‘*To J, Congratulations on your first work, may there be many to come; your editor.*’

“This is really you,” said I.

“I told you, I tell no lies.”

“I have so many questions, but first, why did you tell me?” I asked, leafing through the manuscripts he put on the desk.

J sat on the desk chair, crossed his legs and said, “Trust me, if I had met you yesterday you’d be gone right after finish your meal.”

“Something happened between then and now?” I asked.

“Let’s just say, I’ve had a very good dream last night. The kind of dreams that sticks with you all day long.”

“Did someone tell you to lift off your mask to the first writer you meet?” I asked, kiddingly.

“Actually, a cat in a bowler-hat did.”

I was very confused. I was going to broach the topic of my encounter with Mr. Dandy, but

then, I judged it too soon.

“Tell me, someone has read your short story before you came here right?”

“Yup..”

“And they did not like it as much did they?”

“No, they didn’t.”

“Was it a girl you liked?”

“Kind of..” I answered.

“Then here’s your answer. Let’s say you remind me of someone, and I want to help you become a better writer, to prove her wrong, don’t you want that?”

I gazed hard at him, then I looked around. It seemed a little too far fetched, first Mr. Dandy, then Shiva, then J? Is there a pattern here?

“This is exactly what I want,” I responded.

“Great then, let’s help you write your first novel. Do you have any idea about what are you going to write about?”

Do I have any idea? Alright Shiva, let’s give it a try.

“I do, I know exactly what the novel is going to be about.”

8.

The Zelda Incident

Eternity in a Letter

The kid named Leto

“All God does is watch us and kill us when we get boring. We must never, ever be boring.”

Chuck Palahniuk

“Goddammit! I got lost again. Which way is backward?” Asked Noah, sitting beside me at my desk before my computer, playing Zelda.

When someone meets another for the first time, there are many key elements that would later determine whether they’re going to be very good friends, or just two people who can’t stand one another, and usually the devil is in the details. Sometimes it boils down to how the person actually looks, something about their face, the hair cut, the tone of voice, the smell of their breath, the way they shake hands. Such details, which are usually picked upon during the first few seconds, are sometimes what sets the tone for the next years of the relationship. But there are other factors that a person might come to discover later on; deeper and less conspicuous. As for me and Noah, I can summarize it to two points: we disliked the same kind of people, and we were both realistic about our self-worth. Add those two together, and somehow, by a mechanism that I can’t really explain, a common dark sense of humor would develop. But perhaps I should add another factor that helped in obscure ways to strengthen the friendship: we both played a lot of Zelda games in our boyhood and teenage years.

The clock showed 11:37 p.m., we sat at my desk, facing the computer screen, playing Zelda on a Nintendo emulator. The room was dark, splashed by a blue-grayish hue from the screen. On the desk, aside from the computer, laid the leftovers of four Shawarma sandwiches, half empty cans of Selecto and beer, an ashtray filled with cigarette butts. The smell of sweat, tobacco, meat and cheese filled the room, but our minds picked nothing of which; we were fully immersed in the psychedelic, complex world of *Zelda: a link to the past*.

When Noah and I found out that our common favorite video-game was Zelda, or the Zelda series, we decided to go through them all once again. Fifteen official games overall. Each a world of its own. That night, Noah came to place to help him clear the Misery Mire dungeon in *Zelda: a link to the past*, since I already cleared it a night before him.

At first we thought we’d play it as a tribute to our childhood, the good old days, and an expenditure of quality time, but as soon as we plunged into the game, we took it more seriously than anything else in our lives. The games claimed first priority, everything else became

secondary. When we lost, real frustration penetrated the heart, and when we cleared a boss, a genuine sense of achievement overwhelmed us. That's what Zelda does to you.

One thing I noticed that night, Noah was not himself lately. He has lost some weight. His beard is almost that of a viking, and there was sadness in his eyes. For a fan of Zelda games, he was unusually hyper focused on the games lately, almost as if he was escaping something.

"Okay, check the map once again, see if there's any room you missed and memorize how to get there, then let's make a plan, no unnecessary detours, straight to the mark," I said.

After hours of going astray amid the mazes of the mire, and after several setbacks and deaths, we finally cleared the dungeon, and as Noah was strolling the villages nearby, completing quests to find the location of the next dungeon, I asked him, nonchalantly, "Hey, at the party last time, I saw you leaving with that girl, from chemistry class, is everything okay with you and Lin?"

His hands still on the key board, he said, "It hasn't been so great with Lin, for a while now. I was just blowing off some steam with the other girl. Nothing much."

"Oh, I see."

"What?" he asked, eyes glued on the screen.

"You never cheated on Lin in any way before, that's a first. Did you blow off that steam?"

"I know. I didn't say it felt right. And no, I didn't blow off any steam. After a short conversation that lead to nowhere, I told her I had to leave."

"Because you felt guilty?"

"That, and because the girl was a true bore. She had no imagination, I couldn't stand her."

"Is imagination that important when you want to blow off steam? Go to the blacksmith in the village, he'll ask you to find his brother in the caves of the dark mountain," I added.

"I didn't want to blow *physical* steam. What I wanted was to feel that excitement, that sparkle, when you meet someone special for the first time, when you feel mutual attraction, connection," he said.

"You no longer feel that with Lin?" I asked

"It's complicated," he answered.

"So the other girl wasn't *it*?"

"Nah, she wasn't *it*. She lacked imagination; I could never connect with someone who can't imagine."

"Some people prefer the real world, that doesn't make them less special," I commented, sipped from my Selecto and lit a cigarette as I watched him play.

"When man imagined, he sailed to uncharted islands, discovered new continents, dove in the darkest, deepest parts of the ocean, dug the hot layers of earth until he reached its core and saw with his mind's eyes what laid buried in there. And when he was finished with earth, he flew to the sky, to hidden castles in the clouds, to the moon, to other worlds, planets, and galaxies. And even when he was finished with our world, he traveled back ten thousands years in the past, and ten others into the future. He opened doorways to other dimensions, to other civilizations. He ventured into hell, and walked the golden palaces of heaven, and even survived when all of that was something of the past. He even knocked on God's door, and he barged in uninvited. That's where our imagination got us. Now can you imagine how dull someone who can't imagine is? Give me a hundred years and I wouldn't feel a single ounce of emotion for her," he blabbered and jabbered. He always does that without notice. He'd start talking, on and on about something,

and the bastard always makes a point.

“And yet, you’re a mathematician. One would hear you talk and he’d say here’s a painter or a novelist, but you like math. Just numbers and pure logic.”

“It just shows how much you know about math,” he answered.

“Am I wrong though?”

“True, it is about abstract numbers and pure logic, but that’s just to cover the basics. Once you reach a certain threshold, only imagination can lead you forward. After all, math is nature painted in numbers, and there’s so much about nature we still need to imagine.”

“I see—“

“Math is also the language of God,” he interrupted. “God didn’t speak to us in Hebrew or Hindu or Arabic. I mean, he might’ve had, I don’t know, but God’s true word is math. There’s so much to unpack, so much to read, if we could only crack the code. I believe there’s real beauty in the world. True there’s also cruelty, but at the heart of it, the world is an aesthetic creation, and its true elegance lies in the laws by which everything is governed, in harmony, quietly, humming the greatest symphony no man could ever produce. That’s why I love math, you dumb fuck. I want to dig out those laws, decipher them, and read them leisurely as I sip the best coffee my mouth had ever tasted, and then, perhaps I’d behold the greatest painting ever painted,” he went on again. That’s the thing with introverts, they choose one or two people and open the dams of their souls to. To the rest of the world, they’re an inconspicuous closet standing in a corner.

‘*To live, is to suffer*’ or so said most of philosophers, poets, thinkers, and I should add, Lady Shiva. Dear friend, if they were right, I wonder if the beauty you are seeking would make up for all that agony; or so I wanted to tell him. Instead, I said, “so God should have given Moses the ten equations rather than the ten commandments?”

“Yeah I guess, but they probably didn’t know advanced math back then, so that’s why.”

“Makes sense,” I responded.

Noah remained quiet for a while, then he ventured, “I don’t know what’s wrong with Lin, she criticizes me a lot lately, not in a rude way, but still, it gets me. Besides, I don’t know, she doesn’t act like a woman *in love* anymore, and she’s still not given herself to me, if you know what I mean. I think our love is dying.”

“Look man, I don’t know the details of your relationship, but I know her, and I could tell you two things for sure, she’s a decent girl, and she loves you.” Of course, I only speculated. No one could tell for sure what lays in the heart.

“Yeah well, I don’t feel it.”

“Listen, I think, if she criticizes you, it only means she sees the potential in you, she sees in you the man you could become, and she’s pushing you towards that,” I said.

“Ahuh,” he said.

“What, you think that you are the man that all women should long for? You think that you are worthy of being the center of her world? You’d be terribly deluded if you do. You’re a disaster, you’re useless and immature. You think you’re a man? you’re wrong. A man is, before all else, is someone who earns a living, and someone who gets laid. You’re a broke virgin. You’re but a kid, and she sees that, but she’s okay with it, after all, she’s also struggling with her own insecurities, but she wants to help you manifest the man you could become, because she has already decided that you are worthy of her, or else why would she bother with you?” I continued. Again, I was merely speculating.

"Even if you're right, screw you."

"Look, if you want a half-wit to idolize and worship you for the person you are now, there's plenty of them, but believe me, you'd soon get bored with her, and you'd soon realize the error in her brain for falling head over heels for someone like you. Look, Lin is not an ordinary girl, she has depth and character, and the fact that she singled you out from all the guys she knew should give you a little confidence in who you are. I am not saying you should be a cuckold and put up with everything she does or does not. By all means, fight for what you believe you deserve in this relationship, but do not deem your love a failure just because she's genuine with you."

"Damn, how much did she pay you?"

"I'm just saying, I could be wrong, I mean, you know better."

"Yeah well.. maybe, but you know, when something sounds off, it is probably off. Unless you're paranoid, which I know I am not. And fuck you, *you're* useless and immature," he said. From the look on his eyes, I knew he liked what I'd just told him, but he could never admit it.

"Bright side is, at least we know we're useless and immature."

What I didn't know at that moment was, that Noah and Lin had already broken up. Only after I met with Lin later on that she explained everything to me. I guess he chose not to tell me in order to not explain the details and live it all again. It must've been painful. You don't just end a four year relationship and move on with your life.

▼

After a couple of hours playing the mind dazzling Zelda, we called it a night. Noah stretched on my bed, lit a cigarette and said he was probably going to spend the night at my place. Whenever he decides to crash at my place, he always takes my bed. I fought him on it at first, but then I reckoned that I don't mind sleeping on the floor mattress after all. Some causes are just not worth fighting for.

I dashed to the kitchen to prepare some coffee. I put the moka pot on the stove, sat on a chair and pondered about Shiva's offer. She said that she expected an answer after three days from our meeting, and there I spent a hole day idling about. I should have listened to the cassette in her yellow Sony Walkman, remembered the memories of mankind, and made up my mind whether life is suffering or joy, and if it's the former, whether it is worth all that suffering. But instead, I tossed off the Walkman in the drawer of my desk and hadn't touched it ever since. Even when it's about the end of the world, I still procrastinate.

The sound of coffee boiling inside the moka pot jolted me out of my midnight wonders. I poured down two large mugs and walked back to my room, and there, on the harsh rug, in the middle of the jumble and the gray sickening light, I found Noah on the floor, face up, trembling, his body shaking, his eyes rolled up, his back stiff. On the rug, beside his epileptic body, I saw the yellow Sony Walkman, and attached to it, a long string that ended with two earphones on Noah ears. The drawer of my desk was pulled open.

There, I knew, I fucked up.

I strained not to drop the mugs off my hands, and once I managed to safely put them on the desk top, I knelt before Noah and tried to snap him awake from his trance. I called out his name, slapped his face, tried to stop his body from trembling, and when all my efforts were of no avail,

I started to genuinely panic. The lights went out and quickly came back, at that instant, the part in my brain that does the thinking when I'm in a state of panic decided that I should take off the earphones and stop him from listening any further, and as my hands reached out to his ears, the lights went out and came back again, then I heard a voice from behind, "Oh please, Don't do that," it said.

I turned around and there was Mr. Dandy in his burgundy suit, bowler hat and his wide green cat-eyes. "If you interrupt the process of remembering you might cause real, irreversible damage," he continued. "What should I do?" I asked, leaving the fact that he just materialized in my room for another time. "There's nothing you can do, you just wait, and hope he comes out of it unharmed."

"Is this bad?" I asked

"Yes, it is quite a predicament," he stated, very calmly.

"Shouldn't it be safe?"

"For you, yes. You were prepared, even though in subliminal ways. For him, not so sure."

"What do we do now?!"

"Now we wait." He sat on a chair, the one previously occupied by Noah, and drank from one of the hot mugs. "How did you find your meeting with Lady Shiva," he asked, nonchalantly.

Still bewildered by Noah's stiff body shaking on my floor, I said, "What?"

"Calm down, when there's nothing you can do, it is pointless to stress out. I asked about your meeting with Lady Shiva."

I sat on the rug and watched Noah, after a few seconds, the devil left his body and he seemed to be sleeping peacefully. "I don't know, she wants me to help her end the world. She made a point, but I still have to think about it," I answered.

"You'll decide whatever you'll decide," he commented.

"Yeah, it's all predetermined right?"

"It could be."

"What do you think I should do? I mean, ending the world, that's one hell of a decision."

He looked at me funny, then he said, "I am not supposed to tell you what to do. But whatever you choose, you make sure you follow through."

"What does that supposed to mean?" At that instant, Noah began to move.

"He's fine, I'll leave now. By the way, you're supposed to give your answer to lady Shiva by tomorrow. Here's the address." He handed me another scrap of paper. "Alright, I'll see myself out now."

"Wait, will we meet again? I have a lot of questions," I blurted out.

"Oh please, you'll see me around. And worry not, young man, prophet of doom, you will have all your answers." With that, he walked out of my room and disappeared, to wherever realm he existed in.

Noah moved his body slowly and sat on the floor. Eyes on the ground, he remained quiet for a long while, motionless.

"Everything alright buddy?" I asked.

When his eyes met mine, I saw the unquestionable mark of wisdom, pain, and

memories. He smirked, blinked, a tear fell off his cheek. He stood up, stretched, and faced me. “My friend, remember this: Oblivion, is a bliss. Ignorance, is heaven.”

“Hey, what the hell happened? What did you see?”

“You know what happened, and you know what I saw. I know why you have such a device, and I know the deal you have been offered.”

“Come on man, sit down, let’s talk, after that, let’s make you forget everything you saw. The B side of the cassette will make you forget everything you had just remembered. Just sit down.”

“Oh, that. Yes.” In a brusque move, Noah crushed the Walkman with the cassette still inside with his foot. With one stamp from his heel, he smashed the device into pieces. “I can’t forget, not yet. I will leave now, don’t look for me, don’t try to stop me.” And he walked out of my room heading towards the door. When I tried to stop him, something that he specifically told me not to do, he turned and with a swift move from his index finger on my solar plexus, he knocked me down, leaving me unconscious on the floor.

When morning came, I woke up, and I found a letter beside me on the linoleum cold floor.

▼

“Let me tell you the story of a young man named Leto, who breathed and died a very, very long time ago. Perhaps I should mention first that this name, *Leto*, had only been used for the first seven years of this man’s life, after that, he remained nameless. At the age of seven, one winter night, the kid Leto was on his bed ready to sleep on a bed of hay. He had a meager supper with his mother, peasant father, and two little kid sisters in their cottage on a far fetched village that belonged to a declining empire. That night, an army of three hundred and thirty seven men raided that village. They burned it down and slaughtered every man. Children were abducted, women were raped, and Leto’s parents weren’t an exception. Before the child Leto’s eyes, he witnessed his father’s throat oozing with blood, his mother monstrously violated, and his two kid sisters burn alive. The child Leto couldn’t scream, or even make a sound, not because he was terrified beyond death, but because he was mute. He wasn’t deaf, he heard it all, the cries of agony, the shouts for salvation, the wails, but he wasn’t able to make none of these; I was mute.

Leto was one of the few kids and young girls who survived the attack, and who were taken as a loot instead to the conquering empire. Leto had no time to grieve his family, nor to fully process his sorrow, because as soon as he set foot on the soils of his new home, he underwent hard training to become a soldier. He would sweat all day, have one scant meal at eventide, and then sleep on a cold hard bed at night, only to repeat the same meaningless toil the next day. Exhaust and hunger never left his body, and all he could dream about was a few more hours of sleep, and a loaf of bread to fill the pangs of his stomach.

Sometimes however, Leto would be spared the unmerciful training. Noble men from the high court would specifically inquire for him, bathe him in rosemary water, comb his hair and clothe him in fine silk. Some dukes and barons, as nature have it, did not prefer the milky bulgings and the dreamy intimacies of women, but rather the innocent angelic figures of young boys, and unfortunately for Leto, a duke of a name no one cares to remembers, had taken a special liking to him. “*He’s mute, he doesn’t scream. I hate boys who scream, I end up killing them, I always do,*” the duke said. Up until Leto became of age, he was taken to the duke’s private chambers twice a week. For three consecutive years, Leto had lost what was left of his sylphlike soul to the

rot perverseness of a rich man in a castle.

At the age of twenty four, Leto was once again taken a hostage after the army that trained him lost a battle; It was his third and last war. Inside the dungeons where he was kept, Leto had been tortured in the most brutal of ways for information he didn't have, and couldn't possibly tell. The enemy couldn't believe Leto was mute, they decided he was simply choosing to stay quiet as a token of loyalty, so they used every mean they had to make him talk. Fingers were cut one by one, then toes, then teeth, then eye balls, then genitals, and last, I was skinned alive, and died of blood loss and infection.

What a tragedy, you might think. What a violent story, what misery, what an unfortunate young man. The thing is, my friend, what happened to Leto had happened over and over again, for countless times throughout the history of mankind. I was Leto, and I was many others, who had lived a meaningless life and died a meaningless death. Who had suffered, starved, wailed and agonized. Who had been beaten, oppressed, raped, murdered, humiliated, deprived of every ounce of humanity, by none other than their fellow humans, and never got justice for what was done onto them. I was the other party as well, I was the oppressor, the raper, the murderer, the corrupt, the tyrant. I have delved into the caves of human darkness, I understood that darkness and embraced it, and I realized, with unrivaled certainty that the worst thing for a human being is to be weak, for the weak suffer the most, by none other than those who are stronger. We have within us infinite potential to do evil. We excel at hurting one another. History is laden with examples, with lessons, and yet, we are unable to learn, and will never be. The world wars, the Mongol conquests, the annihilation of the American Indians, The Russian Civil war, the Chinese civil war, the Algerian war, the Napoleonic wars, the Thirty Years war, the Mao Zedong famines, the Congo free state genocides, the Atlantic and Mideast slave trades, the fall of the Ming Dynasty, the Crusades, the Jihad, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Timur, Queen Mary I, Vladimir Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Idi Amin, Pinochet, Leopold, Fu Sheng, Caligula, and many other Tyrants, wars, famines and genocides that lived and happened in the deep history and that are forgotten from humanity's short memory.

The purpose of these memories was to help you decide whether life is misery or bliss. I have met Lady Shiva a number of times throughout my memories, and I know her purpose. I am not here to judge, but since I confiscated those memories from you, I will give you your answer, and leave you to decide what to do with it.

We are born into this world without our consent. We don't choose our parents, our lineage, our genes, our environment, our religion, our kingdoms. We come to the world vulnerable, naked and weak, and we cling to whomever we find to protect and nourish us, but no sooner do we come of age than we come face to face with the only truth that will forever shape our view of the world: pleasure and pain. Suddenly, our purpose is born, chiseled, sharp and clear: seek pleasure, in whichever form it comes, physical, moral, spiritual, and avoid pain at all cost, again, in whichever form it comes. In most cases, pain and pleasure are like light and darkness, the absence of one invites the other.

However, there is a fundamental problem with our *seeking of pleasure*, and that is, *it is laborious*. We must toil day and night to chase away *hunger* and keep a *warm shelter*. We must fight, sometimes with our lives on the line, to maintain *security* and *peace*. We must conform, abide to the laws of the group, and accept to be molded in ways we don't always approve of to *belong*. We must meet certain criteria, unattainable for a number of people, to find *love, intimacy* and *friendship*. We must slave and sweat, we must be disciplined and orderly, we must experience failure after failure, to reach a certain level of hierarchy in life and earn the *esteem* and the *recognition* we need to earn respect by the fellow members of the society we belong to, and to not dwell in chasms of bitterness and *self-loathe*. And even when all of the previously mentioned needs are met, food, shelter, warmth, security, belonging, love, friendship, esteem, we

still sense a void inside of us, an *unfulfillment* that can only be quelled by realizing our full potential, by manifesting who we truly are, by attaining heights privy to very, very few individuals.

You see, the path to pleasure is ripe with obstacles, with agony. Each time we strive to satisfy a need, we meet a hundred hurdle to the next one. The stairway to heaven is a stairway of fire. Do not be surprised if you learn that a striking number of humanity didn't even get to fulfill its first and basic need. That millions upon million have died and are dying out of hunger, not ever knowing love, or peace, or security, or esteem, let alone, self fulfillment. Zillions have passed away knowing nothing but starvation, and for such people, food is their only god, and fullness is their heaven. Others have lived knowing nothing but war and violence. Others nothing but disease—even though today sugar kills more than hunger, and suicide takes more lives than war and violence—Doesn't that fill your heart with sorrow? Doesn't that make you feel most lucky that you ever experienced love even for a day in your life? Maybe it doesn't make you feel any lucky, after all, humans always turn a blind eye to what they have and curse the heavens for they don't. You see, we are cursing the heavens for the wrong reasons. What they should curse the heavens for is *being*. Life. A tragedy for the mortals, and a comedy for the Gods.

Happiness is just around the corner, but around the corner is more sweat, fear and strain. You might believe that there would come a day in your life where you would finally get to rest, and where you'd finally achieve all of your desires and fulfill yourself, and then you'd die a peaceful death. I have been billions of people, and I have died billions of deaths, and though I have known pleasures beyond your wildest dreams, euphorias of success, religious exhilarations, physical ecstasies in beds of love and in palaces of golden orgies, rhapsodies of being worshiped and idolized, and delights of being subjugated to powerful beings, yet, do you know what I thought every time I died? '*It was short and tiresome.*' At the end, decades will feel a holiday trip, and no matter what kind of life you've lead, you'd always think, *It was tiresome*.

Perhaps the highest virtue one could acquire isn't honesty, nor kindness; but bravery. For without bravery, one can never stand to the challenges of life. But courage means stepping into the face of danger whilst being aware of the peril. Being courageous is kissing the tail of madness. But people aren't mad, and cowardice is but the fruit of rationality. To face life is to go against your own rationality, to which people cling with nails of blood. We seldom slip off the heavy mantels of self-doubt and feebleness, and so, we live most of our lives in fear, because our minds tells us that cowardice is the safest and smartest option. What could only liberate us of our fear is to denounce our logic, to denounce life itself. Therein lies the paradox, to face life one must reject it.

Fear is the god whose throne sits between the absence of pleasure and the manifestation of pain. The anticipation of pain is often times worse than the pain itself. Have you known real terror? I doubt you've ever had. For reasons you ignore and cannot control, your breath tightens, your heart pounds like the core of a dying star, and you are crippled. Food tastes like dust in your mouth, music turns to noises, sleep forsakes your bed. You live in one single moment, and in that moment, unfolds an eternity of hell, hell you imagine, hell you conjure out of the depths of your soul, hell you suffer a thousand times before you truly live it, and yet, in most times, that hell is but a ghost. What a curse it is, to live without courage. What a tragedy, to never break the shackles of fear and realize how mighty you truly are, but instead, you keep dying, over and over again, shrinking each time a little, until you meet your grave. That is the human condition.

Ironically, what most fuels our fear is nothing but hope. To hope, is to live in fear that the future carries the opposite of what you desire. On the other hand, to live without hope is to refuse that life bears anything good, or to accept that you aren't worthy of any. Either way, a wicked fate awaits us.

I don't blame us for being hopeful cowards. It is simply how we're molded. But even when

one is brave and mad with life, oftentimes the unpredictable could still happen, and all one's vitality and plans for life turn into shambles. *Sickness* my friend. It is true enough, the human body is a miracle at work, but have you ever wondered why is it so prone to illness? You fall ill and suddenly you feel broken, weak and useless, and probably, if you are lucky, a burden to your family and friends. And if it is not a disease that defiles you forever, it is one that inflicts on your body interminable pain. Unceasing, constant, agonizing pain. Pangs of the flesh that one is helpless about, and can do nothing but swallow its bitterness on a reeking bed in a gray corner. Painkillers can only do so much, but forget not that a large part of humanity had lived in a time where there was no pain killers. Heavens! Tooth aches alone can make one question his whole existence, whether it is worth bearing such pain.

Mistake not my intention here, friend. My attempt is not to convince you that life is misery. It is not a question that needs answering. *Of course life is misery*. Only a naive would argue not. The question is, *is life worth that misery?* That question is one I cannot answer for you. And even if I did, you should take no answer but *Your* own. Certainly, if you deem it better to not exist than to exist. If you deem the absence of being better than being, than by all means, help lady Shiva end this world.

I am curious, would you find in this life that which justifies its endless misery?"

9.

Ferris Wheel

Red and Blue

Humanity's Missing Sock

"Is it possible that existence is our exile and nothingness our home?"

Emil Cioran

Being alone, or doing things alone, isn't so terrible; at least for me. And although on this particular occasion I had no other choice but to be alone, I didn't really mind it. Things slow down when you're by yourself. You get to watch people, watch things, think about things, or imagine things; in all of which I find an inexplicable delight.

A bag of chips in my hand, earphones in my ears, I waited in line for the Ferris wheel. That's what was written on the scrap of paper given to me by Mr. Dandy: *The amusement park's ferris wheel, at sunset, ride a lone*. Before me stood an overweight woman wearing a tight red shirt that turned orange from too much cleaning and her two kids. One kid was admiring how big the ferris wheel was, and the other was nagging the woman about something to which she remained totally nonreactive. Behind me stood a couple, the girl was wearing a jean jacket and black tights, the guy had a somewhat plump face and a buzz-cut, the thing is, they looked anything but excited to ride the Ferris wheel together, they neither held hands nor spoke to one another; they simply stood there, as if waiting for their turn in a busy supermarket line.

I handed my ticket to the guy in charge and inside a red cabin I hopped, however right before I closed the door, a woman appeared out of nowhere before me, with a pair of twin girls. They had straight long blond hair and each wore the same dress, one was dark red, the other was navy blue. They were about nine or ten years old. "Excuse me mister, can you please take my daughters in a ride, they wanted to try the Ferris wheel. I would've taken them myself but heights give me a bad case of nausea," said their mother. Before I could have expressed my refusal, the two girls had already took their seats inside the cabin on the arched couch facing me. "Alright," I said. I need to learn how to say no, I thought.

The wheel started to move, the cabin left the ground and lifted in the air. The girls waved at their mother for a while and then each took her seat and fell quiet as they watched their world getting smaller and their view wider. The red dressed girl watched the forest side and blue dressed one watched the city side. From afar the sunset prayer-call echoed in the air from a nearby mosque and the last sun flames painted the sky a deep orange. I sat and I watched. I wanted to have a smoke but I returned the cigarette inside the pack; children around. After one

full spin, the girls seemingly got bored, and instead of the view, they were now watching me. “Why are you like this?” asked red. “Like what?” I responded. “You’re strange,” said blue. “Strange how?” I asked. “Who rides a Ferris wheel alone?” asked red. “I am not alone, I’m with you,” I replied. They looked confused for a while, then blue said, “Why is your hair like this?” “What about it?” “It has no form,” said red. “Not all things should have a form,” I responded. “Your hair should,” said blue. “Maybe you’re right,” I said. “Is that why you don’t have a girlfriend to ride with? Because your hair has no form?” asked red. “Hey.. that’s mean, and I do have a girlfriend, sort of,” I said. “Why isn’t she here?” asked blue. “Well, because she forgot about me.” They looked confused again, then said at the same time, “that’s strange.” “I know, right?” I responded.

On the third spin, as my cabin reached the top of the wheel, there was a sudden power outage, and the machine was stalled. Not only did the wheel stop, but the whole amusement park went black, not a single light bulb. By that time, the sun had already forsaken the land and the sky rolled under the night blanket. On one side the city lights barely reached the cabin, and on the other, the forest turned shades darker than ink. I could barely glimpse my own hand.

“Don’t be scared, it’s only a power outage, it’ll be fine,” I said to red and blue, to which they responded, casually, “Don’t worry about us, just do your thing.”

My thing?

At that instant, I felt another presence in the cabin. I lit my plastic lighter and on the opposite couch, between red and blue, the dwarf flame illuminated Lady Shiva’s face.

“Jesus! can’t we just meet like normal people? In a café or a restaurant?”

“Glad to see you too, deary,” replied Shiva. She was once again in a yellow dress, however, a different cut this time. She was as elegant, as enchanting. Red and Blue seemed unruffled by her sudden appearance. Red was absorbed in the looming forest, and Blue lost her gaze in the distant city lights. What a strange pair.

“So? Did you make up your mind?” Asked Shiva. Some of the passengers turned on their phones’ torches. I glimpsed the silhouettes of the mismatched couple on the cabin below me making out, and on the other one, one kid started to cry on the lap of his overweight dreary mom, while her other kid was silently contemplating the view.

Have I made my decision? I am not so sure. “To be honest, I don’t think my answer matters that much. I still think you got the wrong guy. I don’t even know what I am going to do with my life in the next few months. I am in no way capable of deciding the fate of the whole humanity,” I answered. I lifted my thumb off the lighter and the cabin once again drowned in darkness. I could only listen to her voice.

“Oh, don’t be boring. Do you think those who have changed the course of humanity had any clue what their lives should have looked like? It’s people like you who end up doing the unexpected.”

“Still.. I don’t like to take on big projects.”

She fell silent, I don’t react well to silence.

“Tell me, if I accept, you’ll hand me the ultimate truth, and I am supposed to deliver that to the world in a book right?”

“That is correct. Once the human race knows, God will end his creation.”

“The thing is, I don’t think I’ll be able to write that book. It could take me years. I am afraid I’ll disappoint you.”

"Tell me first, deary. Are you convinced that what I've told you is the truth? That life is suffering; that free will is an illusion; that no one knows the real purpose of their existence?"

"You know what, let's cut right to the chase. To be honest, I do want to write that novel. Actually, the story is already forming in my head. The thing is, I am not sure whether I want to end the world, nor am I sure that I want to keep it. Yes, you made a point, life is tragedy and we're marionettes dancing on a stage on fire, having no clue why or whom we're dancing for, but still, is the alternative really any better?"

"Contrary to those fanatics foreboding the end of the world, that the signs are out there and that the end is soon, human beings will keep on existing for several thousands of years in the future. And if you believe that human beings will find ways to ease their suffering, you'd be very mistaken. Think of those many lives you'll spare the tragedy of life if you just end it now, think of posterity," she said.

A siren of a distant police patrol reverberated in the air. I love distant sirens in the night, they ease my soul and make feel less alone.

"Okay, let's do it," I said finally. Perhaps a part of me then didn't truly believe that a book might end the world. Follow the liar to the front door. Take her up on her offer. Yet, another part, reveled in the potential apocalypse. At that instant, my actions weren't fully understood.

"Now we're talking."

"But I have one condition, you see, my friend accidentally listened to the cassette you gave me. He listened the A side of the cassette, *The Great Hidden Sea of the Unconscious*. And true enough, he remembered it all. But before I could make him listen to the B side, *Fleeting Dreams*, he smashed the cassette into pieces. I want you to bring me another cassette. I must make him forget. I could only imagine the burden of all those memories. I am afraid he'll lose his mind among all those people inside him."

"I see. You allowed your friend to listen to that, when it was only meant for you. And I asked you to be alone, and yet, I see two girls with you. You are not very reliable are you?" said Shiva.

"occupational hazard," I replied. "I don't want to tell you 'I told you so.'"

"I figured you'd ask that," she said. I heard what sounded like a hand fumbling in a purse, she then said, "light please." I lit my lighter and there she was handing me a cassette and a new Walkman. I grabbed it, and put it in my pocket. "You came prepared," I commented.

"Should we proceed now?" She asked.

"One more thing. This is more like a favor. You see, my ex girlfriend, for some reason, forgot all about me. Can you by any chance make her remember? Not only her memories, her feelings too. There was no official break up, so I couldn't quite get over her."

"You mean that girl, Stella?"

"Yes, you seem to have already met her. I saw you in one of her shots. I know it wasn't just a coincidence. What did you want from her?"

"I merely wanted to probe your surroundings deary. I wish for no unexpected forthcomings."

"Leave her out of this. No one should get involved but me."

"Huh, that sounded quite the selfless request coming from someone making so much personal demands out of this. Well, deal. I will leave her out of this, and I will make her remember, everything; only, after you finish writing that book."

"Fair enough," I said. I couldn't tell if the maintenance team has made it to the wheel. It

seemed we were to be caught in the air for much longer time.

“Although I must warn you, I could only bring back her memories, I am not sure about her feelings.”

“huh.. well, let’s start with that.”

“Now, before I hand you what millions had spent their whole lives looking for, tell me, what’s the story you’d write is going to be about?”

“Well, if you must know, it’s about a guy who always loses one sock of every pair he buys. Under his pants, there are always socks of different colors, and it’s making his life really miserable. One day he buys this expensive, a hundred percent cotton cozy pair of socks, and he’s very excited about them, and lo and behold, the next day, one sock goes missing. Out of principle, he sets out to find that sock. One thing leads to another, and another thing leads to a whole journey, and eventually, he doesn’t find that missing sock, but he finds the ultimate truth.”

She chuckled, then said, “As long as you keep it interesting, it doesn’t matter what the story is about. I’m gambling on you, and I rarely lose a gamble.”

“I lost a lot of gambles,” I added.

Me too, she should have said. Lying bitch.

“So, are you ready?”

“Bring it on..”

I lit the plastic lighter. A meager glare illuminated the figure of Shiva. Casually, slowly, she pulled out a piece of paper from the folds of her left breast, and handed it to me. I cleared my throat, imagined her naked for a second or two, and then grabbed the piece of paper. I unfolded it, my heart started racing, and cast the light on the paper.

▼

Four lines, thirty-seven words, that was the length of the ultimate, unrivaled truth. I read the words with unmatched focus, meditating on the form and meaning of each word, of each sentence, of the paragraph as a whole. Then read it again for the second time, and then a third time. I turned off the lighter, folded the piece of paper and hid it in my pocket. A second faint siren wailed in the air, and then followed utter silence. I looked around, darkness everywhere. A mighty thunder ran down my spine. I fell on my knees, looked up at the stars. Tears started streaming down my cheeks, hot, acid tears, and then I started laughing, hysterically. The world was no longer the world I knew. The stars smirked at me from above. My mind tumbled down, disintegrated, and then formed itself anew. I laughed, and laughed until my tears dried out.

So this is what it’s all about. Oh philosophers, how silly you were. Oh seekers of truth, you would never have guessed it, not in a million years. Such few words, such few lines, bear the pillars the heavens, the pleats of universe, the light of souls, the conundrums of history, the weight of hearts. Such a few words, melt infinity in a jar. The secret of all secrets, the pearl of the forbidden sea, the treasure under God’s throne, the unholy grail, the mystic pattern in the fool’s dream, the apex of the under-world, the crest of the seventh heaven, the unspoken prayer, the greatest metaphysical comedy; humanity’s missing sock.

Shiva left her seat and stood before me, “Stand up, young man. I know the burden on your heart, but trust me, you’ll find ways to cope with it.”

I managed to stand up. My body felt ethereal, feather-light, high on biochemical juices. Dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, endorphins, adrenaline; is there any greater feeling? Is there any morosser? I faced Shiva, and then I held her in my arms. She remained stiff for a while, then she wrapped her frail hands around me. "I'm sorry," I whispered, "I'm sorry you had to carry this alone." I held her tighter, and then, slowly, I let go. It was still dark, but I knew, I knew she shed a tear. Was it for me? Or was it for herself? Or was it for god? I didn't know, but at that moment, She kissed me.

"Don't let anyone read that piece of paper this time. At least not yet," she finally said, her voice different, mellow, warmer.

"Sure," I responded.

"Until then, prophet of doom."

Electricity suddenly came back, and the wheel whirled once again.

I fell back in my seat. Shiva was gone. Blue and Red glared at me as a cat glares at an object it doesn't understand. Then, simultaneously, as if one was real and the other was a mirror reflection, they left their seats and sat beside me, each on a side.

"Tell me mister," said Red, "are you going to end the world?"

"Can you keep a secret?" I asked them.

"Yes," they replied, in unison.

"I will. If what she says is true, then yes, the world will end."

They jolted off their seats and stood before me. They each grabbed the hem of my sleeves, and then Blue said, "Please mister, don't end it yet! I still have to see the world. there's too much to experience, too much to learn. I still know nothing about the world. I don't wish for any wealth or any fame. I just want to experience it, everything, for my own. Let me have my adventure, and then, you can end it if you want.."

And then Red said, "Please, don't end it yet, not before I fall in love. I want no wealth or fame either, I just want to experience one real human connection, with its agony and its pleasure. I want to confront life with the person I love next to me. One person is enough. If I die knowing I shared a genuine love with someone, then it won't be so sad. Please, let me have that before you end it."

Their sudden requests threw me off. Why did they speak like adults? Who am I to decide their fate? But again, do I need to be a certain somebody? someone has to do it, right?

To see the world,

and to fall in love.

Funny how simple wishes from little girls could clash with the truest of truths.

10.

HUMAN, ALL TOO HUMAN

"If a group of aliens were to stop me and ask, "say, bud, how many miles an hour does the earth spin at the equator?" I'd be in a fix. Hell, I don't even know why Wednesday follows Tuesday. I'd be an intergalactic Joke."

Haruki Murakami

The last decade was somewhat hectic. 2010 to 2020 What would they call it years from now? The tens? Okay, let's call it the *tens*. Let me give you a large scope, an eagle's eye view, from someone who had lived his teens and a part of his twenties during those times. Of course, I will glorify this decade, poeticize it, and maybe strip it naked too. Not only because I lived through it, but also due to some solid reasons.

Even if we begin with the dull stuff, the political arena is enough fun to watch. Russia took Crimea. America is a shit show and the Arabs rose through spring revolutions, though springs quickly turned to colder winters. The victories were stolen, one by one, by the same people sitting in the dark, orchestrating the world symphony as they please, and trust me, it doesn't sound that great. Algeria too, finally has awoken, for the second time after the bloody ponds of the nineties and claimed its freedom; it was epic in its unity and peacefulness, however, the question begs itself: was it also a false spring? We'll find out soon enough in the next episode; I don't want to spoil you.

The whole world is slowly metamorphosing into some sort of an ectoplasmic amorphous landscape, the manner by which an abstract artist mixes a sundry of water colors and hopes it would all add up to a something beautiful in the end—only, sometimes it doesn't. China is a growing monster whose techno-fangs and money-claws are grabbing the world by the thighs. America is almost great again, but never is. Japan is a planet of world class sushi and cosplay parades, and the grand children of the once proud samurais are now exporting to the world masterpieces of anime and incest hentai. The french are the same, good cooks, somewhat boring, classy, their milk still african; mais oui, c'est la vie. Russia is still trying to take over the world, however hopelessly. Africa is still the abandoned land of God; poverty, illness and wars. And Canada is, well, Canada is Canada ay?

Did we go the moon again? No. Did we ever go to the moon? Very few people know. How about science? Cancer and HIV still hold the highest records of mega-kills, though, to be honest, we learned how to tone them down a notch or two. No Artificial Intelligent robots apocalypse yet. No goddamn flying cars, yet! No portals to other worlds, and no time travel, yet. Although physics is swimming in a soup of fantasy but math proven theories, trying to unify the quantum world with that of Einstein's. We've found the Higgs Bosons, and we have discovered that gravity is a wave and not a particle; but again, everything is both a wave and a particle, so.. Is

that important? I have no clue, nor do I really care.

The poles are melting away, the amazon is burning, Australia is burning, the Koalas are thirsty, the earth is hot, dying in a sauna room; and so is everybody else. I mean, everybody is so goddamn horny all the time. And I should add, a teenage girl by the name of Greta something is trying to save the world by herself; or so it appears to be.

History has not deprived us from dessert, indeed, an exquisite Chinese final course has been delivered by the end. It is called Corona, it is served cold, but soon makes you very feverish. It is so good it might kill you, and it needed no advertisement but word of mouth to spread.

Sex, money, and fame are the new trinity. The new gods. And people are praying to them from dawn to dawn; on their knees, on their stomachs, on all fours. And the old gods have raged and protested, and when their voices weren't loud enough, they tried, as everything else, to adapt to the new age.

The Internet had it's golden ages, with no regulations, no restrictions. When no one was easily offended. When you can freely utter the most offensive words, when you could be sexist, homophobic, misogynistic, racist, bigot, and people would actually *get* the joke. When you had all the privacy you desired. When you could choose a cool user-name and be a whole different persona and surf the net and be whomever you wanted. But all of that has vanished. Nowadays the Internet is the playground of big corporations, controlled to the brims, an E-corp of dystopia. The golden ages are gone and the only ruins that still stand like pillars in that electronic desert are some decent content makers and some good old memes.

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The eagle is lowering its altitude. I'll narrow the scope now. Location: Algeria-Bone. Sub-location: a group of unemployed broke college students sitting at a café in the west-side of Bone. Drinking thick black coffees and smoking one cigarette after another. Discussing life and what-not.

I chose this particular group of young men because it is a representative slice of the young population back then. If we study it together, and understand it, we could then extrapolate it, and you will be able to grasp what it was like to be a youth in the 'tens' in Algeria. Those young men are not exactly successful, or rich, or pious, or thugs. They aren't exactly smart, neither are they stupid. Just your regular 18 to 25 years olds. Each has a dream of his own, each has a girlfriend or an ex-girlfriend that he's in love with or been in love with, each has family issues, money issues, but no health issues to speak of. Each is confused whether to lyricize or damn his life. And what did they actually discuss? What did they talk about on a daily basis? Mainly two things: Sex and Religion. Those two were the most amusing topics to discuss, the most important topics to discuss.

In the Auschwitz concentration camps in world war II, prisoners, as told by Victor E. Frankl in his book 'Man's Search for Meaning', discussed mainly two topics as well. They talked about politics, and food. About what governed their lives on a macro-scale and a micro-scale. They were interested in politics because it would decide their fate, whether they would someday see the light of day as free men or die a miserable death in the camp. Whether Nazi Germany is winning or losing the war. And what governs our lives on a micro-scale other than our deepest desires? For the prisoners in the Auschwitz camps, their sole and only lust was food. They'd fantasize about it, talk about their favorite dishes, their favorite desserts and how they want them served. Exchange recipes and make future plans to cook and eat their dream's plate once they're

free men; only, most of them didn't live to see that day.

If you could conceptualize Algeria as one big concentration camp, and if you could imagine those young men sitting at that rusty café as captives, you wouldn't be so mistaken (Granted, I am exaggerating a little bit, to compare our suffering with that of the captives in concentration camps is unforgivable of me, but nonetheless). If I wanted to explain how did Algeria end up no better than a concentration camp, I'd have to go through lengths of detailed series of causes and consequences that I do not fully understand myself and would risk boring you, and myself in the process—and I don't want to get bored. However, you need a context to understand, and I am obliged to give you one; all matters could only be grasped within their right context. So, mainly, it's a recipe: one table spoon of conspiring enemies, two table spoons of weak-spirited corrupt rulers, three table spoons of a religious system that hinders all free thinking (a version of Islam at least, pioneered by some single celled organisms that believed that if you don't grow your beard or wear ankle length pants you'd burn in hell). Four table spoons of bad economy, five spoons of colonialism, and a lot of spoons of a population that doesn't read (make sure you add enough of that). So yeah, mix that all up in one big bowl and let it ferment for a couple of centuries and that's what you get: a country that robs dreams even from your sleep. Nevertheless, I must add that, notwithstanding, I still carry warm feelings for my country—it is my land after all.

Sex and religion, those were the two emblems in the minds of young Algerian people, or most of them at least. What governed their lives in a macro and micro scale. If you crack open their skulls, you'd find a sexy lady (her looks depend on the person, for each has his preferences, big, skinny, blond, brunet, you name it) and a man of religion, long bearded, wearing a long white kamis, a bead chain in one hand, and a very judgmental look on his face; standing face to face with the sexy lady, arguing, and sometimes not; and as goes the saying: when a man of religion and a whore fall in love, one them is going to change. And thus is the case.

"Don't think too much about it, you're here on earth to praise god, worship him, and when you die, you go to heaven, if you don't, fire awaits you, and that's it," says a guy named Okba, he's the pious type.

"Does worshiping him include killing everyone who refuses to believe in his sovereignty? It's ironic how people devote their whole lives, take the lives of others, to please their imaginary friend. Get over it Okba, there's no one up there with a magic stick sitting on a throne. When you die, it's limbo, nothingness, the void," says Adam. As you've guessed, he's the atheist, for reasons not fully contemplated I might add.

"So you're telling me, to crack my skull open, remove my brain, and throw it in the neighborhood garbage bin, next to yours? No body fucking knows why we exist, Okba, don't be stupid; and nobody fucking knows for sure if there's a God up there or not, Adam, don't act all smug and smart about it, you risk looking very ridiculous in front of a respectable audience. We evolved on this earth, we became humans, and ever since we've been asking the same questions, no one has the right answers yet," I say to both of them, sounding pompous as hell myself; one gets easily excited in Algerian cafés.

"I honestly don't care, I have no issue if there's a God up there or not, and I am not afraid of death. For now, I want to make money, see the world, have sex, experience new things. Perhaps someday I'll give these concerns some of my attention, but until then, I just don't give a shit," says Jibril. He's not that bright. Or maybe he's the brightest of us all.

"What do you mean evolution!?" protests Okba, "I was not a monkey, I did not evolve from apes. The first man was Adam, and God created him in the best image."

"Of course you were not a monkey Okba," says adam, "You still are."

"Fuck you, you bloody," shouts Okba.

"Shame on you," replies Adam.

And so on. This is but one episode of many that takes place everyday in the life of these young men. They argue with the utmost fever, each defending his own beliefs; never a winner nor a loser. Each argues his convictions, although they grew up together in the same neighborhood with families barely making an income above the poverty line; strange, but that's the beauty of it. Whatever great wisdom saturated Islam and shimmered through its teachings, is now leaking away through the holes of the deformed ludicrous logic of the fanatics leading Islam and the tsunami wave of new ideas, teachers and knowledge streaming from every corner of the globe, through the Internet; which explains why, in one group of friends, you'd find all sorts of orientations: hard-core theists, atheists, deists, agnostics, monotheists, polytheists, and those who don't give a horseshit about it all, like Jibril. However, none of those pals is a bad guy per se. They're all harmless people, and they don't really hold grudges if you disagree with them, nor take it that seriously. The debate could easily swing from the heavens to earth. From divinity, to, which is better, the breasts of a woman, or her hips. And the latter is sometimes taken more seriously than the former.

Nevertheless, as long as you don't terrorize me or kill me if I don't abide by your beliefs, diversity is a blessing. I don't mind it, I enjoy it, and I am perfectly fine with the isolation I am sometimes damned with due to my orientations. However right or wrong they might be, they're mine, and I will protect them until proven wrong. I don't want to belong to any group, I don't wish to convince anyone. I don't follow, I don't lead, but if you walk beside me, I am going to be a good friend; or so says Alber Camus.

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Because of religion, and social honor, the people of Algeria cannot have sex before marriage. Fair enough you might think? Well, not exactly. The concept is fine in itself, solid, even ideal. You meet someone, you get along, there's chemistry, you share a laugh or two, you start liking one another, loving one another, and eventually you want to spend a life time in each other's arms. So you decide to hit the mosque, or the church—whichever you're into—and get married, and hence, you fuck. Lovely idea: a woman gives her body and heart solely to one man, and vice versa. Only, sometimes it doesn't work; most of the time.

Due to the economic mockery this country rejoices, unemployment rate is skyrocketing, poverty is the norm, and a decent life-style has become the dream. If someone is lucky enough, he'd get his life together around thirty; and by that I mean that he'd able to afford the rent of a decent apartment, a salary that will prevent him from starving, and a car—however a car is sometimes a luxury. And, and I guess it's self-evident that, one cannot enter the institution of marriage until he gets his shit together. Thus, most men, if they're lucky, get married around thirty; that means, no sex until thirty; that means that they wouldn't know the warmth of a woman's body until they're thirty; that means that, when the rest of the world has already enjoyed a flourished, wild sex life, most of the Algerian youth is still wondering what it's all about.

One could easily argue, why should they conform to the limitations presented before them by their society, or religion? Why wouldn't they say 'screw it', and live the life they desire? You see, it's a little more complicated than that. Actually religion plays a small role in the birth of the taboos painting the shadows of this society, for they were chiseled mostly by traditions, honor and shame—although the original reason that forbade sex with multiple partners is the spread of disease, historically speaking—Even if all men decided to ignore the restrictions and break free

from traditions, most of women couldn't; they simply aren't be able to afford it. This society treats a woman who has lost her virginity out of wedlock as an embarrassment, a disgrace, a black smudge on her own honor and her family's. Her chances of ever marrying someone and creating her own life and family are next to zero, in other words, she'd be faced with a life of shame. Her only choices are to leave the country and start anew, or stay and live like a monk—or a delinquent, depends on the person. So, sex before marriage for women isn't a wise decision, a risk not worth taking; she'd simply be signing her own damnation over one lousy penetration. Be it with a man she loves or not, no matter from which angle you look at it, it's not worth it. Or perhaps should I correct myself: vaginal sex isn't an option.

All living creatures adapt to their environment, that's nature's way. Butterflies change their wings' color to blend with the trees and escape predators, and a brook of water ramifies all over the place when faced with a huge boulder, continuing its journey ahead despite the obstacles. And as Woody Allan had put it: 'I don't know the question, but sex is definitely the answer.' If you're not starving to death or in sickening pain, sex is probably the leading drive. When vaginal sex was deemed impossible, sodomy became the answer. Sad, but true. And so, for some girls, when lust increases and fear decreases, she'd have sex with her boyfriend, however through the back alley.

That is the equilibrium this society had reached. Hypocrisy and secrecy infiltrated public and intimate relationships. At the front door there's a big luminous sign that says 'Islamic Society,' but once you're inside, it's a brothel. A man can sleep with tens of women but wouldn't marry a girl who had been kissed once. And as for girls, if she's virgin, wears a veil, and her reputation is clean—regardless of what kind of life she'd lead—then she's wife material. Whom to blame for this moral charade? I don't really know.

Sex is more than a physical pleasure. With the right person, it becomes a mystical experience, a bonding of souls. People need sex, and it is understandable to ground it in limitations, rules, such as marriage; but when the conditions are not easily met, there's going to be transgressions. It's only natural, no one is going to abstain until they're thirty, and women do not have orgasms from mopping the floor. People will always find ways to have carnal unions, and if they don't, well, you've got yourself a frustrated population that will do more harm than a sexually freed one.

Thus, people are faced with two options, whether to break all rules and face the consequences, or bury their sex drive deep where they can no longer feel it. However, the sad part in all of this, are the young men and women in the middle, the decent ones who want to enjoy a healthy sex life, but refrain from doing so because of traditions, religion, and shame. People such as my friends—not me though—and people like *Noah* and *Lin*, which I will shortly narrate their story.



It's winter, senior year in high-school, Noah wins the national mathematics tournament. Through the sound of hard rain patting against the windows of the competition hall, we hear cheers and applause. He wins a trophy, and a professional calculator—of which he already has two.

The next day, Noah is sitting at the back of the class, a group of classmates is gathered around him, congratulating him. Boys pat him on the shoulder, girls smile and tell him warm words of encouragement and admiration; and those who, for the first time, notice that he had suddenly become attractive, blush.

Lin, who wasn't his classmate but happened to be there that morning in his class visiting some friends, trudges towards him, and amidst the crowd that gathered around his table, she says, "Hi, good job." And smiles. It was the first time their eyes met, the first time they exchanged small talk, the first time she smiled at him. The voices of the students sank into a faraway background and all he heard was a strange sound to his ears: his heart beating in a funny rhythm, sharp and clear. At that moment, he fell in love, he fell so deep that when he hit the ground, his soul splattered into a thousand pieces; but no one heard the sound, not even himself. Lin leaves his surroundings and disappears out of the class.

He leaped out of his chair and ran after her. He held her by the arm, looked her in the eyes and said, "You took my breath away, and I want to meet you again."—Or, at least that's he wished to do, alas he couldn't find the courage to. In the few days that followed, Noah would stop by her class whenever he passed by, he'd glance at her, and then he'd move on. Sometimes he'd make excuses to get closer to her, and even if it meant a simple exchange of greetings, and a smile from her, it was fine by him; but never enough.

The natural order of his world had been disturbed, swept out of its center by a ravaging tornado. To him, nothing mattered anymore. Noah, the distant boy who always sat at the back of the class, who was in good terms with everyone but had only one close friend; the boy unruffled by the trifles of high-school life, was now at the heart of a tumbling palace. Few knew much about him, no body dared to venture inside the fog enshrouding him. All they knew was that he was good at math; very good. He was fine with things being the way they were, that was the harmony he'd chose for himself, and he wished for no one to disturb his peace; but, whether fortunately or unfortunately, everything changed once he met Lin.

When private life left little room for a social one for Noah, Lin (originally Lina) was his opposite. Her social life overwhelmed her private one. She was friends with everyone, even the wimps who got bullied, even the bullies, even the typical mean girls who hated everyone; they all loved her. That was Lin's secret, that was her unquestionable charm. When you first meet her, when you first look her in the eyes, you'd get the unshakable conviction that, '*this person is never going to hurt me; this person will never have the intention of harming me; this person, although a stranger to my eyes, for some unfathomable reason, actually wishes me good; this person could listen to me, could understand me, could care for me.*' and quickly, you'd feel a burst of selfishness and greed. Suddenly, you'd want to make her your best friend; only, Lin was for no one, but for everyone, and the quicker everyone understood that fact the better.

But even Lin wished to belong to someone.

Lin was one year older than me, and I should add the she was my friend as well, although our friendship consisted mainly of exchanging Japanese novels. We had a knack for those, call it a passion, and we hit it well. Every two or three weeks, we'd meet, exchange novels over some bad vending-machine coffee, and talk about Japanese literature. And that's that, nothing more, it didn't need to be more.

When Noah finally made his move, with an old fashioned high-school confession letter, which said the following, '*I'd like to talk to you, alone. I don't wish to be your friend. If you think that's not possible, pretend you hadn't received any letter.*' Lin had approved for such a meeting, and like fire catching a cotton field, the silent space between them sparkled with desire. She had later on confessed that he'd always intrigued her in ways she couldn't quite understand; that when he'd won the national mathematics competition, she'd visited his class only to see him —You know, the sort of things that happens only in novels, also happened to them.

Naturally, they fell in love; and like any person experiencing that blaze for the first time, they believed their love to be special, unique. A kind of intermingling of souls that's taking place for the first time since the birth of the universe. A rare chemistry that was produced purely by luck

and could never be reproduced again. And it is kind of true, to be honest, *Love is a special, rare thing—that happens everyday, to everyone. Mostly.*

The first few months of the relationship were nothing short of a bliss. It wasn't really of much importance at first whether their characters matched or whether they were really good together. For some reason, whether it was for a biochemical reaction in their bodies, or the mysterious effervescent workings in their souls, they felt a kind of euphoria privy only to people deeply engaged in reciprocated love. For Noah and Lin, colors suddenly were brighter, sounds sharper, and life reduced to a singularity that resided in the space between them; all else shriveled in the background.

They spent most of their time together. During the short time between classes, during recess time, in the library, and even walked home together. Lin no longer belonged to everyone, but no one felt bitter about it. And Noah, whose face oftentimes hinted at the cold indifferent seas beneath, had unexpectedly wore something close to a happy countenance.

By some lucky charm, they had a lot of things in common. They were both single children, their families of middle class, both had stay-at-home moms, parents not overly religious, nor too strict. They were both Tennis aficionado, and liked the same films, which, for a couple, was plenty enough to give them a good kick-off start. Although at the surface it looked good, almost perfect, needless to say, they were sometimes smitten by awkward moments, intervals of silence during conversations, misplaced touches, jokes not laughed about, and sometimes a fight or two. But overall, it was solid.

When the year neared its end, Noah's math teacher, a young man who grew fond of Noah and his accomplishments, had procured for him, through some connections, a scholarship to study math in the university of Sorbonne in France. Noah had anticipated his admittance to the scholarship with a fervent heart, but to his surprise, when he finally had it, he felt nothing. It no longer mattered. Leaving for France would mean leaving Lin, and what does it all mean if he's not with Lin? The only mode of being that had any substance or meaning to Noah at that time was, being with Lin. His dreams and ambitions were robbed of colors, of radiance. They became nothing more than an insect's empty shell, barely clinging to the naked branches of the past, ready to be blown away by the winds of love into limbo.

In the end, he refused the scholarship.

Was it worth it? I don't know. But I do know that he did not refuse it because he weighed the pros and cons of the matter, but did it because he was compelled to. It is funny, even cynical, how love makes us blind to the truth and twists our rational thinking. Through the lens of evolution it does somehow make sense: you meet someone of the opposite sex, your subconscious mind judges that he is a perfect match for copulation, triggers the brain to produce happy hormones that obscure the mind and compel you to mate with that partner, to have sex and produce babies. In other words, to pass on the genes. But joke's on you nature, we have condoms now, and the pill, I bet you didn't see that one coming. And besides, double joke, because in Algeria people don't have sex at all, until they're married at least, which is oftentimes delayed until it is too late, and the kick of those hormones, which is oftentimes called love, is extinguished and love is made on beds of ashes.

Noah stayed in Bone, and enrolled in the same university as Lin, studying third-class math by tasteless, shaggy professors. Although he told Lin that his refusal of the scholarship was due to family setbacks, but she wasn't ludicrous nor naive. She knew that he gave it up to be with her. Instead of feeling rejoiced, Lin unexpectedly felt a heavy weight falling off upon her shoulders, hindering her free movement, crushing her chest. She no longer sensed the levity she once enjoyed in the relationship, the freedom of being with someone equal, and the excitement of the turbulent fate their days carried. Instead, she felt she owed him, indebted with a price she can

never pay back.

She buried her thoughts to herself, and tried not to dwell upon it. On the other hand, Noah took extra care not to show her any shadow of regret nor any sign that she is expected to exhibit gestures of gratefulness. And thus, the relationship went on—although never as it used to be.

The dynamics by which their relationship evolved were slow, but gusty, smooth, unhurried. In the first few weeks he held her hand, and their virgin skins touched for the first time; goosebumps, flushed cheeks. In the first few months he held her in his arms, her chest pressed against his, his nose muffled in her hair; their bodies slamming for the first time; warmth, bonding, security. And after almost a year, in his car, one rainy December afternoon, they finally kissed. One unctuous, sumptuous, salacious kiss. With that, they sealed their love.

However, that was it.

Four years later, and they were still pushing against the mud of that stalemate. They'd kiss, and sometimes they'd feel one another, a hand slips between the thighs, another slithers under the shirts and fondles a breast. But insofar as any physical interaction is concerned, that was the extent of it. She never let him venture any further.

Noah, although with a certain bitterness, was fairly understanding. He never pushed the matter more than he should, and tried to fathom her reasons, even though she gave him none. All he could do was carefully burn what little he had to keep the warmth. And the act of 'making out' was somehow sufficient in its own to quench his desires; until it was no more.

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They're twenty three years old, eating margherita pizza and drinking soda in his car, one mars evening, parked on the edge of a cliff in the outskirts of Bone; the sun was setting, and the horn of Miles Davis, *ascenseur pour l'échafaud*, filtered through the car speakers.

"Thanks for coming," said Lin.

"Of course," he replied.

"You're unusually calm," stated Lin. She gave him a furtive glance and lowered the volume a notch.

Noah remained silent, he opened the side window, lit a cigarette and said nothing. The air was alive, even as everything seemed poised on the verge of collapse, waiting for a push.

"baby, what is it?" she asked as she brushed off a strand of hair that partly covered his eyes.

He looked at her, hesitated for a second, then ventured, "Let's go to my place."

Lin pulled her hand back and stared at her lap for short while. "You know I can't," she said finally.

"But why? You love me, you trust me, you want it as well, don't think it's time?" he protested.

"Just stop, please."

"Yeah, I expected such an answer, but you don't understand. My desire does not stem from a simple physical need in me, it is something deeper," he said.

"How so?"

Noah dithered, puffed from his cigarette, then said, "My feelings for you, Lin, have created a void in me that needs to be filled. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy our time together, and *I see* you, your thoughts, your feelings, your quirks and your ambitions. But *to love* is to share both the heart and the flesh. They're equally important. Take one out and the relationship becomes crippled, it becomes half, hollow, deformed. It's been four years now, and the void of the missing sex has only grew deeper and denser, and I am afraid that I can no longer ignore it."

Lin listened carefully, and after he finished, she looked at him with misty sad eyes and said, "I understand, but I just can't."

"Why not? what's stopping you?"

"I do want it!" protested Lin, "But I can't have sex before marriage, and don't ask me why please, I think you understand this much. Ever since I was a little kid, I was programmed to think and feel this way about sex, by my parents, by relatives, by society. It is rooted deep in my psyche, hard-wired in my mind; even if I wanted to, I wouldn't be able to do it. It is just one huge wall I can't surmount."

"I do understand this much," replied Noah, "but we are going to get married. As soon as I finish college I'll find a job, and I'll be ready to support a life of my own. But we need to cross some lines now, for the sake of this relationship, to save it. We need to go against the stream. I'm afraid we won't survive another two or three years without it."

A heavy silence befell them. Pieces of unfinished pizza laid scattered in the box in the back seat, half empty cans of soda in the space in between them. '*Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*' was on loop, it ended, and started again. The sky was painted blue upon darker shades of blue, and the first stars twinkled in the vast beyond.

Lin looked away, mused over the matter, then finally spoke, "You know, I never thought we'd make it this far. I don't know, I always imagined it would be but a whimsical high-school affair and that it would be lost somewhere in the foggy road between teenagehood and adulthood. But here we are. Somehow, we've made it."

"What do you mean?" asked Noah, a little puzzled.

"Do you really believe that someday we'll get married?" asked Lin, her voice hushed.

"Yes, that's the plan. I don't yet have the means, but I already know whom I want to marry."

Lin chuckled faintly, and her eyes clouded with tears. "We're the same age Noah, I hate to say this, but, most likely, it won't happen." Noah remained motionless, and watched her carefully, half surprised, half enraged. "I mean," Lin continued, "you're smart, and I know you'll achieve a lot and end up being someone well-made; but, it's going to take time, and I can't wait. Love is one thing, but reality is another, and sometimes their colors don't match. Women marry young you know, a window opens for a short time and once it's closed, it's hard to push it back ajar."

Noah fell quiet, staring far off at a non-existent point in the sky. This was all new to him. A colossal wave of silence suddenly drowned his world; no word seemed worthy of breaking it, not even a thought. He stood at the edge of his existence, and watched his world sink in thick dark waters. Strangely enough, he felt serene.

"Is that how you truly feel?" he finally asked.

"Yes," she answered, after a moment of hesitation.

Noah leaned his forehead against the steering wheel, closed his eyes and let it all sink in. Once he lifted his head, he started the engine, and drove her home. On the road, no word was exchanged, even the stereo was off. Lin gently wept.

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She tried to call him during the next few days. She texted him. But Noah, holed up in his apartment, only watched the phone ring, but never answered. And just like that, abruptly, without any warning, it was all over. Four years that summed up to zero.

In the few months that followed, Noah stopped coming to college. He lost some weight, grew a beard, and the daily amount of cigarettes butts in his ashtray doubled. He spent his days lurking in his apartment, eating one lousy meal, and watching five movies a day. When he undressed before the mirror, he could see his ribs, sharp and protuberant. And as to his face, it looked more like a thin dry mask that was about to fall off any second.

Lin, on the other hand, was no better off. When she attended lectures, she sat at the back of the class and instead of listening to the professor's clear voice, all she heard was some unintelligible noise coming from a distant world. And when at home, she spent most of her time in her room, reading her Japanese novels and listening to dreary music. What did she feel at the time? What people usually feel after break-ups: a broken heart, and the realization how strongly did she truly love him. However, deep under the calm surface, at the bottom of the ocean, a volcano had erupted. She felt a rage that was never there before. She felt *furious*, at this society, at her parents, at religion, even at God. Why did she have to suffer such chastisement just because she was born a girl in this country at this age. Why did she have to be chained with so many rules, so many taboos, so many red lines. Why did she have to be a virgin at the night of her wedding. Why is it so wrong to be with the person she loves, despite being a full fledged adult. The volcano erupted, puking out hot lava, and before she could realize it, her ocean was already boiling.

It was during that time that Noah mistakenly listened to Shiva's memory cassette at my apartment, after which he disappeared somewhere unknown.

I called Lin, and after meeting with her, I got a clear picture of their situation. I also tried to explain to her the size of the problem at hand, that I must see him and make him listen to a cassette, and to my surprise, she was unusually receptive. She didn't ask about the details of the matter, details which would have been problematic to clarify. I asked her to help me find him, but since he didn't answer her calls nor her texts, she had no way to reach him.

Lin dwelt in a state of haze, walking the thin line between melancholy and rage, until her mother called for her one day, and they had a *long conversation* at the kitchen table.

After that talk with her mom, Lin knew exactly what she had to do. She sent a text message to Noah, it said the following, "*I'll come to your apartment tomorrow at 6 p.m., I don't plan to talk. Feel free to not open the door.*"

Lin had never laid foot in Noah's apartment before, and her text only meant one thing. When Noah read her text, he put the phone back on the table and stared at it for a while, then he read it again, analyzing each word, and what could it possibly mean. At that time, I could only imagine what Noah had been going through. But it seemed, be it the memory of a zillion lives within him, when it came to Lin, Noah was his old confused self.

He left his dwelling place and rode back to his apartment. He opened the windows, cleaned the apartment, mopped the floor, took out the garbage, changed the bed sheets, showered, and shaved. The next day at 5:30 p.m., he brushed his teeth, put on his best clothes, his best under-wears, combed his hair, sprinkled two sprays of Jean-Paul-Gaultier on his neck, and sat on the edge of his bed, waiting.

The apartment was dim lighted. His room was splashed by a cold bluish glow that filtered through the half open window; outside, the sun was quietly leaving the horizon. He sat on the edge of his bed and stared out the window. He wasn't looking at anything specific, he simply stared, unsure what he should do. Silence built up by the second, and the clock ticked. He heard a distance voice in his head, but wasn't sure what it was trying to say. He kept staring out the window, but couldn't shake off the feeling that something was not right. The voice in his head was getting louder, but he turned a deaf ear to it. The clock kept ticking. He sat on the edge of his bed and stared right down at a bottomless abyss, dark, unending, full of monsters. That is exactly where I am heading, he thought, and there's no turning back. The voice in his head became loud and clear, '*Don't do it*,' it said. He cupped his head between the palms of his hands and buried that sound deep where no one can find it, where no one can hear it. '*This is mine to take!*' he shouted as he stood up.

Once he turned around, Lin was standing at the foot of his bedroom's door.

Lin looked dazzling. Dotted pale blue dress, high heels, and a leather hand-bag that perfectly matched the rest. She wore a thin necklace, a bracelet, and emerald earrings all of which were hand picked by Noah himself. Her make-up was inconspicuous but spotless, her hair was lush and her aura exuded an exotic but gentle perfume.

Lin was smitten by the looks of Noah. Especially his hair, that turned Ivory white. A color induced by the massive memories in his head. She took a few steps towards him, and he did the same. They stared at one another in complete silence. All the words in the world were meaningless; all that could be said had been said; all that needs to be said could only be conveyed both symbolically and literally in bed.

He pushed her against the wall, she let go of her hand-bag, and they kissed, feverishly. To put it in more elaborate terms, they exosculated. His hands felt her body and rested on her hips, and so did hers. She unbuttoned his shirt, he unzipped her dress. They kissed some more, she lead him on the bed, and their under-wears joined the rest of their clothes on the floor. The order and nature of what happened next eludes the words, but they were uninhibited, and didn't hold back. All the accumulated lust and affection burst out unreservedly, his kisses knew no forbidden spot, her tongue slid down his throat, her nails dug into his back, and her moans grew louder and heavier. Like two starved animals, they devoured the flesh they craved. After enough foreplay, he was on top of her, staring at her glinting eyes, her face all flushed, her loins wet and warm. Right when he was about to enter her, he faltered for a second, and looked her deep in the eyes. There was no mistaking it, what was buzzing at the back of his head had now became clear and true: there's an unambiguous, almost palpable, sadness in her eyes.

Noah stopped, retreated and sat on the edge of the bed. Lin laid there naked, face up. She stared at the ceiling and said nothing.

"I'm getting married," she finally said, breaking the silence. Noah, taken aback, turned towards her for a short while, a puzzling look on his face, then turned back to the window.

"I figured," he said.

"He's the son of my mom's friend. He's around thirty. He was born and lived all his life in France. He wouldn't care whether I am a virgin or not," she said, matter of factly, her tone flat and low.

"I see," Noah replied.

"I am leaving to France next month," she continued, and then she fell silent again. She looked at Noah's back, and was about to say something, but stopped midway. In the quietness of his apartment, she started to sob.

Noah, who didn't want her to see his face, was also shedding tears.

"Can you hold me?" she managed to say.

Noah let his tears dry out, and then joined her, and held her in his arms. She nested her head in his skeletal chest, and kept on weeping. Noah said nothing, all he did was stroke her hair, until she fell asleep in his arms.

She never said sorry, there's no one to blame. It is what it is.

After Lin made sure Noah was sound asleep, she left the bed, put on her clothes, and called me inside, as we agreed. There I found him, the one I burdened with eternal memories. carefully, I put the earphones on his ears, and played the yellow SONY Walkman, the new cassette inside, on the B side, *Fleeting Dreams* started playing.

When Noah woke up, he found no one in bed next to him. He remembered what happened last night, about Lin and the fact that she was leaving the country to get married. He felt sad, but at the same time, he felt unnaturally light, as if a lot of dreams and memories had fleeted his mind. His hair gained its natural dark color.

Strange, he thought.

11.

Second Disciple

No One Gives a Shit About Your Feelings

Lamis Lamperouge

'The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shock proof, shit detector.'

Ernest Hemingway

"Okay let's get one thing straight first," J said. The clock showed 10:12 p.m., I sat at the counter in the MadBuddha, a plate of french fries on the side and a can of soda. I munched and listened. "You're not writing to send a message, nor to spread awareness, nor to emphasize certain morals, nor to elaborate what you think is the right philosophy of life. You're not writing to express your own feelings—no one gives a shit about your feelings. You're not writing to describe a good scenery you remembered from some trip somewhere, and you're not describing good art you've seen in some gallery either. You're not writing about your own life; it's not that interesting. You're not writing about what you think love should look like. You're not writing to ease the suffering of your fellow human beings nor to show them how to live; believe me, you're no judge of that. And you're not writing about time travel either."

I nodded, mouth full of fries dipped in mayonnaise.

"Your purpose is one and only, and that is to entertain. Your single aim is to write an interesting story, to make the reader forget about his miserable existence and delve into your world. You must keep the reader flipping the pages, excited to know what's going to happen next, and not to bore him into throwing the novel aside and pick up his smart-phone instead."

"Okay.. I hear you," I said.

"Novels are not something transcendental or magical. Don't think that because you're writing a novel, you have the right to put down whatever thought or idea you want to deliver. Think of novels as movies, video games, TV shows. They need to be concise, and they need to hook. A novel is not your diary. You have your characters, you have a plot, and a story line. You need to keep things happening, your characters interacting, and things always moving forward. Don't put on paper anything that doesn't serve the story. Am I clear enough?"

"Yes sensei!"

"Now that doesn't mean that your story mustn't bear a meaning, or a philosophy. It can, and it should, but it must serve the story, and nothing else. If you want to write about love, make it the love your characters are experiencing. If you want to write about suffering, make it the suffering

of your characters that chisels their personality, changes them, and makes them do stuff. If you want to slow things down with some descriptions, do it in order to give the reader some rest, or give life to a scene, or to show that the world of your characters is slowing down, and never for the sake of description itself. Remember, the reader is always more interested in the story than how beautiful the sky looks or how aesthetic the architecture is.”

“That, I can agree on. Sometimes I struggle finishing descriptive passages,” I commented.

“I don’t need you to agree. I need you to listen to my words as if I’m Gabriel bearing the word of god.”

“You’re enjoying this aren’t you? Am I your first disciple?” I teased.

He looked at me funny, sipped from his milk, chopped more onions, knife in the left hand with the missing pinky finger, Egyptian tattoo and fried skin. And went on, “it doesn’t matter which genre you write in, be it in a world with dragons, or in an interstellar civilization, your story needs to be real; not in relation to our physical world, but in regard to the human nature. For example, the nice guy doesn’t get the girl in the end. There’s no awaited chosen one who’ll save the world. Lonely people are not more interesting nor mysterious than your regular ones, they’re just unsociable, and no one is going to notice how special they are. There’s no such thing as soul mates. There’s no one out there for each one of us. Good does not always triumph over evil. Not everyone gets what they deserve. Money may not buy happiness, but the lack of it leads to a miserable life. No one cares about the inner beauty of an ugly person, people will forever be attracted to beautiful persons no matter how empty or hideous they are from the inside. People are selfish by nature. And definitely, there’s no one evil by nature, when you make an antagonist, make him human, with motives and philosophies. You get the gist of it?”

“Sure. The reader doesn’t care if you break the laws of nature, but he cares if you break the laws of the human nature.”

“Exactly, you’re not so dull.” I’ve never before seen someone chop onions and not shed tears. I was going to bring it up, then I judged perhaps it was not the best time.

“Do not tell lies about life, people will pick up on that,” he continued. “But do not tell people what they already know either. People have been lied to. They reach a certain age and they realize that the conventional moral landscape does not make them winners nor heroes, and they’re mad about it; they feel scammed. If you’re not going to break taboos, speak out what nobody can, expose the lies, and be the voice that dances with people’s madness, or the whisper that quells their anger, then don’t do it.”

“So, I must first and foremost entertain, but I must do it in an unconventional way, and yet, I must tell no lies,” I concluded.

“Something like that, yes,” he said. “It is a gamble alright, you must be willing to risk humiliating yourself. If you’re going to write dull stuff that doesn’t contrast with the tediousness of most people’s lives; if you are going to be polite, reasonable, inconspicuous, then you’ll most likely to fail. You must be willing to look strange, rude, inappropriate and brave. You must risk looking like a psychopath, a pervert, evil, even bare tendencies of a serial killer. Of course if you’re famous those traits would look sexy, deviant and special on you. But if you’re a nobody—and you are—then it’s a risk for you. Yet, it’s not entirely a gamble. Think of it like poker. You don’t get a six times in a row world champion in poker out of pure luck. It’s a game, like everything else in life, and games have rules, some are simple, some are very complex. And unless you know those rules, unless you master them, you are going to fail. However if you become a virtuoso, then you’ll have the world in the palm of your hand. Same goes for writing. It is a gamble, but not exactly. You can’t play it safe, but you don’t have to be totally crazy either. Just the right amount of frenzy, with a grand sane closure.”

The number of customers at the MadBuddha was decreasing. Just a few tables to serve, and more time for us to chat. I agreed to attend J's lectures as he fixes quick dishes in his restaurant everyday from 9:30 p.m. till late at night. He would teach me how to write, and in return, I'd write the book that'll end the world. Have I come to terms with ending the world? I figured it was a useless question. If the world were to vanish, I wouldn't exist to regret my actions. And I don't have to worry about all those who would later be born if not for my actions, whom I've robbed the gift of life, because they wouldn't even exist to blame me either, nor to feel sad for themselves, nor to curse their fate for not having been given the same chance as everyone else. If humanity vanishes today or survives another thousand years, it's all the same. Feeling sad for those who would never be born is like lamenting the sperms you ejaculate each time you masturbate; it's just stupid. For all I know, they're imaginary people. The ones I should care about are the ones existing now, those who can feel both pain and pleasure. Should I embezzle them the right to know the truth? I am no judge of that. I'll deliver it, and let them decide what to do with it. And if God wants to wipe out his creation for knowing the truth, it's his own deal, who am I to comment on that? Besides, if it gets me Stella back, and a few years of fame as a writer, it wouldn't be so bad.

And that's what we call, *Rationalization*.

"I'll explain some basics, since you appear to know nothing about writing," said J. "You can break writing into two parts, *Talent*, and *Craft*. Talent is whether you have anything *to say* at all, and Craft is *how* you say it. Talent is the story in your head, Craft is the words you put on paper. The best example is a piece of music. You can hear the music in your head, you imagine the melody, you create the harmonies, the bass lines, the rhythm, everything; that's talent. But once you try to play it on a piano, without craft, without years of training, you can never manage to play it. You get me?"

"Yeah kind of. Which one do I lack?" I asked.

"At this point, it is safer to assume you are as good as any body else."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you lack both. Most people have nothing to say, and the few who do, don't know how to say it. Considering you call yourself a writer, I am going to assume you at least have the ability to conjure up stories. I am not going to tell you what to write, but I'm going to help you write it."

"That's good enough for me. But how do I get better? I mean, I'm not a genius like you. You wrote a best seller at the age of seventeen. The heavens did not serve us equally."

"I'm no genius. I just had a little bit of luck, and a special mentorship."

"You had mentorship? From whom?"

He fell quiet for a while, put a cigarette between his lips and lit it, then said, "It's a long story, maybe I'll tell you about it another time."

"You tell me that, and the story of your missing pinky finger," I said.

He chuckled, and then offered me his half pinky and said, "promise." Of course, pinky promises should take place only when two people lock their pinkies together, which was not possible in his case. I chuckled back and said, "Good one, at least it's still useful to make pinky promises jokes right?"

"Everything is useful with the right mindset," he replied and winked. "Strange thing about missing body parts, you still feel them. I can still sense my whole pinky. I forget that it's been cut. And then I try to use it and my mind realizes it's not there, which makes my head spin. I can

only imagine what people with missing limbs are going through.”

At that instant, I pulled my hair and uncovered my missing ear lobe. “I feel you,” I said. He fixed my deformed ear for a few seconds then, changing the subject, he said, “you asked me how to get better. You master craft by reading and writing a lot, and you master talent by experiencing life. After all, you are writing about life and about people. So, you must go out there, try new things, live in danger, explore your territory. Interact with people, know them, observe them, study them, get involved with them, understand them. Only then, you can write truthfully. You can’t be brave in your words unless you were brave in real life. You can’t write about love unless you’ve loved intensely. You can’t write about pain unless your flesh had writhed in agony.”

I’ve experienced a lot of missing socks, I thought, so I will write about that. As a matter of fact, I was wearing different pairs of socks right there and then. At that point of my life, I stopped fighting it. A sock is a sock.

“And finally,” he concluded, “Always, *Show*, do not *Tell*.”

“Oh I know that one, gotcha, show, do not tell,” I said.

▼

J gave me my first assignment that night. He said I should get to know people, and by knowing people, I know myself. “You see that lady over there?” he asked. She entered the restaurant late at night and sat alone at the exact table I first met Stella at. She ate quietly, sipped from a glass of lime water, and scribbled some lines on a notepad with her left hand. At moments, she’d stop moving, and she’d stare at some people eating, and then, she’d slowly resume her eating, and her scribbling.

“Approach her,” J asked, and I said I wasn’t really comfortable with the idea. “Doing what you’re not comfortable with is part of the assignment,” he replied. “I’m not intimidated or anything, but just approaching strangers isn’t my thing, especially when they’re eating. I myself would not like to be disturbed if I ate alone in a restaurant, plus..” I hesitated for a second, and thought of Stella, “I don’t feel like hitting on any girl for the moment.” “Don’t be dull,” he said, “I’m not asking you to be someone you’re not. And I’m not asking you to take her to your place tonight. Just talk to her. Try what you’re not used to, that’s how you broaden your spectrum, that’s how you’ll be able to write genuinely. You can’t imagine everything, somethings you must live. Now go.”

I grabbed my can of soda and walked to her table, I stood there for a while, waiting for her to glance at me, but she didn’t even notice my presence. Her hair was red, styled in a bob cut, a thick framed rectangular glasses rested on her small nose. She wasn’t exactly slim, but she didn’t seem to have excess flesh either. She wore an orange turtleneck shirt, a necklace that settled on the bulging of her breasts, and black tight jeans; her perfume filled my nostrils.

“Excuse me, I won’t take much of your time, can I sit?” I asked.

She lifted her gaze, studied me for a short while, then nodded. I took my seat, she closed her notepad, and adjusted her plate. She rested her elbows on the table, cupped her neck with her hands and looked at me, “Yes love?” she said, finally.

Fuck, now what? Here’s the thing with approaching women you don’t know. First, you are a creep until proven otherwise. Second, you are not allowed, in any possible way, to bore her in the first ten or twenty second. Third, she most likely has a boyfriend, and she’s going to let you

know that as soon as you make your intentions clear—or as soon as she judges you unfit.

“I have a question.”

“Shoot away,” she answered. She didn’t blink, she almost never blinked.

“What are you scribbling in that notepad?”

Without saying a word, she just handed it to me, opened on the page she was writing on.

A timeless man, tall and grand,

With a misty visage, and quill in hand,

He weaves the tapestry of fate with skill,

But the weight of it all leaves him feeling ill.’

“You’re a poet,” I said, “that’s beautiful.”

“Do you have any more questions?” She said.

“Yes, actually. Let’s say, if you were given the choice to end this world, painlessly, no wars, no apocalypse. Let’s say there’s a red button in a room somewhere, and if you push it, the world ends, like switching off a TV, would you do it?” Sometimes asking an honest question is the smartest option. As Nietzsche said, people mostly speak the truth not because God has forbidden falsehood, but because it’s convenient. Falsehood requires invention, memory, and deceit. And I lack the two formers; I deceive myself all the time.

“Hmm, funny way to strike up a conversation with a woman,” she said with a mischievous smile. “Women do not usually concern themselves with such matters. But yes, I would do it, without a blink of an Eye.” Although, she seemed to do everything without blinking.

“Oh yeah? Why is that?”

“Why else? Because life is dreary, and it has no inherent meaning. I would only spare lovers if I could. I’d let them have those first hedonistic months, or first voluptuous years. Those are the only moments worth living for.”

You and Shiva would hit it off so well, I thought. She should have chosen you.

“You seem to have it all figured out,” I commented.

“It’s not that hard to figure out. When the trees of our minds became ripe with clear reason, the first temple we demolished was the same abode that kept us sane for centuries: religions. And in the absence of the divine, the absinthean weeds of nihilism invaded our virgin gardens. We don’t love it, but in our seeking for answers, we beheaded all answers, and now, we must accept our loss, and our meaninglessness,” she said, and ate a mouthful.

“One could argue otherwise,” I said.

“Oh, to argue. I’ve had very long conversations about this particular matter with my teacher. He’s a romantic, the poor man, and he values life too much. He even committed unthinkable deeds to prove to himself he had free will. I don’t think someone could argue in favor of life as good as he did. He is the smartest man I knew, and yet, at the end, arguing only serves what it had always served, which is nothing. Some opinions are just impossible to change.” She was quite talkative for someone who eats alone.

“You talk like a poet too,” I said.

“That’s because I am.” She fiddled with her necklace, then said, “It’s that guy over there who sent you to me isn’t it?” I looked back, and she was meaning J.

“Is it that obvious?” I asked.

“No, but a woman is always aware of her surroundings,” she said.

“Well, he sort of sent me to you.”

“He is kind of hot though. Tell you what, I’ll give you my number, if you could introduce me to him,” she stated.

“I would introduce you to him if you want, but don’t give me your number. If I were to have it, I want it because you really want me to call you,” I said, a little pissed off.

“Oh, tough man,” she said, smiling mischievously again, fixating me with her eyes. “Let’s make deal. How about I give you my number, and you don’t introduce me to him?”

“Why the sudden change of mind?”

“You see, when the first thing you ask a girl is whether she wants to end the world or not, you’re either going to scare her away for real, or attract her in ways she could not resist. Can you guess which one you pulled on me?” She sucked on the straw in her lemon water, her gaze always on me.

“I honestly don’t know. I had no particular intention, I just wanted to make small talk,” I said.

She leaned back in her chair, crossed her legs, and then said, “although you are much younger than I, but here.” She scribbled her phone number on the notepad, tore off the page, and handed it to me.

“Much younger?” I asked.

“Don’t be a jerk, call me.” She winked, grabbed her stuff, and left the table. As she passed the counter, she turned to J and said, “He’s okay J, he’s a keeper.”

When I walked back to the counter, J said, “to answer your question, No, you are not my first disciple, she is.”

And that’s how I met Lamis Lamperouge. A twenty nine years old poet, also a doctor, married in France, who kept her maiden’s name after divorce. Tutored by J since the age of 21, published twice, and just recently back to Algeria, after her three years marriage failed, and after she lost custody over her daughter.

*‘A timeless man, tall and grand,
With a misty visage, and quill in hand,
He weaves the tapestry of fate with skill,
But the weight of it all leaves him feeling ill.
A top-hat crowns his head, a symbol of might,
Yet in his heart, he longs for someone to share the night.’*

Lamis Lamperouge

12.

QALAM

Semiramis

Quiche

"As above, so below. As within, so without. As the universe, so the soul."

Hermes Trismegistus

One thing I learned through my long years of experience, is that if you feel like peeing, do it right away. Don't hold it until later on. Especially on cold nights, and one shivering night it was that day.

I got back home from a long talk with J at the MadBuddha, and a little after midnight, I went to bed. As I snuggled under my blanket, I had a little inkling of a pee coming on, it was still brewing, hadn't matured yet. I was tired, and the bathroom seemed on the other side of town, so I thought, it's manageable, I can tame it for now, I'll just sleep, and pee in the morning. However, as you might've guessed, an intense urge to urinate woke me up in the middle of the night, a bullet train, there was no keeping the genie in the bladder, it had to be released right away. I managed to get my ass out of the bed, and to the bathroom I walked. Had I been a kid, I would have turned on every light on my way, but I wasn't a kid anymore, and I befriended the darkness—it is a sign of maturity, or psychosis, to not only be no longer afraid of the darkness, but to grow a liking to it—So I walked, barefoot, through the long corridor to the bathroom. The only source of light was the orange mercury lamp of the building hall, seeping from the opening at the foot of my front door to the inside. I peed, a long, uninterrupted stream, which I considered a success, since I didn't sprinkle the toilet seat, considering I was half asleep. I washed my hands in the sink, and walked back to my bed; the electric watch showed 03:02.

As I shuffled my feet back to my room in my pitch black apartment, a little detail caught my attention. The line of light seeping through the opening below my apartment's front door was not a straight line. It was intersected by two short dark spots. It didn't register right away in my mind, but when it did, I knew it only meant one thing: those are the shadows of someone's feet. Someone is standing at my door.

The gears of my system shifted. Goodbye sleep, welcome panic. The juices of fight or flight started to pump in, and I stood my ground. I watched the dark lines with great intensity, as if my life depended on their approach or disappearance, but they didn't flinch. I mustered some courage, and walked, on tiptoe, to the front door, making sure I didn't make the slightest sound, barely even breathing. I looked through the eye hole, and I saw the silhouette of a tall man, standing a few centimeters away from my front door, wearing what seemed like a top-hat and a

long dark coat. Is it Mr. Dandy? No, dandy was somewhat shorter, and slimmer. Whoever this is, it's not Mr. Dandy. He remained erect, not moving, just glaring at my door. In one hand he was holding what looked like a plastic bag, the other one was empty. Then, suddenly, he moved his empty hand and placed it on my door. He didn't knock, nor press, he simply felt the door, as if palpating its pulse—my pulse! Did he notice I was watching him? My heart pounded harder, decisions rushed and clashed in my mind. Should I confront him and open the door? What if he was dangerous. I was carrying no weapon. Stupid me, I should have grabbed a knife, or the stick of the broom, anything to successfully neutralize the enemy at the door, but I was empty handed, and I felt, with strong certainty, that if I moved back and took my eyes off of him, he'd disappear forever, or barge in uninvited; one of the two possibilities, and no cosmic place for a third.

“Could you please open the door, Mr. Razi. I know you’re in there. I realize this seems a bit sudden. I should’ve called, or sent a letter. I apologize for my unforeseen visit at this ungodly hour. But I mean you no harm; actually I do, but it’s not what you think. I brought mini Quiches, we should eat them as we converse before they get cold. You know Quiche becomes lamentable once it gets cold. And, we must talk,” said the man, his voice was somewhat too sweet and too high for a guy with such bulk.

“Who the hell are you?!?” I asked. What else should I have asked?

“I am meaning to appropriately introduce myself once you let me in.”

“I am not opening the fucking door!” Although, I knew it was only a matter of time before I do. I knew, that I and this man were going to have a long talk.

“I come with friendly intentions tonight. But must you know, I could easily enter your apartment, and I could, with better ease, take your eye balls out of your sockets and replace them with melted Pule cheese,” he said, with the utmost calm and gentleness. “Do you know what Pule cheese is Mr. Razi?”

I cleared my throat, I knew what Pule cheese was, the most expensive cheese in the world. He made his point, he's reasonable, but could demonstrate lengths of cruelty. He's modest although he's wealthy beyond belief. And I also knew, he could fulfill his threats and do much more. At that instant, I gave in, and unlocked the door.

I couldn't quite outline the details of his figure at first, but once I invited him inside the kitchen, turned the light on, and sat on the table, he was much clearer to discern.

A faceless man.

Tall and grand, with a misty visage, and quill in hand,

Under the top-hat, there was only dense gray fog in the form of a head, slowly swirling around the axis of his body. No eyes, not even a Voldemort nose, and no mouth whatsoever, just fog, mist, smoke, whirling in calm, hypnotizing circles. ‘At least I have eyeballs you sick fuck!’ I wanted to tell him. His figure was covered by a long dark trench coat, buttoned up to the top, and his hands covered in black silk gloves. He sat down, and placed the plastic bag on the table top. I turned the gas on the moka pot, and waited for coffee to brew.

“Here, Mr Razi, try these Quiches.”

I sat facing him, hesitated for a short while, then ate a mini Quiche.

“Delicious, isn’t it?”

“Where did you buy them?” I asked. Those Quiches were nothing like I ever tasted before. Crunchy, light, an umami bomb. Magical.

“Some place where they sell very, very good Quiche,” he stated.

"I see, that was specific. So, who are you and to what do I owe this late visit?"

"Who are you?" a question I asked a lot lately, first to Mr. Dandy, then to Lady Shiva. I simply wished for a short simple answer this time.

"My name is Qalam. I write the Shicksal. Fate, destiny, in other words. And I came here in an attempt to talk you out of ending the world."

Huh?

"What do you mean you write destiny?" I asked, and ate another mini quiche.

"I write the story of mankind, from start to finish. I'm the guy up there who does it. Now don't be ludicrous. You certainly didn't think it wrote itself did you? Mr. Razi?"

My mind made some mismatched calculations, then a memory of a hadith, a saying by the prophet Muhammad, came rushing to my mind. '*Verily, the first to be created by God was the Qalam (pen). And God told it to write, so it wrote all that will exist until forever.*' A vestige from my old Islamic teachings. You could never unlearn what had been carved in your brain as a child.

"You mean you are.."

"Yes, exactly Mr. Razi. I am exactly what you think I am. I am God's Scribe. Only, I was not the first one created by God. Lady Shiva was. And I am aware of what she is plotting. Naturally, I can't allow her to. If the world ends, I would be unemployed. You understand me Mr. Razi? No one wants to lose his job, and neither do I. Everyone must have something to do. Besides, my story must be finished."

I frowned at the thought of what this guy's presence could mean. I realized there were many things I didn't understand. So many questions I had, and I tried to start with the most important one, only to find out they were all equally important. At that instant the smell of coffee snapped me out of my thinking. I served two cups, and sat back at the table.

"Hold on. If you write destiny, aren't you the one who decides how things go? Who does what and what is what? aren't you the one who wanted this to happen?"

"Not quite Mr. Razi. First of all, if I write a story, with characters and plots, it does not necessarily mean I decide every little detail that goes in there. You are a writer yourself, you should understand my point."

"I am sure I do not understand your point," I went.

"When you write a story, Mr. Razi, you do not invent the characters, nor do you decide what they do, what they say or what they're like. They simply intrude on your imagination. They appear out of thin air, present and impose themselves as separate beings from you. All you do is write them down, describe what you see. And even after you give them substance with words, you still have no idea what they're going to say or how they're going to behave. Their course of action becomes unpredictable. You merely watch them in your imagination, and then, you translate what you see into words. The power you have over them is somewhat limited."

"But you do exercise a certain control don't you?" I asked.

"Of course I do, that's my job."

"Then why the hell all this much pain and suffering? Do you enjoy it when your characters are tortured to death, or weakened by agonizing sickness till they rest on their graves?"

"You are asking me a senseless question Mr Razi, I judged you more intelligent. Are you overcome by anger?"

Senseless? Yes it was senseless alright, but still, I wanted to hear his answer.

“Do you think a story where no one dies, where no one gets hurt, where there isn’t a conflict of interests, of good and evil, of reason and emotions, of desires and ethics, is a good story? Do you think it better, if all that people knew is bliss and happiness? People glory life, poeticize and revel in it because they are aware of their own mortality. Give a person an eternity of joy, peace and wealth and he’d grab a hammer and start smashing things just to have a little action. What I write, what people go through, is but necessary. My job is to maintain the illusion of free will, it’s the only tool by which people will keep on chasing after the ghost of meaning.”

“If you say so. Still, a lot of people would disagree with you,” I said. I had nothing to add, plus I was too exhausted to argue.

“Not only do I not have complete autonomy over my characters, Mr Razi, but furthermore, there are certain individuals whom I cannot decide the fate of. Beings who escape my pen. Namely, Lady Shiva, Mr. Dandy, and my daughter. And any person who comes in contact with them, or gets involved with the vortex of their doings, also escapes my pen. These people who get tangled up in the webs of Lady Shiva, Mr. Dandy and my daughter, are no longer the subject of my scribbles. Their fate and the unfoldings of their actions and choices elude me. Namely, you, who have interacted with the three of them.”

“Who do you mean your daughter?”

He switched the position of his crossed legs, tapped on the table with his fingers in a strange rhythm, which, by the sound they made, I reckoned he had solid, material, fingers. Then adjusted the position of his cup of coffee, which remained untouched.

“Sara, or Stella, as you call her, is a woman whose birth is mingled with my loins,” he finally said.

“Stella is your daughter!?”

“In a way, you could say so. She’s the seed of a mistake I made a long time ago.”

“What do you mean a mistake? Did you make love to her mother?”

“In a way, but not exactly. Tell me, Mr. Razi, do you think a writer could fall in love with a character he wrote?”

“Very unlikely, I’d say. Also, very creepy.”

“True, very unlikely. But not impossible. I wrote a woman so fascinating I ended up falling in love with her. Foolish of me you might think, and perhaps you are correct, but she was my master piece.”

“Huh, seems like you got laid with queen of Sheba,” I kidded.

“Not the queen of Sheba, but the queen of Assyria, Semiramis.”

“What? You fell in love with Semiramis? The Semiramis?”

“Yes, Semiramis, the founder of Babylon, the embodiment of a superwoman, unmatched in beauty, counsel, military ability, sexual prowess, administrative skills and ambition. Mother of witches, mistress of the Gods. The quintessence of charm. A pitfall of candor and warmth. After the death of her husband, Shamshi the fifth, one lonesome night, I made it to her room. She embraced me, accepted me. Perhaps she was the only woman who could love a faceless man. I, myself, could also act unpredictably sometimes. I, myself, could not understand the workings of my soul.”

“I.. don’t know what to say honestly.” I bet Noah knew that, for a while at least. “And how is

it that Semiramis is the mother of Stella?" I asked.

"The daughter that sprung from our union never came to gasp the breath of life. Semiramis had a miscarriage. To put it in clearer terms, I caused the miscarriage. The Scribe of God must not mingle with the daughters of men. Qalam is forbidden to have an offspring. However, considering the status Semiramis held at that time, her fetus was never buried or disposed of. Instead, through methods unbeknownst to humans in this day and age, methods that would be rediscovered, or remembered in a future age, if you don't end the world, her Magis extracted the essence of her fetes, and hid it someplace that could never perish, until, it was offered to Stella's mother, on her holiday to nowadays Iraq, as she was pregnant with Stella."

"This is unbelievable. I am sorry if I seem to be objectifying you daughter, but does that have something to do with her thigh gap?" I asked. I was starting to see things more clearly.

"Yes, she has her mother's thigh gap. A sight that made the thrones of kings tremble. One more fact I must add: my own presence, or anything I interact with, also eludes my pen Mr. Razi. I, as lady Shiva, Mr. Dandy, or Stella, you, are whimsical, capricious variants in this cosmic equation. Variants I cannot control. I could only watch, and wait."

"Funny, now that you've mentioned it, Stella's mother's name was Samira. Was that a little twist you made? Nice touch," I said.

"It is indeed a nice touch, however unintended. Samira, Stella's mom, was never meant to bear children. She was meant to miscarry her babies in the third month. When, to my surprise, I learned she was in her fourth month after she visited Iraq, I knew my mistake had come back to haunt me."

And then it hit me! The man in a top-hat.

"Hold on a second! Are you the one who tempered with Stella's memories? Did you make her forget about me because I would be plotting with Lady Shiva?" I asked, a little furious.

"That, I did. You must understand, I had to contain the situation. Lady Shiva and Mr. Dandy are enough trouble for me, along with Stella being in your life, it could render me helpless."

"So that paper-weight is yours?"

"Yes it is. I watched you that night, on the beach. I saw how she cuddled under your arm, and heard the words she whispered to you, and in that instant, I realized I must do something. I always carry my paper-weight with me. Naturally you understand by now it is not an ordinary paper-weight. It flings open the gates of imagination of whomever uses it. I pulled it out of my pocket, and I used it on Stella that night. Though I must applaud your chivalry. You didn't try to win her back as long as she didn't remember that you once were her lover."

"Not cool man. She's your daughter. You don't take responsibility for her by robbing her of the memories of the guy she loved."

I darted to my room and brought back the paper-weight and handed it to him. "Here, take it. I don't want it anymore."

"Oh, you keep it Mr. Razi, it's a token of friendship. I sure would appreciate it if you did not use it to write that book. But it would help a lot writing your next novels. Am I bribing you? Well, it might look like it, but I am actually not. I admire your persona, and I want to see you fulfill who you truly are. After all, you are one of my characters as well, and I had plans for you."

Had?

"Use it how?" I asked.

“Next time you write, keep it next to you, and you’ll see.” I already had an idea about its effects, only now explained.

“Are you planning to give Stella those memories back?” I asked.

“I might consider it, if you stop your senseless labor. Do you still plan on writing that book?”

“I haven’t changed my mind,” I said, sounding a bit challenging.

“Tell me then Mr. Razi, why do you want to end the world?”

“Because we’re play puppets to you, or to fate. Because no one knows what’s the fuck this is all about. What’s the ultimate purpose of his life. And because life is misery. You might think that pain is necessary, and perhaps you’re right, but man, you overdid it. There’s just so much pain. Why not be done with it already?” I said. That’s what Shiva thinks. But what do I truly think?

“And do you think, if you were to ask every single human being alive at this moment, they would agree with you? Or would they do everything they can to stop you?”

“I don’t know. And I guess I don’t need to know. Humanity’s history had been mostly shaped by minorities. As you would know yourself. Kings, military leaders, inventors, philosophers, special individuals. The rest just floats passively on the surface, subjugated to the ebb and flow of history’s tides. Funny how you ask me such question, as if people have a real free will and they can decide for themselves. Besides, humanity wasn’t asked if it wanted to be there or not, we just were. I see no reason why it should be asked if it wants to vanish or survive. Things just happen I guess. Shiva’s plot is just one of them.”

“And you think there’s nothing worth living for? No transcendental meaning, and no inherent value?”

“There are around four thousand religion. I am sorry but the sheer number of the possible answers to your questions is ironic. And it is even more cynical that we’re supposed to use ‘reason’ to filter them out and find the correct one.”

“Cynical, you say. So you believe God has been unfair to you, to your race?”

I pondered for a moment, meditated on the lines written on that scrap of paper, the ultimate truth, and what meaning it bore. Even if I understand it, and even if I comprehend the mysterious intentions behind it, is it enough to stop me from ending the world?

“To be honest, I don’t truly understand God. I’ve had religious experiences. There were days when I prayed and felt my flesh decompose in absolute bliss, eyes clouded with tears, heart fluttering in dreamlike reveries. I do not hold any grudge against God, if anything, I do love him, though in mysterious ways. I just don’t understand him. Perhaps deep down, I just want a reaction from him. And I do have this feeling, which I cannot make sense of, that God isn’t actually bothered by my doing, or by Shiva’s.”

“Fair enough. I would be lying if I said I did understand him as well. And I would be dishonest had I stated that I knew the purpose of your existence, or that I don’t understand Shiva’s motives. But I just can’t let you go on with it.”

Does Mr. Qalam ignore the ultimate truth? After all, it makes sense that it is a secret privy only to Shiva, God’s one and only friend.

At that instant, Qalam rose from his seat, stood beside me, tall and mighty, and blew dense fog into my face. Every instinct in my body screamed to dash away from my seat, dodge the stream of smoke, and hold my breath, but it smelled so good, so heavenly, that my nostrils opened and I inhaled every molecule of it.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked as I looked angrily at him, though he had no eyes, and I didn’t know exactly where to look.

“What you’ve just inhaled, Mr. Razi, would slowly kill you. There’s no cure but the one I possess. In three months, I’ll come to claim your soul, unless you’ve changed your mind.”

“So you’ve gotten serious huh?! that’s your answer? that’s how the greatest writer of all time is going to convince a simpleton to stop writing a damn book! No persuasive arguments, no clever comebacks! Instead, he threatens to kill him?!” I wanted to punch him in the face, but I knew it would be a very bad idea.

“I know you, Mr. Razi, more than you know yourself. And I know that you’ve already made up your mind. You who wishes to end the world. You who is brave enough to undertake such a heroic deed, is going to realize his own vanity when his will is broken by the simple threat to his own fickle and fragile existence. I don’t need a clever comeback, I just need you to realize it yourself.”

“Three months huh? You know what that means? It means I’m gonna have to write faster! Now get the hell out of my house!” I screamed, although I felt fear eating up my bones. Is it worth dying for? Am I going to have to beg for his cure? Did I make a mistake? I started shaking.

“There’s nothing personal. It is just how it is. I’ll see you again, Mr. Razi. Until then, take it easy.”

▼

And that’s why, you should pee before you sleep if you had the urge to. Even a small one. Sometimes it may cost your life.

13.

Wigs and Plastic Breasts.

Genie in a Bottle.

“The key to the mysteries of the universe is found in the heart of every human being.”

The Emerald Tablets

It was seven p.m. I came a little early to the MadBuddha. The last ember tails of the sinking sun danced over the mountain range and the early stars started to twinkle. With the knowledge of my looming doom, I had an urge to leave my apartment and take a long walk, and then, I suddenly felt alone, terribly alone that if I upped and disappeared, life will continue totally undisturbed without me. What an awful realization. So I walked to the MadBuddha, sat at a table for two in one corner, and ordered a black coffee.

Pencil in hand, I tried to edit the chapter I was supposed to hand J tonight, but I just couldn't focus. *Brandford Marsalis – Again Never's* sad trumpet sounds streamed from the speaker, immersing me in a dreary mood that matched the tapestry of my soul. To whom would I complain my sorrows? I could've called Noah and opened up to him, but some grievances needed the special ears of a woman. I drank my bitter coffee alone, almost invisible, and imagined Stella walking in. She'd notice my lonesomeness and join me at the table. She'd hold my hand and ask me why do I look so gloom, and I'd stare at her sweet eyes and drop my heavenly burdens over her shoulders. Should I put an end to this existence, and my life with it? Or should I save both? And she'd tell me, 'I don't care if the world ends as long as you live.' And then she'd hold me in her arms, and we'd kiss. One long burning kiss that'd turn all my afflictions into butterflies flung in the winds of the absurd.

A certain special click-clack of high heels snapped me out of my reverie.

I raised my head, and there she was, Stella, walking swiftly into the restaurant, wearing a long camel trench coat and a crimson scarf. Is it a bad sign to recognize someone by the sound of his footsteps? What a wimp, break free from her shackles already. But there she was. Am I manifesting dreams now? Or am I hallucinating? Will she join me, and then I'd make her mine again, and then, why not, make love? Don't get excited, you always get excited too fast. Calm down. She looks back at the entrance, and she smiles. Jack follows her inside, stupid guitar on his back. He rests his hand on her waist and they walk to an empty table.

I always get excited too fast.

I might've omitted a simple detail. Jack and I used to be childhood friends. We used to study the Koran together at the neighborhood mosque, until one day, as I barged inside the mosque's

library, I saw the Imam trying to kiss the angelic face of Jack. We were only eight. I walked out, and I never set foot at that mosque again. Jack and I never mentioned it. He went to a different middle school, and our friendship fizzled away. Up until that point, we had such a happy childhood together.

So, shake the dices as hard as you can, throw them on the gaming board and the results are, Stella is with Jack and I am alone. Funny, but what's there to do? Accepting things as they are doesn't make them any less painful, it just saves you the trouble of attempting to change the unchangeable. You might argue that this is a situation where one has a room to fiddle with things, shake them up a little, create a mess, a chaos, make her a little confused, a little uncertain, and then throw your arrow. But that's not how I do things. Well, if you must know something about me, I usually don't do anything. I just adapt with whatever comes my way. Do I regret it? Yes, sometimes. But so far I see no reason why I should change my approach to living my life. I follow the path of the least resistance. The downside to that is, sometimes the things that come your way might get you in a lot of trouble.

I tried to focus on my story, scribble some notes on the side, cross out some words or some sentences, but I just couldn't focus. There they were, sitting on a table across from mine. He's cross legged and probably making some terrible jokes. She, giving off some giggles. She seems happy. Suddenly, our eyes cross, and she waves my way. I pretend I didn't see her and look the other way. Why did I do that? I don't know.

Why is she with him? True, he plays some songs on the guitar, but how to describe Jack. He's become like a movie on an air plane, ranking a solid five on Imdb, not great, but something you watch nonetheless, and when it's over, you ask how much time is left on the flight. If he were an actor, he'd be the guy having a sad dance in the background of a night club scene. If he were a spice he'd be flour. His spirit animal is a mosquito. No real substance, just a copy of a copy of a copy; a counterfeit of a counterfeit. Am I being hash? Perhaps. But I am deeply disappointed in my childhood friend.

A hand rests on my shoulder and a mellow voice follows, "You didn't call."

▼

I looked up, she smiled at me and joined me at the table. "I am not disturbing the writer on his process I hope," Lamis said, a hint of sarcasm pervading her voice. Same bob cut, same turtle neck wool shirt, only cream coloured this time. Does she have vampires bites on her neck she's trying to hide, did she try to hang herself and failed? Or is she just hiding hickies? A triangular golden pendant rested on the bulging of her breasts. "Not at all," I said, "I could use some company."

She took a seat, called the waiter by his name and ordered a Caesar salad, extra pepper, she added, then looked me in the eyes and said, "Say, Razi boy, why do you write? Really, no bullshit."

Stella rested her hand on the table and tapped a rhythm with her fingers, all the while listening to jack telling what had most likely been the number one ranking unimportant thing in the universe at that hour of the night. She always does that, tap on a rhythm, on the table top, on the steering wheel, on her thigh. Music always played in her mind.

"I want to make money, be a little famous, and the other perks that comes with it," I answered.

"Come on, if you wanted to make money, writing books is the riskiest business. You'd be lucky if you made a dime. If you wanted to become famous, stand in front of the camera and say a couple of funny lines and that's it. I'm sure you can get creative," she commented. Her salad came and I ordered a Selecto soda. Fewer customers entered the restaurant.

"Let's just say, I have a couple of things I need to say. For me, writing is the only way."

"Ah-huh," she said, looking at me funny.

"What?"

"You act tough, like you don't care, wearing a thick cloak of nihilism. But you're really sensitive under that skin. I understand, it's hard for a man to be sensitive these last couple thousands of years. But *I see you*," she uttered, half a smirk on her face. Her eyes riddled with sarcasm. Smart people get sarcastic about everything at first, when they're shallow and barely scraped the surface of life. Then they start to understand how things work and they become deep, heavy, and the sarcasm disappears and makes place for an existential dread. Not only until they've understood enough and realized the beautiful absurdity of life does the sarcasm come back. *The second sarcasm*. That of one who comprehended the complex mechanisms of reality, and understood with clarity that the only proper attitude a man should adopt in this fickle existence is to take it all lightly, like a madman, a jester, like a smug adolescent who doesn't think three days ahead in the future. That is the greater wisdom, and that is the kind of sarcasm brimming under Lamis' milky eyes.

I see you, she said.

If I begin to believe those words then she'd suddenly become someone I deeply care for. How many people look at us but barely see us. How many people think they truly see us but all they mean is a distorted version of ourselves that lives in their heads, shaped by their expectations and experiences. Not that it matters to be truly seen, it just feels good.

When we meet someone who truly sees us, we feel born anew. How pathetic we are, really. A human being is only a refined term for an attention-whore.

Jack reached his hand and placed it over Stella's. Sorrow mixed with anger swelled in my chest like a gastroesophageal reflux. I wanted to break something against a wall, but I only broke my pen in half.

"Why did you get divorced?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Too personal. Easy, tiger."

"Isn't the world full of mundane small talk already? Personal is always more interesting."

"Hmm.." she hummed, crossed her legs and looked away for a while. "It just shows you've never been married." She lit a cigarette.

"Divorces don't happen for one particular reason," she continued. "It's a long process. One step further at a time. It takes patience and diligence. Tension builds up, little by little, causing micro damages, like nicotine on DNA. An argument gone a little too far. A fight that lacked a proper apology. One wrong look in the morning. A dinner not shared. A call unanswered. A text ignored. A sex invitation unfulfilled. A birthday gift uncared for. And before you know it, what once had been a slight crack, has now became a gaping hole. The healthy cells finally become cancer. You become miserable, and then, you only wait for the inevitable."

"The congress of marriage has always seemed a little off to me. It is an enterprise, and an enterprise runs on good management and smart decisions, not on love," I said.

"There are many powers at play, and you don't fully understand them until you're deep in a

marriage. And when you do, rarely do you have any control over them. A fine balance is required, a balance that could easily be tipped off by the simplest of things, like buying ice cream a flavor your partner assumes you know he doesn't like."

"Seems too complicated to me."

"It is honey, it is."

She fell quite. The tip of her cigarette crackled dryly as its lavender smoke formed a tracery in the dim lighted space of the restaurant. The more I looked at her the more of her charm became visible. She is charming, I noticed. However, she reminded me of a street washed clean after a downpour. Empty, cold, but somewhat serene.

"Say," she blurted out, swirling the knife between her fingers, her stare riddled. "Have you ever wanted to get violent in bed?"

I pondered a moment over her question. "I don't get the amount of action you assume I have. But to answer your question, no, violence in bed isn't one of my kinks, so far."

She leaned close, planted her elbows on the table and stared absently at her plate.

"One day, he proposed we'd do something like that in bed. He never asked for anything strange before. Sex was always sensual, even when it was not, it was pretty ordinary. One morning, as we were having breakfast silently, he brought it up, casually. He said he wanted to do it differently tonight. He said he wanted to tie me down and do things to me he wouldn't do to someone he respects. I'm open to experiments in bed, but that morning, I straight up shut him down. I don't know why I did that. I wasn't particularly against the idea. On different circumstances, I would have found it pretty hot. But that day..." she trailed off for a while, "it felt like my husband was trying to show me a whole new side of him, a persona I never knew existed. Perhaps by revealing that side, he was trying to bridge the gap between us. It was as if he was trying to say, 'The old me failed at this marriage, but here's another person I hid from you, a side of me that I suspected you wouldn't accept, but who might actually do better.' but I shut him off..."

Stella pulled her hand off from Jack's and started eating her dinner. She seems happy, I thought.

"And you wonder, that perhaps if you didn't behead the other personality the moment it popped its head up; that if you gave it a shot that night, you'd still be together now?" I asked.

"Yes.. I always think about it. Had I slightly been in the mood that morning, would I and my ex-husband still be together today. Would I still have my daughter.."

"I guess you'd never know. I think it's pointless to keep mulling over it."

"Hmm.. says the guy who keeps eyeing the couple over there this whole time," she added, jolting out of her transient sorrow. To that, I said nothing.

"Do you have a crush on her or is she your ex-girlfriend?" So she did notice my furtive glances toward their table. She didn't even look their way. Some women.

"A little bit of both," I said.

Still not turning her direction, she said, "She's that special huh?"

"You know.." I trailed off for a few seconds, then continued, "with certain people, we want to be good, and with others, we want to be very bad. Sometimes you love a girl and all you want to do is to protect her and make her very happy. She symbolizes everything immaculate in your life and all the hope you have lost in people. You want her to be the mother of our children and you want to shelter her away from all the ugliness of this world.

"And sometimes, you love a girl, and she brings out the rebel in you, and she'd toss you in a Technicolor world of desire and danger, where you'd want to break every moral code you'd set for yourself, be dirty and do the unimaginable. And you'd find great pleasure in finally being the demon you hide from the world. She's not afraid of who you are, she accepts you, and she pushes you to unfold your wings, show your fangs and become more. She's toxic, but you love it. Because she makes you feel free.

"Sometimes it's sad when the good girl wants to be bad, and when the bad one wants to be good. It just doesn't feel right. You feel something strange, odd. Like a Moroccan rug in a room decorated in contemporary furniture. You just can't see it. It feels unnatural. You resist it. And it only ends up pushing you away. Sadly enough, the same could be applied to you. If a woman sees only the good man in you, she'd be surprised, maybe even repulsed, to see the bad one in you.

"However, sometimes, you meet someone with whom you can be both, and in whom you can see both. When you can love a bad girl and see the saint in her, and when the docile one feels safe to show her unholy shades to you. When a woman sees both your light and your shadow, when she loves the perverted lowlife you are and yet sees the good man in you. Well, that's magic. Suddenly, all the world around you fades away for a split second, and then burst anew. That how it was with her," I said.

Lamis looked at me for an instant, but the look on her eyes set me off. For the first time, they were filled with empathy, an empathy solely aimed towards me. She held my hand and then said, "Razi boy, you are hurting aren't you?"

Each man is a glacier, solid, cold, placid. But each glacier has a weak point, a crack hidden somewhere. Hammer a nail at crack and the glacier comes crumbling down, exposing a jelly like core, soft and vulnerable. Lamis is trying to find my crack, or has she.

She should've stopped. Digging out people's pain is pointless. More or less, we've all been through shit in life. True, some have it easier than others, but pain is relative. One could experience a lot more suffering after a minor failure than one who's been through the death of a loved one. Thing is, pain is pain, you can't measure it, you can't quantify it, you can't judge it. You just have to take the word of the sufferer for it. If one is hurting, you can't tell him that he's not, nor can you share his pain, and in most cases, you can't do anything about it.

What I will say might sound strange, even inhuman, you shouldn't feel that bad for those who are in pain. Be there for them, if that's possible, but don't feel bad for them. Because they will go through it, and they will move on, and when they do, try and ask them this. Actually ask anyone this.

'You have been through a lot haven't you?'

'Yeh, I have..' they'd say, their voices deep, a sad look on their faces. Their eyes might even well up with tears as they remember the bleak days they've been through.

Now ask them the following.

'Do you wish you could go back in time and change what happened?'

They'd give it some thought, and then they'd say. 'Of course I would, I regret so many things and there's a lot I wish I'd done differently. I would have saved my heart a lot of unnecessary pain.' In hindsight, they always blame themselves for their misfortunes. It's either due to bad choices, or to stupidity or weakness on their behalf.

But then, as if an epiphany befalls them, they realize something very crucial, and they'd tell you, 'But I wouldn't be who I am today if I hadn't gone through all pain!' Some would even venture and say, 'I am actually grateful for those tragedies, they made me who I am today.' and

that's the catch.

Don't feel bad for those who're suffering. It is probably the best thing that ever happened to them.

Pain is the root of all beauty, wisdom and strength. When the hand of the almighty swings the golden ax with vigor against the thick walls of the soul, a crack opens, and through that crack, light would shine, a light brighter than a thousand star.

▼

"Not really, I'm not hurting," I tell Lamis.

"It's okay, I am not interested in your strength nor in your lofty spirits. When you're my age, you start to appreciate the softness in men. Feel free to be whomever you truly are," she said, her hand still on mine.

I cleared my throat, glanced once more over at Stella, then said, "you know, it's not the fact that she's with another man that hurts, it's that she seems happy with him." Saying those words out loud gave them a totally different meaning. Articulating them made them real, and real things weigh much heavier than thoughts.

Lamis fell quite for a long time. Finally she pulled her hand out of mine and said, "Tonight, I don't want to be alone. Can you please keep me company?"

I couldn't tell if she truly felt lonely or if she wanted to insulate me from my dismal thoughts. Either way, I said yes.

At the counter, I left the chapter I wrote by J, who, at the sight of us leaving together, didn't say a word. I made my way to his laptop and chose a song, *November Rain, by Gun's N roses*. It was Stella's favorite. After hearing the first few bars, Stella looked back at the counter, her eyes met mine, this time I didn't look away. I smiled at her, then left.

▼

In a silence that befitted its part perfectly, we drove with her Toyota Yaris to her apartment, a rented one room with a veranda on the roof of a villa that overlooked in its west side a tiny part of the sea. Once inside, she placed her handbag on top of the make-up table, turned on the lights, and excused herself to the bathroom. The furnish was minimalistic. A well made bed, a closet, a mini fridge, a desk, and a make-up table with a mirror that was almost too clean. However, it lacked any unnecessary embellishments. The walls were devoid of any framed paintings or photos. On the desk was nothing but a stack of papers, a few pencils, two poetry collections and a novel. The walls painted hospital white, the sheets of the bed were onyx black. It was more like a motel room than an apartment. All signs stipulated that whoever lived here wasn't planning on staying for too long.

I took off my shoes and walked around the room, eyes prying for an object of intimacy, a family picture, a special key chain, a piece of jewelry, but I found none. This room could've belonged to a Korean gay assassin or a Zimbabwean fugitive Doula for all I know and I couldn't have made the difference. Finally, I sat on the edge of the bed, and waited.

Lamis walks out of the washroom, covering her skin a thin bathrobe.

She turns off all the lights but one desk lamp; a faint orange hue spills over the room. She

walks to her nightstand and from its drawer she pulls out a pair of Rayban dark sunglasses and asks me to put them on and I do and she slips out of her robe and she's stark naked before me. She grabs my hands and places them on her waist and I let go and start to feel her. My lips run on her navel and up and below as she undresses me and before I knew it I was naked as well and laying on her bed. She kisses my neck and down until she takes me in her mouth but before long she straddles me and I enter her. I want to ask her if she was sure about it but it all happens so fast. She starts to move and I start to get conflicted ideas about my place in the universe and about Stella, and the more I think about Stella the more I feel I'm about to climax, so I drive her out of my thoughts and focus on Lamis. Lamis, she's the woman who occupies your present, not Stella, I tell myself, Stella is with Jack. Lamis is the woman I must love. I turn her around and as my hand tries to pull her hair she jerks it off suddenly and tells me that it's a wig and that she's shaven underneath because she's doing chemotherapy. We stop moving for a while and the scent of her perfume mingled with sweat fills the room and she tells me about her breast cancer and the mastectomy she'd undergone and how she now relapsed and discovered that her cancer had metastasized to her bones and liver and she grabs both of my hands and places them on her breasts and tells me that one is silicone and if I could tell the difference. I feel the difference and I tell her that I do. I take off my sunglasses but she insists that I put them back on and tells me she prefers it better that way and I take off her bob-cut wig and throw it away and I tell her I prefer her better that way and I enter her again and as I am on top of her I remember our conversation about her husband and how he wanted to try new things in bed and how she turned him down and I cup my hands around her neck and press lightly. A neck so fragile and beckoning, no vampire bites nor a strangulation mark nor a hickie, just smooth skin over trembling muscles, and for a fleeting moment I feel like I am about to commit a grave act of violence and I look her in the eyes and the way she looks back at me as I tighten my grip bespoke a mutual agreement; that she actually wants me to do it. That she wants me to strangle her and accidentally kill her. But I don't do it. She climaxes before I do and then she finishes me off with her hand. As we lay in bed, her bold head resting on my chest, I realize how senseless sex with a woman you don't love is, like an engine without a plane, no matter how fast or hot it runs, it doesn't move one inch forward.

"I am sorry," she says.

"What for?"

"I was thinking about my husband all the time," she confesses.

I remain silent for a while, confused as to why I didn't feel slightly offended. "It's okay," I say finally. Naturally, this would be the time to ask her if she was dying, because of her cancer, but I refrain from doing so. I felt like this was not a question one asks to fulfill a curiosity, but only if one truly cared, and I didn't believe I cared enough to ask.

"Say, do you think when.. If I die.. am I the one who should question God as to why have I died alone, young, after suffering a disease that I had no control over without even seeing my daughter, or would he be the one who will be questioning me, about how I didn't lead a godly life?"

"I don't know," I said, as I caressed the scalp of her head with the tip of my fingers.

"No!" she blurted out all of a sudden and looked at me hard in the eyes, her eyes red and blurred with tears, "You tell me! Am I going to question him or is he going to question me?!"

Again, I fell quiet in the face of my ignorance. How should I know? But I understood her fury. I understood her frustration, her confusion, her feelings of impotence, of powerlessness, of injustice. And yet, there was not a word I could utter. Finally, I pressed her back against me. With that, she started sobbing. "I don't want to die," she muttered. "This is not fair. This is not the life I ought to have had. What's the point? what's the point of my existence if it's going to

end like this?"

This is not fair..

'I know,' I wanted to tell her, but I didn't. Eventually, she fell asleep.

▼

I watched the small hand of the clock edging toward the one O'clock position; I didn't blink an eye. I carefully pulled my numb arm from under Lamis' head, slipped in my boxers, fetched the pack of cigarettes from my jacket's pocket and walked barefoot to the veranda. The moon was full, the night was deep, yet, there was a kind of friction in the air. I lit a cigarette and inhaled, the crackling noise of the ember tip poised my soul. If only were there was a distant siren sound, an ambulance, or a police patrol, that would be nice.

What now?

Suddenly, I started coughing, an unceasing dry hard cough from the bottom of my lungs. Then it stopped as abruptly as it started. Did I inhale something? Or did I catch a cold? Is it lung cancer, or.. is it Qalam's curse? I crushed down my cigarette and stared at the moon. What is this unsettling emptiness that coats my head and caresses my soul.. to think straight and clear seemed light years out of my reach. What a conundrum, what an irony, life is.

"What is it with you and yellow dresses?" I ask Shiva. I turned to my left and there she was. She appeared out of the velvety blue as usual. Again in a Yellow dress, striped with dark gray lines this time, accentuating the unearthly curves of her body. Does she think it's cool to appear this way? must've watched too much batman. It is cool, to be frank.

"I'll answer that question another time perhaps. How's your book going?" she replied. Her voice serene, hands resting on the balustrade, eyes glued to the moon. What could possibly be going on inside the head of this woman, I thought.

"It's fine.." I said, "by the way. A guy who calls himself Qalam paid me a visit the other day. I thought you should know."

"What did you just say?" She stood before me and grabbed me by the shoulders. "You mean?.. what did he say?"

"He said I should stop writing that book, that he'll be 'unemployed' if I do." I grabbed her bare forearms and lowered them down from my shoulder. She is too close. I could go another round. How can I think of sex at a time like this, I rebuked myself. But she's Shiva, I rationalized.

"And? What did you say?" she asked, curious. Doesn't she know everything already? Or is the doings of Mr. Qalam elude her omniscience? Probably.

"I said no, and he sort of poisoned me. He said I have three months. And there's no cure but the one he disposes of. I sort of believe him. Sort of."

Shiva looked to the ground and gave off a short laugh. "I knew he would step in at a certain moment. But I didn't expect him to go through such lengths."

"Yeah.."

"And yet, you still want to write that book?"

"I do. I respond in non-productive ways to threats. Had he convinced me not to write it, I

would have perhaps given it a thought. But threaten me with power, and I will be even more determined. It gives me a reason. It makes my deed a heroic one, and if I die, I'll be a martyr, even if no one will ever hear about my martyrdom."

"But it's your life on the line.."

"Yeah.. I am scared, to be honest. But.. he's watching right?" We raised our gaze to the moon simultaneously. Him.. "If he thinks that what I am doing is wrong, then he'll stop me before I get to finish it. And if he thinks that what Mr. Qalam did is wrong, then he'll save me from him. We're all equal to God right?"

"You're risking your life just to get a reaction from him?" she asked.

"Sort of.."

"Sort of, what I am doing is the same."

I lit another cigarette, then put it between Shiva's lips. And I lit another for myself. Elbows on the balustrade, the cold breeze caressed our skin. We fell silent for a while. "I had a slight hunch that you weren't doing this solely for the sake of mankind," I told her.

She exhaled, smoke clouded the air before it disappeared before my eyes, then she said, "My cause is right, and I believe it's right. Humanity deserves more than this. But I have a soul as well, and sometimes it makes demands that I can neither understand nor ignore."

"You two were close right? Tell me if I'm wrong, but you still haven't yet come to terms with why he had banished you for eternity, right? You too, are risking a lot just to get a reaction from him."

"Who knows.. maybe I am." Then she turned and faced me, and with her magical fingers she brushed the strands of my hair and said, "Razi boy, I can't ask you to risk your life. Unfortunately, I cannot save you from Mr. Qalam. If you want to stop, I'll understand. But if you want to continue, then ask me for anything, and I will make it happen."

"I thought you hated mythological human creations, and here you are sounding like the genie in the bottle," I kidded.

"Exceptions can be made."

"I want a lot of things, but right now nothing comes to mind. I just want to finish that damn book. What could you give me? A fortune? Women? Power? It's cynical how money seem so trifle when you have only three months left to live. Women? I just slept with a fine woman and all I felt is a cold emptiness. And I don't wish to have any sort of power that I didn't deserve. The only power I need right now is the one to finish that book and stand in the face of destiny and eternity. I appreciate it, but no thanks."

She smiled, closed her eyes and heaved a deep sigh. "I'm starting to get fond of you. You and I would make a great team."

"Actually, I do have something I want."

"Yes?"

"The thing with getting Stella's memories back; I no longer want that."

"I understand, as you wish."

Part II

“But that’s only Euclidean nonsense, I know that, and I can’t consent to live by it! What comfort is it to me that there are none guilty and that cause follows effect simply and directly, and that I know it?”

The Brothers Karamazov

14.

ROAD TRIP

"Better to be an animal than a man, an insect than an animal, a plant than an insect, and so on. Salvation? Whatever diminishes the kingdom of consciousness and compromises its supremacy."

Emil Cioran

Far from home, one cold morning, J and Razi sat at an ordinary outdoor café, located in a backstreet near the cheap hotel they stayed in, in Algiers. J ordered a glass of cold milk, as usual, with a pain au chocolat. Razi had a café au lait with a piece of Pain d'épices. An ordinary algerian breakfast, finished with two glasses of orange juice.

"It is more important to notice you are wrong than it is to prove you are right," J said, after he quickly read what Razi had written, and dragged from his cigarette.

One night, Razi had come to the MadBuddha, right before closing time, and confessed the following to J, who listened carefully: "*I only have three more months left to live. The answers to the how and why, I wish to keep for myself. I doubt you'd believe me anyways. I need to finish writing that book, so if there's anything you must teach me, then please, do it faster.*" J, whose instincts never faltered, believed Razi without further inquiry. Not only that, but for some reasons Razi couldn't quite comprehend, two days later, J answered with the following, "*Pick up your bag-pack, we're going on a road trip, bring your laptop, and keep it light.*" J later explained that he'd always wanted to go on a third road trip (the first two being in America and Asia). He said it's senseless to discover the edges of the world when you don't know the forest in your backyard. This time, it's the backyard of Algeria he wanted to explore, and why not use some company.

In his Ford Ranger, a truck a little too spacious for two travelers, but perfect for long distances, J and Razi began their Road trip one October morning, and never came back until a month and a half later. J explained the program in great details, which was the following: "We'll make the rounds of the northern coast cities, from east to west, From Bone to Tlemcen, and from then, we'll go south, to the Sahara. In each city, we'd stay from one to three nights, during which we'll venture into the heart of that city, visit its historical cites and eat its food. The rest, I'm not interested in." When Razi expressed his lack of financial means for such a long trip, J explained that Benzine, lodging and food were on his bill. "That's a lot. I can't let you spend that much on me," Razi protested, to which J responded, "First of all, I am rich. I could afford double the length of this trip, with lodgings in five stars hotels and dinners at fancy restaurants and my bank account would barely shrink by a decimal. Second of all, it's only a loan. When your book is published and is making a profit, you'll pay back whatever I spent on this trip. I am not doing

charity. Although I doubt you'd mind where the money goes once..” he trailed off. Once you're dead, is what he wanted to say. “But I don't know if I'll even finish that book, or if it'll even get published.” “You will finish it. And whether it'll get published or not, you only have to worry about me. If I deem it worthy, it will be published. My editor will do as I say.” “And I am supposed to write during the trip?” “Correct. Find the time and rhythm that suits you, and get on with it,” J replied.

The land whispered the history, the architecture painted it. Algeria was the playground of kings and graveyard of civilizations. Phoenicia, Carthage, Rome, Numidia, the Vandals, Byzantium, Umayyad Caliphate, Abbasid Caliphate, The Fatimid Caliphate, The Ottoman Empire, the Spaniards, the French. From the suspended bridges of Qacentine to the cuicul roman ruins of Djamila in Setif. Up in the high Yemma Gouraya mountain in Bedjaya, down the narrow streets of Qasbah in Algiers. Between the Jedars of Tiaret, to the Santa Cruz castle in Oran and inside the Caves of Beni Add in Tlemcen. J and Razi would drive first thing in the morning after breakfast, lodge in a middle class hotel, and eat in *Houma* diners, whatever there was on the menu. The hotels had one thing in common, their ordinariness, their commonness and their lackluster. Hotels that any pedestrian walking by would miss, for their stale colors, their inconspicuous locations, and their signs which were at best cases a small neon plate where a letter or two had gone dark. But nevertheless, the hotels were decent, and clean enough.

The car was used only for inter cities travels. Once in the designated city, it would be parked somewhere safe. J and Razi traveled by foot, taking a bus here, a subway train there. This way, they avoided the never ending traffic and blended deeper in the city, taking in its crummy narrow streets, its colonial boulevards, its mosques and churches, cafés and restaurants, and most importantly, its people. J never missed the opportunity to strike a conversation. He had a knack for getting friendly with strangers in the most subtle and quickest ways, a trait which Razi did not have, and had to learn.

The relationships they sewed were mostly superfluous, but sometimes, over a dinner, or over a beer in the hotel bar, people would open up over long conversations and tell their stories, something which J always hunts for; the stories of common people. A salary man, an ex convict, an artist, an Imam, a military official. Razi was first amazed how did J manage to sway his interlocutor with such dexterity and cunningness into divulging their life's deepest secrets, but sooner, subconsciously, he learned the trick, and would at multiple occasions lead the conversation. And the trick was fairly simple, to learn how to ask the most crucial questions in the most casual ways, and to be a good listener. Razi was beguiled how eager people were to tell their stories; they just need somebody to listen.

Some nights, J and Razi would stumble upon a pair of women, and with the same deftness of words and lightness of character, the women would sometimes undress. On these occasions, the stories came after sex.

Razi noticed that J was always up before him. When Razi strained to move his body out of bed, J was already dressed up and ready to leave. Only later on did Razi learn that J always woke up at four a.m., daily, and wrote till seven. That was his schedule, and he never missed a day. Was J writing another novel? Razi did not yet know. To wake up early was healthier, Razi admitted that much, but he always preferred to write at night. From eleven to two a.m. In the stillness of the night, he could hear his thoughts much clearer. “It's strange, how easier I could write during this trip, even though I am tired,” Razi once told J as they drove on the west east expressway. “That's because we're moving. Fish don't swim in stale waters. Your mind is full of fish,” J answered.

Thus, Razi wrote page after page. With Qalam's paper-weight on top of his desk, words flowed seamlessly. Ripened ideas were picked and skilfully presented. Characters metamorphosed from inflatable figures to personas with depth and shade. The changing of

scenes, people and perceptions switched something on in the mind of Razi. He wrote like he never did. After one month on the road, and with the mystic guidance of J, Razi finished his first draft.

“Don’t be ungrateful to religion, look where it got you.” J said, answering Razi as the conversation lead them to this topic. “You think we got here through logic and science? If people didn’t obey to holy commandments they believed were absolute, inviolable and divine. If they didn’t believe in an after life, in a just judgement day, in an eternal reward. If they didn’t believe in the sacredness of the human life, do you think we would have gotten this far? You’d be a fool if you think so.” “Weren’t they a little too bloody, a little too irrational, as a means of navigating this life?” Razi asked. “Religion is the best out of a bad lot. Besides, with or without religion, humans will shed always shed blood, and they will never be able to live without a God, or at least a form of a higher power.” “I am not so sure about that anymore,” Razi said. “*Moral masochism*,” J said, “we crave to be humiliated in the presence of a greater power. To beg and to worship. To submit our own will to the grander wisdom of an omnipotent being. Be it a god, or a nation, or a person. Why do we do that? To be freed of our own freedom. To be spared the heaviest of burdens; of actually taking responsibility of our own fate. Who dares do that? Who dares face life on his own? It is much easier to hand out your life to another being. Make him all loving, all protecting, omniscient and then you’d be able to sleep at night, for your life’s trajectory now lies in the safest of hands. Do you think people could be their own god? The worm inside of us will always trump the god in us. People will always need a God. Kill him and they will create another. Because we can’t live otherwise.”

One day as we strolled the streets of Oran, someone tugged the hem of my coat. Razi turned around to find Red and Blue, the Ferris wheel twin sisters. “Hey mister!” they shouted together, excited that they’d met him hundreds of kilometers away from home. Razi greeted them, shook their hands like adults. Red approached him and whispered in his ears, “are you still going to do it?” He looked at her funny, how amusing, he thought. “Sadly, yes I am.” Razi remembered Red’s wish, to fall in love at least one real violent time, and he remembered Blue’s wish, to travel and discover the world. Razi thought that he should’ve lied to her about ending the world, but he couldn’t. A mournful look painted their faces, but quickly disappeared. “This is for you,” Red said, and handed him a Pringles chips can, cheese flavor. And Blue said, “This is for you,” and handed him a Kitkat chocolate bar. “For me?” “Yes, we want you to have it. We had a fun Ferris wheel ride.” Razi accepted their gifts and patted them on the head. They smiled at him and ran back to their parents. Strange pair, he thought, himself smiling.

All the while, J kept staring at them. Even when they left, his gaze never left them. It was the first time Razi saw him look at something this way. “Never saw a pair of twins?” Razi asked. But he said nothing.

In Timimoun, a city at the heart of the Sahara desert, Razi and J lodged in a villa owned by military general, an old acquaintance of J. The general rarely used the villa, except for about a week or two in the winter holidays, where he and his family would spend a few nights amidst the warmth of dunes, so by the time J and Razi arrived, it was empty. “Here we will rest for a couple of days,” said J. Three days later, as they sat on the veranda, sipping Sahara tea, J broke the silence, “At the age of sixteen, I was hit by lightning.”

15.

Three women

Two baby shoes

One promise.

At the age of sixteen, J was struck by lightning. One rainy Monday evening, J rode his bike to Bone's central theater to see his girlfriend perform at a play. It was her first piece and he wanted to be there, only, halfway, a lightning struck him. The bolt penetrated his head, and discharged through his left arm leaving its skin fried. J was knocked out unconscious. Two hours later, he regained consciousness in a hospital bed. The ER treating doctor reassured his parents, although he was somewhat confused himself; thankful but skeptic. J suffered no injuries. No cardiac or respiratory arrest, no hearing loss, no cataract. Except for the third degree burns on his left arm, J was a healthy boy. The doctor could not find any rational explanation. He called it a miracle and went about his day.

J however, remembered the scene differently. Right after the lightning ran through his body, he plunged into a deep state of euphoria. Every cell in his body quivered in pleasure. He experienced what seemed like a psychedelic experience, the details of which he preferred to keep for himself, but in his words, he summarized it as the following, "for a fleeting instant, everything became one, clear, connected, and I understood it all."

After that accident, J, who was jovial and spirited, became secluded. In class he was silent, absent minded, and once back at home, he seldom left his room. The sudden change of personality worried his parents to some degree, which lead them to consult a psychiatrist, but the latter reassured them again that nothing troublesome was with their son. On the contrary, the psychiatrist was amazed, almost flabbergasted, by J's wits and the deep understanding of his own condition. The psychiatrist knew that J wasn't a normal boy, he possessed a wisdom way beyond his age. If anything, the doctor wished they could bring him back, only to keep conversing with him, but his medical code prevented him from making another appointment. Their son was psychologically the healthiest person he ever met; however somewhat deviant.

A few days later, J started revisiting a short story he'd already finished and discarded of months ago, only this time, he planned on turning into a novel. *The Blind Flutist*. He spent all his waking hours hunched on his desk, typing word after word, in a state akin to frenzy, and left his room only to visit the restroom, or to grab a quick bite. A few months later however, his process was interrupted when his family moved to Sweden. His father, a newly appointed ambassador, was located in the Algerian embassy in Stockholm, and thus, the *Blind Flutist* was finished under the gray Stockholm daylight that haunted his new room; although J didn't mind much the change. "*Parting with a friend is a sadness, a place is only a place,*" he said, quoting from his favorite book. He printed the manuscript and sent it to the editor of the *Delfin* publishing house. A choice that was made hazardously. Two weeks later, the editor, a thirty six years old overweight man, called J and invited him for lunch, whereupon he was surprised to see the

sixteen year old boy. At that moment, the editor knew he made the discovery of his life.

The novel was published on J's seventeenth birthday. At first, the echo wasn't loud. A few copies sold here and there in corners of Stockholm libraries, but a few months later, after it was translated from English to Swedish, it won a local award, then quickly, a national one, and overnight, J was the talk of the country. J used the first letter of his first name as a pen-name, and refused to appear on any television or talk-shows. He only talked to journalists through the phone, and declined to give his full name or address. When his editor, who became his friend, asked him why, J answered, "*The real me died that night by lightning, I am but a ghost, a vestige, of what I had been. Sometimes I can't even see my own reflection in the mirror.*" The editor stared at J in confusion, but those words were the closest he got to a real answer.

In six months, J became fluent in Swedish. After he finished high-school, he went to Stockholm University where he studied history, and where he met the person that will change the course of his life.

Ms Siv. His professor of 'History of Egypt and The Ancient Near East in The Bronze Age,' class, whom he met after she gave him an '*Icke Godkand*', an F, in his essay. J had knocked on her office's door and protested. "Your paper was brilliant actually. You deserve a full grade," she said to him. "So?" J asked. "However, historically speaking, it is all false. What you study here isn't necessarily the truth. I had a feeling you might be interested in knowing the real facts." And thus, on the first of June, a day that had changed J's life forever, he and Ms. Siv, over coffee, had a long conversation about the history of Egypt. Whenever J debated, Siv's arguments were stronger, sharper, impenetrable. J, whose genius thus far began to bore him, was mesmerized by Siv's intellect, wit, and oceans of knowledge. Not only were she the most brilliant person he ever met, but also the most beautiful. Her features bespoke an incomprehensible charm. Her spotless clothing style, her eloquent words, and her refined gestures filled J with a tingling sensation. Magnetizing. An adventure. He experienced an attraction towards her that was beyond anything sexual or romantic. Rather a strange blend of intellectual and spiritual pull, with a mysterious element he could not quite put the finger on. That lady, Ms. Siv, who could've easily been somewhere between twenty-nine and forty-nine, became J's new bewilderment.

That day she showed him a small text in hieroglyphics, an excerpt from an ancient Egyptian book called *The Maxims of Ptahhotep*, it said, "*Be not proud because thou art learned; but discourse with the ignorant man, as with the sage. For no limit can be set to art, neither is there any craftsman that is fully master of his craft.*" For young J, that line stuck with him, until later on, for personal reasons, he tattooed those hieroglyphic lines on his burned left arm.

Several times a week, J would knock on Ms. Siv's office and hang by her side for hours on end. They would discuss all sorts of topics together, from history to philosophy, from art to literature, love, family, friendships, religion, mysticism. Although J was well read himself, but mostly, he sat and listened to Ms. Siv. His mind was a fertile thirsty earth that absorbed the abundance of her knowledge. No matter how long their conversations lasted, she always left him hungry for more.

Outside the office, they strolled the University campus, sipped coffees at Stockholm's outdoor cafés and sometimes, enjoyed a drink in dimmed musty pubs. Ms. Siv was a single woman, who lived alone in an apartment in midtown Stockholm. 'Is it because she's single that she was always available to hang out with me?' J mused, who often wondered why would an accomplished woman like her take an interest in a guy like him. Other than her Marital status, J knew close to nothing about her. Her past, her upbringings, her family, was a mystery to him. However, Ms. Siv never lacked for stories. Her stories were always mind gripping. Some happened to her personally, others she heard on the tongues of others. Sometimes J couldn't quite draw the line between reality and fiction of what she recounted, but he didn't mind. He was addicted to her stories, a lot of which he used later in his own writings.

▼

One year later, right after the publishing of J's second novel, *Three Nights at The Moon Hotel*, Ms. Siv invited him to dinner at her place. It was a first, and J, who had his reservations about the intimate invitation, showed up at her doors at the exact time, well dressed, in his hand a bottle of Elaijah Craig bourbon he'd bought with the money of his prepayment from the *Delfin* house. J decided to reveal his true identity that night, that he was the acclaimed writer, only to find a copy of his latest novel on the coffee table at Ms. Siv's living room.

"I see you bought a copy of J's latest novel," he commented, nonchalantly.

"Already finished it," Siv answered as she pan fried calf's liver with butter and onions.

"And? What do you think? I hear he's okay."

"He is okay, although he still needs polishing."

"Is that so?" J said, a little taken aback. "Some critics claimed that he might be the Dostoevsky of our age."

Ms. Siv lowered the heat on the pan, wiped her hands with a towel and walked to the living room where she handed the novel to J and said, "Open it, I've scribbled notes everywhere. Right on the first page you'd see where you could have written it better."

J opened the paperback novel, the smell of a newly printed paper filled his nostrils, and started reading her notes, written on the sides with a ballpoint blue pen, only to understand the full length of her words that registered a little late in his mind. He stared at her for a moment, surprised, and said, "for how long have you known?"

She smiled impishly and said, "I have always known."

"How?"

"A woman have her ways, but it was really a coincidence. The details aren't that important. What's important however, is that you get better."

Over dinner, J and Siv ate and talked about his two novels. Hours on end. What he could have done better, his long sentences, the weak parts of his character development, his loose style, his over complicated plots, his obscure philosophy. J listened carefully. He realized that such honest and precise criticism he would find nowhere else. However, he'd hoped to hear some praise, some flattery from this woman he so admired, but none came from Siv's. She was rather borderline cruel to his writings, like a mentor trying to obliterate any shadow of vanity in her disciple.

J left that dinner shaken, his view on writing forever changed. That night he went home, and without changing his clothes, turned on his computer and started typing what would later become his third novel. He had one single idea in mind, one motive: to prove to Ms. Siv that he's a good writer.

Ms. Siv taught J everything he lacked, and everything he wasn't even aware he lacked. She took him to the right tailors and showed him how to dress like a gentleman. What perfumes and watches he should wear. What haircut and what glasses best fit his face. She taught him how to cook, how to make cocktails. How to manage and invest his money. How to talk to women, and how to converse with strangers. What books he should read and what skills he should acquire. And after that night, she also taught him how to write. J had the vague impression that she was

grooming him, preparing him for something, but what for? That he ignored.

One and a half years later, after Ms. Siv had made J rewrite his third novel, ‘*Poisonous*,’ seven times, she finally judged it ready. Upon publishing it, J won three international prizes, The Neustadt award, the Betov award, and the Franz Kafka Prize. With his third novel, he made the leap into international fame, all thanks to Ms. Siv. But still, J declined any appearances. When he received a prize, he kindly asked Ms. Siv to represent him. Interviews were made over the telephone and book signing sessions consisted of already signed copies without a signer in the flesh.

“I taught you everything you need, from now on, you are on your own,” Ms. Siv said. She sipped from her drink and stared at J from across her living room.

“I never asked for your mentorship to begin with,” J said.

“True,” said Ms. Siv and chuckled. “I’ll be leaving the country, tomorrow.” A slick silence filled the room. J eyed her, rivers of words halted at the tip of his tongue.

“You are never coming back are you?” He asked.

“I taught you enough, but I never told you my story,” Ms. Siv said. “Keep writing. I’ll be reading every word you publish. When I deem you good enough, I’ll find you, and I’ll tell you what I never told anyone. I want you to turn my truth into the best novel ever written.”

Again, a heavier silence.

“Is that what you’ve been honing me for? To be good enough to tell your story?”

“Yes.”

“But I am good enough,” J protested, fire in his eyes.

“There are times for goodbyes, and times for reunions,” she answered. With that, J resigned to the fact that this might be the last time he’d ever see Ms. Siv. Be it a platonic love, or friendship, or kinship, but Ms. Siv, at that time, was the most important person in J’s life. He wanted to tell her all that, hold her in his arms, thank her, but he couldn’t. He knew that if he manifested any of his feelings, they’d turn into iron shackles that’ll rust around his ankles.

Before leaving her apartment that night, J pulled out a box and handed it to Ms. Siv. “I ignore why you wear only yellow scarfs, but I noticed you didn’t have this one Fabric.” Ms. Siv opened it, observed it in her arms, and slung it around her neck. “It’s a *fleur-de-lis* pattern, a symbol of French monarchy, but I guess you already know that.” Ms. Siv smiled. She understood the token. A token of friendship and gratitude, and of *something* else.

She pulled him closer, and landed a kiss on his dry lips. “Aufwiedersehen,” she said. And closed the door behind him.

▼

At the age of thirty-five, twelve years later, J married the daughter of his editor. After the departure of Ms. Siv, J dropped out of school and did mainly three things; he read, he wrote, and he traveled. His novels received world wide appraisal, one of which was he allowed to be adapted into a movie only to realise later how big of a mistake that was. He was one of the rare writers who only kept getting fresher. Although his style was the same, J kept reinventing himself, rarely did he ever repeat or copy himself, something that increased his readership and maintained its level of enthusiasm and wonder. During those years, J never had a solid

relationship with a woman. He only had affairs, and only with older women. Single, divorced or married women. However they all had one thing in common: they were lesser versions of Ms. Siv. Mysterious, classy, well-read. The conversations were interesting enough, and the sex was fulfilling, partly because of their experience, and partly because it lead nowhere. J always knew exactly when to cut ties and retreat before things got complicated, when he sensed the seed of emotion planted in these women. Some hinted at the prospect of marriage, others introduced their kids, and others fantasized about leaving their current partners. Although J liked their company, but never did he feel any desire to make them real. The levity and detachment that defined their affairs were important to him, at least until he met the daughter of his editor.

She was nine years his junior. He met her at a little party her father gathered celebrating his eighth novel '*Thus Danced the Frog*'. She was twenty-five at the time, freshly out of med school and curiously enough, one of J's least fans. To her father's recommendation, she read all of his novels, and for some reason, they were not to her taste. The day they met, she seemed bored and out of place. When her father introduced her to J—something he rarely did, respecting J's wishes of privacy—she put very little effort hiding her lack of admiration towards J's novels, something that was perhaps triggered by J's air of arrogance and disinterest. "Do you hide from the public because you feel like an impostor?" She asked, in a challenging casual tone. A question that piqued J's interest, which lead to a conversation, that lead to another conversation, to a date, and finally, to a relationship.

Her vivid spirits, straightforwardness and jaunty wits brought a crisp newness into J's life that all of his previous affairs failed to deliver. He felt young again, alive, challenged. Was it love he felt towards her, J couldn't decide. But he didn't question the fact that he enjoyed her company, a lot. She on the other hand, was helpless. Before J's dark charm, cool chivalry, bewitching eloquence and trained touch, in no time she found herself deep in the pits of his grip. All the men she knew before him dwindled in comparison. No one made her feel the way J did. Never before had she understood how painful 'waiting' was until she met him. Waiting for her phone to ring, for a text, for the next date, was like walking knee-deep through moving sands towards a destination she wasn't certain she'd ever reach. But when he did call or text, when she made herself beautiful to meet him, was joyful in ways that made her shiver in fear at times.

They dated for one years, and when J invited her to a fancy dinner to celebrate the publishing of his ninth novel, '*Lightning Boy*', he proposed. A classical dinner proposal that was borderline lackluster, but for her, it was enough to squeeze tears out of her wide green eyes. Nevertheless, as J held her left delicate hand and slid the ring in her digitus annularis, a speck of doubt sparked in his heart, 'is it okay to marry this woman when I am ready to leave everything behind if Siv returned?' at that thought, J retired his gaze from her moist eyes, 'why can't I even look her in the eyes?' he cleared his throat, and smiled at her. She on the other hand, was an intuitive woman, and she watched the minutia of his gestures, the way he proposed, the way he held her hand, the way he withdrew his gaze, as if embarrassed of something. Her heart twitched, jerked, and then danced sadly. She knew this man didn't love her. He was kind enough, warm enough. He never intentionally hurt her, but around him, she felt like a bonfire in an antarctic desert. She shed another tear. A tear for herself. A tear for her heart. She knew she will be hurt, a slow dull pain that will last years of marriage; and yet, that day, she was the happiest of mortals.

▼

J and his wife lead a rather calm life. He bought a house in the suburbs with a backyard that had a willow tree. She worked in a nearby clinic. When he didn't write, he cleaned the house, gardened, jogged for long distances, and played video games. To his surprise, J enjoyed the

married life. Grocery shopping, cooking with his wife, sharing a meal, watching a movie together and then being intimate during luscious nights; slowly, J grew to cherish that routine. The sense of responsibility, of belonging, of being truly loved, filled a void in his heart he didn't know existed before. Their only fight was about a kitchen faucet that J was too lazy to fix.

One evening, two years later, J and his wife played Mario Kart together. The loser had to sip raw vinegar. They both won and lost. They laughed, they kicked each other, they cursed at one another, and suddenly, at that moment, for the first time, he realized that he no longer waited for Siv's return. He observed his wife as she laughed, her molars showing, her face red. 'She's beautiful,' he thought, she's beautiful, and I am not sad nor am I lonely by her side. She loves me, and she gives me everything I need. He observed her, and he felt grateful inside. 'It's time to let go,' he finally decided.

Ever since Siv left, whenever J published a novel, he waited weeks, months, years, for Siv's return, for a reply, a sign, only to go through the same ordeal after publishing another novel, but to no avail. fifteen years he had spent waiting. Suddenly, he concluded that fifteen years is a long time.

That night, J started writing his tenth novel. '*Ode to Yellow.*' With that novel, he was making his own closure. Time to turn a page, and start anew. Ode to yellow, ode to Siv, 'I've waited for you, and this is the best I can get. With this, I say goodbye.' Months later, J's novel was finished and published, and right before he was about to travel to America to sign some papers related to publishing business, his wife said, "I want a baby."

J was taken aback, he cleared his throat and stared at his wife. "That's sudden. When I come back, let's have a serious conversation okay?" he said. "I am most fertile these days, I have been out of the pill for two weeks. Let's do it tonight, before you leave." J knew this day would come, and yet, he wasn't prepared to face it. He hesitated, then, quickly, the hesitation turned into angst. J realized the undoubted truth that, he was not ready to have a kid. Was he not prepared to be father? Or was he not prepared to father a child from this woman? Didn't he make his decision already, didn't he choose her before everything else? Why is he not ready then? The question rose in his mind like a clock tower in a flooded village, ticking. "I promise you, we'll talk about it as soon as I get back," he finally managed to say. She stared hard at him, and then suddenly, her eyes lost something, like a candle blown out at the end of a long dark tunnel. She looked away, and said, "okay."

J returned from his trip from America a day earlier, in his bag two pairs of baby shoes, only to find his wife on top of another man, on the bed where they slept, her breasts bouncing up and down.

He shut the bedroom door, left, and never came back.

▼

Whenever Leila enters J's hotel room, she sits before the mirror, stares at her reflection, and whispers to herself the following: *I am Leila Salmani, Daughter of Rashid and Nihad Salmani, wife of Mustafa Asghar, friend of Rym and Hana. My home is Palestine. My god is Allah. My loyalty is to the memories of those whom I've loved, of those whose voices still run in my veins.* Then Leila would undress, leaving only her thigh-highs on before she joins J's bed; and would leave them on through the whole ordeal of fulfilling her role, a role for which she is paid a certain amount to play. However, Leila, after sleeping with J for the first time, had caught her mind drifting in a mud of daze as the waters ran down her body in the bath. The line between

acting and reality had blurred somewhere along the fervent love-making with this strange man. She closed her eyes and repeated her litany, a litany she taught herself to shelter her mind from insanity, '*This flesh is not my flesh. Whatever it feels does not reach me. Whatever it endures is swallowed into the belly of the past. My heart beats beside the grave of my husband.*' When she walked out of the bath, she found her payment in an envelope on top of the vanity table. "When can I see you again," J asked. She stared at him for a while, hesitated, should I see this man again? then said, "you have the number."

A number J got from a cab driver in Gothenburg as he drove him to the Poseidon Hotel. "If you want an exotic company, call this number," said the taxi driver in a crooked voice, and handed him a card. "Sir?" the taxi driver repeated, snapping J out of daydreaming, cutting the repetitious scene of his wife's bouncing breasts on top of a man he ignored the face of. An image he hoped he would flee by driving non-stop to the next city in mind, but the image, he found out, was pressing, constant, its edges only getting sharper. J grabbed the card and tossed it in his pocket, and never touched it until a month later. A month he spent holed up in his hotel room. A tsunami wave of silence, of void, flooded J's mind. My wife had slept with another man, he stated to himself, as if repeating an inanimate fact. My wife had slept with another man, the earth revolves around the sun, the major musical scale has thirteen notes. Then, an anger welled and swelled up inside of him. The sewers were clogged and dirt rose up to the surface. He was angry for not feeling hurt or furious as he was supposed to. I should be possessed by a ravaging wrath, he thought, but I am not. He laid the two pairs of baby shoes on the bed beside him and stared at them. A blue pair and a red one. Baby shoes, never to be worn. A child is dead. My child is dead. And yet, I feel only sorrow.

My wife cheated on me, the verdict has passed, the penance is done. I left her to never return. Once the sacred bond is severed, it is impossible to mend. Now I am left with one pressing question, why had she done it? But J almost instantly realized the answer. 'I didn't love her, and she knew it. She never complained, but she must've been hurt. Demanding a child was her last bet, her last bullet. The manner by which I answered, the look on my eyes, the words I uttered in those few second that followed her proposal had provided her with the final answer. The curtains were fully drawn and the spotlights immersed the undeniable truth in light: I did not love her. The identity of the man with whom she slept matters less, he is but a symbol. A symbol of our ultimate, inevitable end.'

A month had passed in which J sank deeper in a void without end, until he began to feel himself gradually fading away. He needed to talk to someone, to touch someone and to feel the touch of another. He had no friend and no enemy in this town. If only Siv were here, but she's gone to never return. That's when J remembered the card in his pocket, and that's when he called the number, to which Leila answered.

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When J first laid eyes on Leila, they rested on the features of her visage a little longer than usual. J had known numerous beautiful women, but their beauty was nothing more than a sight he enjoyed to behold. They stimulated his sense of aesthetics and never penetrated any deeper. And yet, for the first time, when he saw Leila, the dark winds of her exotic comeliness stirred the unruffled leafs of his innards. He eyed her reflection on the vanity mirror with the inquisitiveness of a child as she sat and mumbled words to herself. 'Is it her shoulder length dark hair, is it her narrow forehead, her arched eyebrows, her sad eyes or her prominent cheeks? What is it about this woman's face that agitates the languid oceans of my heart.' He observed her, and yet, he could put his finger on no tangible answer.

When his fingers brushed her skin, when his lips skimmed her neck, J was caught by surprise by his own acts. His touch was not aimed to fulfill a physical desire, rather it was probing, searching, hunting for that unnameable element that lay hidden beneath her skin, that mysterious force that compelled him to stare at her for a few seconds longer than usual. His touch was naturally guided by Leila's reactions, who, eyes shut, seemed to have surrendered to J's unpredictable, gentle, caress and soft fondle. Her breathing heavy; her movements willing, avid and compliant. A man who's soul was disintegrating, and a woman who buried her heart ages ago, strangers to one another, on their first night, their bodies entwined, their senses heightened, and amidst the steam and the sweet confusion, their eyes met, in which they glimpsed a forgotten promise, a home, freedom. At that instant, they kissed, a kiss that was akin in its glamour to a first kiss, a first love, innocence.

They uttered no word.

"When can I see you again?" J asked, who was still marveling the fact that he was able to experience such emotions.

"You have the number," Leila answered, who feared the possible meaning of this man's existence. She who thought had renounced life itself.

J called her the next week, and the week after, and then the week after that. Leila would knock on his hotel room's door on the exact expected time, would sit before vanity mirror, repeat the words to herself, undress, and join his bed; her thigh-high always on. Their bodies would join in tender motions and rise gradually but simultaneously to a profound climax, then, at the shower, Leila would again repeat her litany, "*This flesh is not my flesh. Whatever it feels does not reach me. Whatever it endures is swallowed into the belly of the past. My heart beats beside the grave of my husband.*" Her mind ever confused. Why was I secretly waiting for his call? Why is this body feeling pleasures I had long forsaken? She kept asking herself.

On the fourth week, Leila did not repeat her litany.

After a month, J started to call her twice a week. On their sixth time together, they didn't have sex. They merely cuddled and kissed, naked under the doleful sheets of his bed. On their ninth time, Leila was surprised to find McDonalds, burgers, fries and cocacola, on the vanity table. "Let's just eat tonight," J proposed, "you'd still get paid; if that's okay with you." "You don't have to.." Leila said, eyes widened, and motioned refusal by her hand. "I insist, please. I got coke, I hope you don't prefer Pepsi." "I'd rather have water than pepsi," she replied, jokingly. "Good, then I can trust you." "Sorry?" "I go by a rule that has never failed me: don't trust three kinds of people, those who say they never get bored, those who claim to have found the truth, and those who prefer Pepsi over Cocacola." "Hmm, what if I prefer Fanta?" J chuckled and said, "well, that goes beyond my simple understanding." And so, they sat on chaises longues on the balcony of his 37th floor hotel room, watched Stockholm's grey sky, ate and talked.

For the first time, J saw her smile and glimpsed her thoughts and emotions. The conversation started off somewhat rusty, shy and unnatural. Words usually precede physical unions, and not the opposite. But soon the banter gained a flux that danced smoothly with the clock's hands until two hours had passed. She told him about her friends, Rym and Hana, of the orchestra she used to play in back at Gaza, "Rym and I were always rivals, when I ranked first in class, she ranked second. When I mastered a cello piece, she'd already moved to the next one. Hana was the chill one. But we were inseparable." '*We were,*' J reflected, but he felt no need to ask her anything further. "We even loved the same guy, Rym and I, can you imagine. Now that I think back on what we felt, I get overwhelmed by a warm sensation. Sometimes, I still can't decide if good memories are a bliss or a curse." "Because they hurt the most?" "Because they do." "The past saddens us because we know we should've been happier. Most of what stressed us turned out to be ghosts, makings of our mind," said J. "Yes, I should have been happier. I would give anything

for a day back in my teenagehood,” said she. “There lies the trick of the past. The past, *in our memories*, is ridden of the source of all agony, which is the imagination of the future. There’s no *unknown tomorrow* in our memories. Pain lies in what we don’t know, what we don’t understand.”

Leila stared at J, their gaze lingered in the air, wordless, then she asked, “Who are you?” J pondered the question awhile, where should I begin? If I say anything, would I be telling lies? “I am a writer, and I live in this hotel because my wife cheated on me,” he uttered finally. The truth escaped his mouth like a bird fleeing an open cage. She laid the coke can on the floor and held his hand. So they remained, each absorbed in his thoughts, each reminiscing over a muddy past, over endless possibilities. Then Leila left her seat and stood up before J. She slipped off of her thigh-highs, revealing feet dyed with red Henna up to the ankles, a pattern of flowers and octagrams. “This is the Henna of my wedding night. Right after we consummated our marriage, my husband left for the war, and returned a corpse before the Henna faded away. For the past five years, I’ve been dying my feet with the same pattern. It is my reminder of who I am, and of the man I loved.”

That day, before she left, she asked “Are you sure you don’t want me to undress?” “No,” J answered. She landed a voluptuous kiss on his lips and left.

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Three months later, J heard a slight knock that woke him up from his sleep. Knock, knock, then silence, only to repeat again after a few seconds. He opened his eyes and checked the clock, 03:01 a.m., In his dizzy mind, he could not at first locate the sound, but soon it became clear. It came from his window. Someone was knocking on the glass of his hotel’s room’s window. Its sharp reverberation sent J’s heart racing. Its persistent tone made his flesh shiver with fear. What could be knocking on the window of my 37th floor room? J covered his head under the sheets and tried to fall back asleep, but each time, the sound grew only distinct and louder. J eventually mustered enough courage and sat up. Through the dimness of the room, He trudged towards the window. Squinting, he managed to make out the outlines of a frail knuckle, gently tapping the glass, knock, knock. As he walked closer to the window, a face emerged in the faint moonlight. J saw himself. His sixteen year’s old self, knocking on the window. When their eyes met, the face receded in the darkness and disappeared. J’s heart screamed in his throat. He knew in his innards that this was bound to happen. When J opened the window, he found a box on the windowsill. Inside was a knife and an apple. His heart racing faster and faster, he held the knife, freezing metal, and cut a piece of the apple, only for blood to gush out from the fruit, hot thick oozing blood that painted his hands a crimson red.

That morning J woke up, the details of the dream razor-sharp, only to come face to face with a truth he met for the first time in his life: he was in love.

I must stop seeing her, he told himself. I must stop, leave this hotel, disappear, and never see her again. I am not ready to face the consequences of a first love at this age. That night, J called Leila once again. She arrived sooner than expected. No words exchanged, they plundered each other’s flesh. J’s new feelings, like luminous oil, coated his hands, his lips, his skin, his genitals. They magnified his sensations, exalted them, and transmuted them into something entirely novel to J. Sweet and savage. Mythic, pure and cosmic. Is this what congress with the woman you love truly feels like? J thought, and closed his eyes. At the heat of the moment, one thought distinguished itself clear in J’s head: *how could life be meaningless when one could feel what I feel.*

That night, for the first time, Leila slipped off of her thigh-highs. And to J's surprise, he finished earlier than usual.

"Say," J asked, staring at the ceiling, "how did you end up.. in this line of business?"

"You're unusually interested in my personal life," she commented, head resting on his chest, her finger drawing random shapes on burnt arm.

"I'm sorry, never mind."

"Does it really matter anyway? Aren't we all but flecks tossed around by the merciless, whimsical stream of time?"

"In a way, yes."

"You're an enthusiastic student, full of dreams, then a war rages over your city and you suddenly lose almost every person you love. You drop out of school and immigrate to a foreign country with your old sick mother. One hardship after another, and you realize you are doing what you've never thought you'd do. And the most cynical about it all, is that you adapt, and you find ways to live with your new reality. So.. how did I end up in this line of business.. in a nutshell, I couldn't have ended any other place but this one," Leila said, then left the bed and started dressing up.

"Where are you going?" J asked.

"I think it's better if we keep it professional. I've gotten a little too close to someone who pays me for sex." Her eyes furtive. Her voice cracking.

J held her by the arm and dragged her back to bed. They made love for a second time, then a third and a fourth. As they faced each other, Leila brushed his hair and asked him, in all seriousness, "*Say, if I stop, will you take me?*"

J faltered. I love her, but she's a prostitute. A *prostitute*. J was certain, that if he made her his woman, if he said yes, he'd only grow to love her more. And then, he'd start thinking about all the men she'd been with. Will he bear the thought of other men's touch on her? An image that already stung him. Will I be able to trust her? What if her phone rings and she leaves the house after, will I be free of doubt? Or will it eat at me from the inside? What if she doesn't grow to love me back? What if my books stop selling and I can't provide for her? what if I fall ill and can't be the man I should be, will she return to knocking on hotel rooms?

A sweet apple that bleeds.

After several heartbeats of silence, Leila smiled and said, "don't be so gloom, I am only joking."

Leila left the bed and started dressing. J only watched her, speechless. He knew he had to make a decision, again, and make it fast, but he simply couldn't bring himself to. He wanted to hold her and confess his feelings, and make her promise him not to ever tell him a lie; and he'd believed her. But he only watched her leave. "Leila!" he shouted before she closed the door. "What?" she said, her eyes watery. "You.. forgot your payment." She looked down, then up at him, light illuminating the wet path on her cheek where a tear had passed. "Consider this night a gift." She smiled, and left.

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The first pangs of love, J felt the following night. His bed suddenly felt empty, his flesh

forlorn. He knew he couldn't call her unless he had a definitive answer. He despised himself for being bound to forces he could not control. Why can't I just get over it. Why can't I be brave enough to trust, and strong enough to carry her past. Why do I feel a hate towards all the men she'd been with, towards the circumstances that pushed her to this line of work, even towards her dead husband. And why am I feeling pathetic for the first time in my life.

For three consecutive nights, J wrestled his thoughts in the shaded confines of his hotel room. Finally, he reached no logical conclusion, nor did he come to terms with his doubts, but nevertheless, he grabbed the phone to call her anyway, to tell her 'yes, I'd take you.' Not because he devoted his soul to bear the weight of his fears, but simply because he could no longer endure her absence. He knew he'd be toxic, insecure, and that he'd hurt her, but at that instant, it didn't matter. He wanted her, and nothing else.

He called her seven times, but her number was unreachable. He waited half an hour, then called again. Same result. He dialed her number every hour until 4 a.m. Unreachable. It never happened before. She used to pick up after three of four rings, always. For the first time, J experienced 'worry' for another human being. What if a tragedy befell her? It amazed him how his mind imagined the worst possible scenarios and fixated on them. He wished that she'd only pick up, tell him 'I don't want to talk to you,' that this was the only reason why her phone was unreachable. But his mind remained restless.

Another three full days had passed and J didn't hear a word from Leila. He had no other way to reach her except for that number. He ignored where she lived or if she had any friends. The number was the only string he could tug on, until suddenly, he remembered seeing something on the card given to him by the cab driver, a fuzzy image of a logo and a name. Luckily, the card was still tossed away in one of his jackets inner pocket. There he found it, a logo of a fish and a name that said: *Aphrodite*. It must be the name of the agency she worked for. But aside from the logo, the name and the number, no further information was printed on. J dressed up and left his room to the nearest Internet café. There on the computer he typed: Aphrodite, Gothenburg. But the results were unrelated. Nothing about a prostitution agency. There he typed again: Aphrodite, Gothenburg, prostitution. On Google's second page, he stumbled on a local Gothenburg forum where someone was asking about the same agency, to which there was only one response, a number. Immediately, J leaped to a nearby phone booth and dialed in, to which a woman picked up, her voice low and cranky: "Yes?" she said. "Good evening, is this the Aphrodite agency?" "Who are you?" the woman asked. "I'm a customer, I am looking for a woman of yours, Leila Salmani, is she free for tonight?" a silence of a few heartbeats followed. "Hello?" "Leila is no longer with us sir, do you have another girl in mind? Or do you wish for a recommendation, matching your preferences, of course." "Did she quit?" Another silence. "Yes," the woman said finally. "Could you give me her personal address, please?" "I am sorry sir, we do not provide such information." J pondered the situation for a while, then he added, "as a matter of fact, Leila used to tag her friend along, another girl, sometimes when it was desired. I never asked for her name, but she's a fun company. Could she be available tonight?" he tossed his made-up bate. "Oh, you must mean Olga. She's the only one close enough to Leila. Yes, she is one of our finest." J gave the woman his hotel number, and asked her to inform Olga, whomever she may be, to call before she comes. With that, he hung up.

At nine that night, his hotel room's phone rang, "Sir, you have a phone call, can I transfer?" asked the receptionist. "Sure," said J, his heart beating faster.

"Hello," said a woman.

J cleared his throat, said nothing.

"Please, come back home," she said.

"How did you find me?" J asked

“It wasn’t easy.. are you okay?”

“I am, how are you?”

“I’m fine.. I mean I neither have cancer nor did someone break into our house,” his wife answered.

“That faucet still dripping?”

“It is, thanks to someone,” she chuckled, sadly.

“I am sad, and terribly lonely,” she said. “I have made a stupid mistake,” she continued, “I did it out of pure spite. You hurt me, in so many subtle ways. That does not justify what I did. But I want you to understand my reasons. And I know it might be hard to believe, and I understand if you refuse to believe me, but it happened only once. You know what’s cynical,” she gave out a sadder chuckle, “deep down, I wished you’d catch me. I wanted to see the look on your face. I don’t know, I guess it would have made me a little happy, to see you shocked, or hurt. It would have meant you cared, or loved me. I was ready to confess to you what I did the moment you got back home anyway. I thought I was ready, but I was not. I am sorry, I am terribly sorry. Please just come back home. I’ll do anything to atone for what I did. I just want what we had back.”

J was glad to hear his wife’s voice. In his heart he carried no grudge nor hatred towards this woman. Only the good times remained in his memory, the laughs, the night talks and the misadventures. She was the closest thing he had to a friend. She was his best friend.

“I bought baby shoes.. when I was on that trip.” Silence. “I am sorry, I don’t want to make you feel guilty, I was just excited about them.”

“I still want to see them,” she said.

J thought about the shoes, buried somewhere in one of his bags, then he said, “I am sorry, you had to go through all that.”

“Even when I am the one who was unfaithful, you apologize.”

“You meant a lot to me, you still do, that’s why I am going to tell you the truth. I never loved you, at least not in the way you wished me to. And I don’t think I ever will. Whatever you felt when we were together, whatever drove you to offer your body to someone else, you’ll keep feeling it forever as long as we’re together. I am not offering you a choice. I am sorry but I am not coming back home. I am only telling you this because, on the long run, it’s what will set you free.”

A longer lap of silence elapsed. J could only hear her heavy breathing through the speaker, until she finally said, “I love you.” And she hung up.

“And I terribly miss you,” J said to the beeping receiver.

J stepped into the shower when the phone rang again, this time, it was Olga.

“Hi, I am Olga, Leila’s friend,” she said.

“I am J, I am also.. Leila’s friend,” he replied, dripping wet.

“I know who you are,” she said. “Leila told me about you.”

“Can we meet and talk?”

“Yes, I was hoping to meet you as well. Come to this bar, I’ll be there in half an hour.” And she gave him the address.

On a dim lighted corner, J and Olga sat facing each other over a daiquiri and a sazerac.

"Leila was murdered, three nights ago," said the chubby blond Olga, glasses, a ponytail, a tweed jacket. You'd take her for anything but a prostitute. J remained speechless. "I am sorry, for your loss." "What?" J managed to ask. "Our employer noticed that Leila's share had decreased over the past three months. She told him that business was slow, but when he realized that she'd been turning down clients, he got furious." "What do you mean?" "Leila was *only* seeing you. She hated taking money from you, but your payments, which were always a little over the usual, is what allowed her to refuse other clients. I told her it was risky, but she was steadfast. Sadly, she couldn't hide it forever. Last week, she got busted. Our boss took it personal. He treats us relatively well, but he hates it when we undermine him." Last week, J thought, that's when she asked me to take her if she stopped. The walls of the bar wobbled before him, his hands turned cold. "He did not fire her. He knew Leila was one of his bests. Instead, as a punishment, he sent her to.. special clients. Clients with queer tendencies. Mostly it's just weird, disgusting even, but rarely, it could get violent; like three nights ago." J gulped down his drink, cleared his throat. "She was found tied up to a bed in a hotel room, bruised, and choked to death."

Olga pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and dried her tears.

"Usually no one messes with us, but this particular individual, was untouchable. A powerful politician. Our boss was enraged, but he could do nothing. The whole thing was covered up as if nothing happened. Who would ask about a prostitute, a refugee. They swiped it all under the rug. But word go round, and in our line of work, it's hard to keep it a secret. I couldn't believe it when I heard. But that's our world."

J hid his face in the palms of his hands, stayed motionless for a long while. "Did she get a proper funeral?" he asked finally.

"Her body is still at the autopsy, but I doubt she'll have one."

"What's his name?" J asked.

"If you were to seek revenge, I advise you against it. You'd only chase a ghost, and ruin your own life." Eventually, Olga gave in to the demons in J's eyes and gave him the name the politician who choked Leila to death.

Before leaving, Olga said, "she seemed really happy whenever she was about to meet you, and after too. Whatever you did for her, I am grateful. I'm sure you were kind."

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A punishing rain poured down that night, a shroud of misery, under which J dragged his feet through one street to another. His skin numb to the merciful needles. His warm tears joined god's cold ones on his cheeks and eased a bit of his agony. Never before did he regret being such a coward. A fucking coward. She declined other clients, she took the risk, to be with me, and I couldn't even spit a 'yes'. Now she's dead.

A lapse of time passed. J found himself before the forensics ward in the Gothenburg Health hospital. Soaking wet, on the hall, he stumbled on an old man in a white coat.

"Is Leila here?" J asked the man.

"Sir, it's almost midnight. Whatever you're here for, couldn't it wait till morning?"

"Can you please just answer me?" The man eyed J from head to tow, then, for whatever reason, he invited him inside his desk and offered him a cup of coffee and a towel. On the desk top, one of J's novel, 'Lightning boy' was laid open, face down.

"These night shifts are only getting stranger, and I am too old to be out of my bed at this hour. I am the supervising forensic doctor tonight. May I ask who you may be?"

J showed him his ID, and told him he was a writer. "And you are looking for?" the doctor asked. "Leila Salmani. She was murdered three nights ago," J answered. Speaking her name sent echoes of pain throughout his body. The doctor remained silent. He neither confirmed nor denied. "I am her friend," J said. "The poor lady," the doctor said, "you are the first one who inquired about her." "Is it true? Was she.. strangled to death?" "Unfortunately, I cannot divulge medical secrets concerning the cause and circumstances of death, but I can tell you that she is indeed resting here. We stitched her up this evening."

"Can I see her?" J asked. "Unless you are a relative, no you can't. I am sorry." J stood facing the wall and wept silently. "Excuse me sir, but how close is she to you really? If you don't mind me say, I hear she was a prostitute." "We were close.." J answered. 'close' seemed the only right word. The doctor tapped his finger on the desk top a few times. He looked around, glimpsed at his watch, then threw a second glance at J's ID. "I am not supposed to tell you this," he finally said, "but you seem honest, so I'll take my chances."

"What is it?" J asked, eyes crimson and wide open. "Leila.. she was, eight weeks pregnant." J made calculations in his head, two months, if Olga was honest, then she slept with no one but me in the last three months. But how? Then J remembered that one time he did not use protection. But she'd told me she was safe.. could it be? "I am not making any assumptions, and I ignore if she was aware of it herself. I imagine in her line of work, such accidents could happen. Follow me please." They left the desk and inside the lab, the doctor opened a cooler in which several plastic bags with name tags were hermetically sealed on top of one another. A few seconds later, the doctor pulled out a bag and poured its content on a sanitized metal plate. A red organ the size of a fist. "This is her uterus." He opened the already dissected organ in half like a purse, exposing its insides, its endometrium, and there, attached to it, a lump of about three centimeters in diameter. "This is the embryo," the doctor said. "actually, these are two embryos. She was going to have twins, had they survived. I ignore what gender they are. It is pointless to do a DNA test to a dead fetus, of a dead woman. I don't know why am I showing you this, but it felt like you might want to know." J observed the inanimate mass. Red, slimy, round. He touched it with the tip of his fingers, and there, like a sailor who knows a storm is coming, like a prophet who knows judgement is nighing, he knew, that this is a part of him, that this lump of flesh would've been none other than his own kids. He felt a connection, a nexus of possibilities, and the wail of the covenant he'd silently made with their mother.

A series of would have beens, J thought.

Siv, would've returned

Baby shoes, would've been worn

Embryos, would've breathed.

"Can I keep it?" J asked. The doctor gave it some thought, then said, "This organ would've met the incinerator anyway. You can, but you must promise I'll never regret making you this favor."

With a scalpel, the doctor carefully removed the fetus from the womb, put it in formaldehyde flask, and handed it to J.

"Tell me something, is it yours?" The doctor asked.

"It is.."

On the way out, J thanked the doctor for his time and favors. "Hold on, you said you were a writer, have I read anything of yours? I have been an avid reader since a young age."

J was about to deflect the question, but the air about this old man made it hard to lie to his face. J pulled a ballpoint pen from his pocket and walked to his desk. There he signed his own book, a novel the doctor seemed to have been reading through his long night-shift hours. "I hope the novel is to your liking.." J said.

"It's you.." the doctor said, in awe. Then he smiled to J and said, "now I can sleep in peace. We both have each other's secret."

▼

That same night, J moved to another hotel. His Poseidon hotel room was painful to be in knowing Leila will never again set foot inside. And for the next six months J lived for nothing but revenge. He gathered all the articles about the Politician from news papers, all the information he could gather on the Internet. In a couple of weeks, he knew where he lived, where he worked, whom he was married to, what schools his three daughters went to, the identity of his friends, his secretary, and his driver. With a little more digging, he found out he had two sexual assault charges on him that were dropped due to 'inconclusive evidence.' The features of his face were carved in J's retinas, the wrinkles on the edges of his eyes, his receding hair line, his prominent forehead, his round nose and tight lips, and that obnoxious grin on his face, that same grin he made whenever a picture of him was taken. J imagined all the ways he could make the man suffer, all the ways he'd kill him. For several weeks, he'd park some blocks away from his house in a rented car, follow him to work and to the restaurants he went to for dinner, and once a week, to a hotel, where the man would stay there with the company of a woman from 10 p.m. until midnight. The women always left half an hour earlier.

J considered getting a gun, but eventually preferred an old style classic murder, using a knife. He felt an urge, almost a lust, to feel the blade as it slashes through the different layers of his victim's body. He bought a Miyabi black 8-inch Chef's knife. Why did he spend so much on a knife he'd use to end the life of a man he hated? J wasn't sure. Perhaps he wanted his first and last murder to be symbolic. Perhaps the sharpness of an expensive tool would provide a smooth, quick and spotless act. Or perhaps it was a memento for Siv. "You need to cook properly, and for that you need the right tools. Buy yourself a good Chef's knife," she said to him. He never bought the proper knife, until now. A Miyabi Black 8-inch.

J, during the days that followed, would find himself staring at the black cold blade in his hands. Was he ready to kill the man? Did he hate him enough to do that? Why am I holding a knife? J asked himself. He never stabbed anyone, never even slaughtered a sheep or a goose. But one thrust, aimed at the heart, was all he needed.

'I was a numb man for as long as I remember, until I met her and I felt alive again. I felt I was myself again. I began to dream and to aspire, and I drank from life's deepest well, until you took her away from me. Now I'm a dead man, the only force moving me is a throbbing hate towards you, and for that, you should die.'

J made up his mind. The following Thursday, when the politician would go to his regular hotel from ten till midnight, that's when and where he'd kill him. J booked a room a day earlier at the same hotel. At ten at night he'd wait for him in the lobby and casually follow him up to his room. He'd locate the room, then wait until the prostitute leaves, around 11:30 p.m. That's when he'd knock, look him in the eyes, stab him, and leave.

At 9 p.m., as J was cleaning his already clean chef's knife in the hotel room. He could picture it, he could see himself doing it. He could feel the tip of the knife penetrating the many layers of

skin and fat.

Suddenly, J felt an acute excruciating pain in his chest. A jabbing agony that irradiated to his neck and jaws. J never experienced a pain so intense before. He dropped the knife and fell to the floor. With the little might he had left, he reached for the phone to call for an ambulance, but as soon as he dialed the first number, he lost consciousness.

When he opened his eyes again, the clock showed one after midnight. He stood up in the darkness of his room, feeling a strange force brimming in his body. He remembered the pain and the panic, but all that's left was vague sensation. He looked at the clock, realized he missed his chance. The lucky bastard. A heart attack now of all times. A part of him leaned on seeing this incident as a sign to quit, the other was still blinded by hatred. 'Next Thursday I'll get you, you lowlife.' He turned on the light, gulped two glasses of water and sat at the edge of the bed, only to notice a brown envelope by the door of his room. He picked it up from the floor, opened the door, checked for any presence in the hallway, but no one was there. Back inside, he tore the envelope open, there he found three photos.

Photo number one: a wide angle view of the room, the king sized bed in the middle, on top of the bed laid the politician, naked, hands tied to the bed frame, soaked in a pool of blood.

Photo number two: a close up shot of the man's chest. Seven punctual stabs in the heart.

Photo number three: a close up shot of the man's face, writhed in shock and pain.

On the last photo, J noticed something. The man's hands were tied with a yellow scarf, embroidered in a Fleur-de-lis pattern.

With the pictures came a note that said, '*Don't waste your life yet, you are still needed.*' signed S.

▼

Ever since J walked in on his wife on top of another man, he wrote not a single word; until that night, when he saw the man that robbed him of the woman he loved crucified in an aura of his own blood. When he finally saw that grin he despised turn into a gasp of pain. Revenge, he discovered, was not as savory as he imagined, but he'd choose it each time over forgiveness. Seeing the judgment one so craved certainly drowns the flames of enmity, and returns sleep to one's nights.

'Scandal or tragedy? Renowned politician found murdered in a hotel room. Seven stabs of an ice-pick in the chest. The culprit remains unidentified.'

Said next day's news paper. Yet J still felt responsible for Leila's death. The thought that life is determined, and that no one was truly responsible enraged him. To prove he was free, to believe he could have saved her but failed, J grabbed the black chef's knife and cut his pinky finger. J wasn't naive. His anger was rather focused on the endless chain of causality that weaved its strings tight around everything known and unknown. He wanted to snap that chain. He wanted to break it. But he realised how pointless his pursuit would be. Instead, he decided that what he would break instead was the chain of 'rational' causality. The foreseeable, intelligible, logical chain of causality. He cut his pinky simply because there was no reason he would do that. He cut it as a revolt against his own slavery. As he saw blood oozing out of his half pinky, he realised that only insane people are truly free.

I am free, and I am responsible for Leila's death.

J left for America. In his back pack nothing but one change of clothes, a shaving kit, the pair of baby shoes, the 3 centimeter embryos in the formaldehyde flask and the Chef's knife. There he lived for four years, traveling from one city to another, occasionally visiting other artists who knew who he was, and rarely, he talked to strangers he met at random places, except for one ex Zen monk, whom J helped run his restaurant, befriended, and knew buddha through him. His ten books kept selling, and his bank account kept adding on zeros. He sent a monthly salary to Leila's mother, until she passed away, three years following her daughter death.

After America, J traveled to east Asia for another three years. China, Tibet, Mongolia, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, India. He neither visited touristic sites nor museums. Motels, cheap diners, musty bars, deserted cinema halls, temples and long aimless strolls through crowded streets were what made up most of his days.

Each morning, ever since he received the photos of the dead politician, J would wake up at four a.m. and write till seven. Each day, he'd write two thousands words, and he never stopped since. What he wrote in those early waking hours remains a mystery. He never published them nor showed them to anyone. J's works, aside from his early novels, had but disappeared from the literary arena. The world wondered and conjectured. But to J, the reason was clear. He was convinced he could not get any better. He said what he wanted to say, and he said it the best way he could. '*All I could do now is be grateful to this craft, and for that, I will write everyday.*'

In Taipei, one hot June day, J suffered a deadly infection, after which he got robbed, kidnapped and beaten to death by a local mob. A rare combination of bad luck. He was just a man in the wrong place at the wrong time. J thought he was going to die, when he was suddenly and miraculously saved. His kidnappers were gone, the door of his cell opened, his passport and credit card returned. With the lot, came a note: '*Return to your birth place, I shall meet you there.*' signed S.

At the age of forty six, J finally returned to his home, to Bone. There he opened the MadBuddha restaurant, a few blocks from the university where Razi, Stella and Noah went.

16.

Noah's Promise.

Tarte au Citron

The trip is over. The book is finished.

1 a.m., a November night. Noah parked his gray Clio on a cliff facing the harbor. Behind us cars raced inside the medical emergencies department of the hospital that loomed over us. We nibbled on cheap *Mahboul* chips, smoked, sipped from Selecto cans and listened to a pink Floyd album on the car stereo. It rained lightly that night, the kind of rain where you aren't sure if you really need an umbrella.

"Didn't you sleep last night? You look beat," Noah said.

"Do I?" It must've been Qalam's curse. Lady Shiva was taking the pain away, but the damage was present. I have lost a few pounds, I fainted when I stood up at times, I broke my pinky on the doorknob, I lost a molar—it simply fell while brushing my teeth—I could no longer see with my right eye, my legs sometimes failed me, my blood hardly clotted when I bleed, and I felt tired all the time. Strangely enough, I slept very well.

"I actually slept very well last night, but you know, it's just life.. sort of."

"Sometimes I wonder, are we supposed to feel this way at our age? Anxious and mostly unhappy?" Noah asked.

"I think deep down we're afraid of becoming losers, and we constantly feel that we're heading down that exact road," I answered.

"Do you regret being with Lin? I mean, you've invested some good years there," I asked.

"It's a hard question, because you're facing a dilemma either way. It is stupid to commit to a serious relationship when you are young, but it is also a fatal flaw to fall in love when you're old. If you fall in love young, you'll commit. If you don't commit young, you'll fall in love when you're older. Zip zap. So.. really, I can't answer you."

"Yeah.. it is a dilemma. I too had committed to Stella. But either way you look at it, you can't ignore the feeling that we could have lived our lives differently. Stress free, more bravely, more daringly. Love makes you insecure and coward. We always worry, and we always end up worrying about the wrong things," I said.

"Imagine this," Noah said, "you waste your whole life stressing about trivial matters, you know, money, future, women, and the whole package of existential and psychological dread that comes along. You die, you stand before God, and you realize that your life was a joke. A wasted joke. So you fall on your knees and you beg him over and over again to give you a second chance. And you promise him that this time, you'll live it fully. You'll be brave, disciplined,

wiser and gratified. For one reason or another, God grants you your wish, and he sends you back, to this exact moment and place, here in my car, watching the bay. This is your second chance.”

“So we wasted our lives eventually..”

“Eventually, yes.”

“And this is our second chance, now or never, go wild,” I said.

“Exactly.”

“I see..” I dragged from my cigarette and added, “I have good news, I finally finished writing a novel.”

“Really?”

“Yes, it is finished, editing and all.”

“Well congratulations you bastard, I knew you were cooking up something. Can I read it? Or is it the kind of novels you don’t want your friends and family to read?”

“I don’t know.. technically you can, but I have a bad feeling about it. I can’t say I really love it,” I said.

“Well look, if it’s good, it’s going to get published sooner or later. If it’s not, then don’t fret about it not being published. If you put out there something half good, and it’s going to be out there for good, you’re going to regret it eventually. Important thing is, you finished a novel, you finished something, finally.”

The novel was then by with J, he was reading it, and he would be the judge it. If he likes it enough, it’ll get published. He’s the one who provided the mentorship on how to write a proper novel, so if he finds it a fail, a part of the blame goes on him, I conjectured.

A novel that is going to end the world, at least according to Shiva. I should’ve been feeling quite anxious about it, about my choice, but not really. All I was experiencing was a slight twitch at the back of my head. It was like you parked somewhere and walked away, only half way to ask yourself whether you locked the car or not. You want to go back to make sure, but you also know you probably locked it, like every time before. Did I lock my car? I probably did. Should the world end? It probably does.

“I also have some good news,” Said Noah. “There was a concours, and I won a scholarship to Germany for a PhD in Homological Algebra, in the university of Münster. I’ll be going there for five years, probably forever.”

“Now that’s good news! It’s your time to shine and do some real shit with your life.” I was happy for him. One might think that he should have accepted the first scholarship to France some years ago, but perhaps things have a way of sorting themselves out, perhaps this way was better, no one knows really.

“Yeah, I have actually been learning some German, want to hear a phrase or two?”

“Hit me baby one more time.”

“*Bitte verbrenne dieses Buch, und schreibe etwas anderes,*” he said, his eyes suddenly shades more serious.

“Wow, terrible accent. What does it mean?”

“Terrible huh? Then I’ll let your ignorance of this language bite you. You’ll go to the grave not knowing what I said to you this night.”

“Seriously? Suit yourself. I bet you insulted me in some perverted way anyway.”

"That's exactly right," he said.

"So.. how do you feel about it? Leaving and all."

"I'm going to be real with you." *If* by pink Floyd ended and *A Great Day for Freedom* began. "I am actually excited. I feel free, for the first time in my life. Part of it because Lin and I broke up. It's not that I didn't love her, I still do, but the circumstances, our natures, the timing, was not helping. We were a little miserable. No one's fault. It's just how it was. I feel lonely sometimes without her, but I wouldn't lie, right now I feel lighter. It's as if you were watching a beloved one suffer from sickness, but now he's finally dead. I really wish she's happy. You see, forgiving, and letting go, sets you free. It might be self evident, but not until you are forced to forgive and let go, that you truly realize it.

"Now it's my time to move. I have never been out of Algeria before. It is a little scary to travel abroad alone, but it's time for my adventure. I have made a promise to myself, that I will do what I love without reservation. I will see the world and meet interesting people. I will live without fear. I know it all sounds like the dream of a teenage girl, but do we really know better than a teenage girl? I don't know how to describe it, but I feel alive," he said.

"Finally happy huh?" I said.

"To chase happiness is a fool man's pursuit. Happy is not what I feel, nor what I expect to feel. I know I will be bored, disappointed, hurt, but I will also watch a good movie, read a bestseller, listen to a symphony, eat a delicious cheese sandwich, have a killer hair cut, buy a fancy suit, laugh with a friend, kiss a pretty girl, smell her perfume, feel her hand in mine. I might travel alone, I might have a little success, I might learn how to play the trumpet. I might just have a walk alone in the city or a hike in the mountain. When life gives you lemon, you just make a Tarte Au Citron, and you share it with someone you like. That's just life, that's what we have. You might think me a gullible optimist, but at the end of the day, we are lucky to be alive. I'm sure you could never play Zelda or smoke a cigarette if you never existed. You see my point?

"The way I see it, life is just a bouquet of present moments. Whenever I settle in the present, forget the past and the future, and live that moment, in pain or excitement, that's another flower in my bouquet. The rest is just weed that will eventually be trimmed away and done without."

"Did you really die and then God sent you back to this moment?"

"Did I disappoint you? Now that I'm no longer a sad nihilist?"

"Yeah.. extremely boring. What are you going to tell me now? To believe in myself, wake up early and work hard for my dream?" I kidded, though halfway I realized how bitter I sounded. Where did the bitterness come from?

"You dislike most people. That could only stem from a high self-esteem, and I'm sure writing that book took a lot of effort and you have big hopes for it. I don't need to give you any advice. Waking up early is however a lost case for you. You are cursed to forever wake up after noon. And if you did wake up before that, you'd be miserable," he said.

I lit another cigarette. He did too, and tacitly, we knew it was our last cigarette together.

"Now that we're both single, we could have a real fun time with the ladies, but you're going away." I will be lonely when you're gone, I wanted to say.

"I doubt it. You're the type who seeks real connections. Your type never has fun with the ladies. You'd be looking for Stella in every woman, and you'd be disappointed most of the time."

Flashbacks from the night with Lamis visited my memory. "True, I'm a sucker."

“You didn’t tell her yet.. about you two?” he asked.

“No, not planning to. She’s with another guy. She’s with Jack, the irony. But letting go, remember?”

He shook his head, “this feels a little wrong. I don’t know, seems like you must do something, eventually.”

“Eventually, maybe.”

Another song passed without a word exchanged.

“Someday, Let’s buy the latest Nintendo Console, and let’s play the latest Zelda game. I’ll look forward to that,” he said.

“That would be nice, sure, someday.”

17.

Stella's Promise.

Hot Snow Ball

Thus the night falls, and thus I return to my cold apartment. It is tidy and clean alright, but terribly cold and dark. And neither does the darkness nor the chill give away when I turn the lights or the heater on. I change into my pyjamas and trudge to my bed. My body crumbles under the weight of nothingness and unfulfilled desires. Has another bone broken, have I gone shades paler? Maybe. Shiva might have dulled the physical pain, but why do I feel the earth closing on me, gasping for air, a scream trapped inside me.

I need a friend, I need a hug.

A copy of my finished book laid on the desktop beside the framed black and white photo Stella took of me. I still haven't picked a title, nor did I feel any urge to. I stared at the wobbling darkness dancing around my bed, I stared until the time on my phone showed 1 a.m.; the scream inside me was louder than ever.

Until I burst into tears.

And I scream,

“Are you just going to keep watching??

“Can’t you see I am committing the epitome of blasphemy? Aren’t you going to stop me? Punish me? Chastise me? Make a lesson out of me?!

“Just how insignificant am I to you? I am ending your world and you wouldn’t even budge. Just how distant and detached are you?

“I get that I am not your most perfect or beloved creation, but what lays in my heart is as radiant and fragile as the souls of your tormented prophets, and it has needs of your love and attention as the naked birds on cold mornings.

“Do you think I want to do this? Do you think I don’t yearn to believe in the greatness of your wisdom, and feel the warmth of your mercy?

“Give me a sign, anything, and I will stop. Ignore me, and I swear by your great name and by the love I bear for you that I will end your world.. Just a sign.”

Seconds tick away, but no sign.

By that moment, I realized that I had neither screamed nor wept. My eyes were desert dry and my voice too brittle to have left my throat.

Oh well, we all suffer alone don’t we? With no one to observe our pain nor care for it.

Dry weeps and silent screams.

As I closed my eyes and wished to sleep and never wake up, someone knocked on my door.

I waited, lest I imagined it.

Knock knock.

I walked in the darkness to my front door. I neither wanted to meet Lady Shiva nor Mr. Dandy or Qalam and his quiche. Just let me have a good night sleep.

“Who is it?” I asked

“It’s me..”

I cleared my throat, opened the door and asked her to follow me into my room without turning the lights on. I didn’t want her to see me in the image I had become.

“I tried to text you before, but I didn’t know what to say,” said Stella. She took off her long coat and hung it on the chair. The clouds revealed the moon and its beams flooded my room, illuminating her thigh gap. A siren wailed in the distance.

“How did you know where I lived?” I asked.

“Noah told me.”

“It’s a little late for a visit, don’t you think?”

“One of my girlfriends had a birthday party, she lives nearby. I was supposed to spend the night at hers. We stayed up late, and when my other friend was finally driving home, I told her to drop me here.”

“You aren’t making any sense Stella, why are you here?”

“Stella.. you never called me that before, or have you? I don’t even remember where does this nickname come from.”

“I don’t know why I am here,” she continued, “but I feel like you already know. I need answers.”

To hold you in my arms would be my answer.

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re talking about,” I said.

“Stop lying. I know you do. Please, just tell me. Tell me I am not crazy, because I am starting to believe I am,” she said, and took a few steps towards me, I a few back.

“I keep having these flashbacks. And I realized, there are gaps in my memory, somethings I should have lived but never did. Feelings without images. It’s like.. a chapter ripped off a book, and without it nothing makes sense. My heart remembers, my skin remembers, but my mind is amnesic, and it’s always you, in these flashbacks, or your face, but not truly your face, a blurred image, a shadow, but I know it’s you, and I don’t know *why* it’s you.”

“Why do you think the answer is going to make it any easier?” I asked after I served her cranberry juice and makrood.

“But I need to know! Not knowing might be a bliss, but being aware of your ignorance is hell. Some doors should never be opened, true, but once the door appears, it’s all you think about. Please, I cannot take it anymore. Why else would I be here at 1 a.m.,” she said.

I sat on the edge of the bed, she on the desk chair. I gave it some thought then I said, “we used to be.. good friends. After your mother passed away, I helped you take your father’s heritage from your step father and his sons. We falsified some documents, we bribed some lawyers but we eventually took what’s yours. We did them dirty. We were a bit terrified and afraid we’d end

up in jail, but when it was all over, we had a good laugh about it. You bought your new condo, and put the rest into a savings account. Then.. well, you had an accident and lost your memory of what happened. It wasn't kids throwing rocks, actually this fell out of blue sky and hit you," I fetched Qalam's paper weight and handed it to her. She felt it with her hands, then touched her scar on her forehead. "I couldn't just walk over and say, 'hey, we were kind of close, but you forgot,' that would have been sort of weird. So I shut up about it."

She fell silent for a few seconds then said, "I.. I have no recollection of that. I remember buying the condo, and saving the rest of the money, but didn't I inherit my father's wealth legally?" She gave me back the paper weight and I put it in my pajamas' pocket.

"Well, your step dad was sort of a jerk. He made your mother sign some papers before she passed away, so he could take everything after. When you found out what he was up to, you couldn't just stay still and do nothing. And I helped you."

She heaved a deep sigh and said, "and.. we were good friends?"

"Yeah."

"Liar."

I said nothing. She stood up and said, "can I see you?"

"Please let me stay in the darkness."

She sat beside me on the bed, held my hand, and slowly started touching my face. She ran her fingers around my lips, my cheek, my hair and down to my half ear. "Did you lose your ear because of what we did? Is it my step father and his sons who did this to you?"

I just kept staring at her through the darkness, Stella, love of my life, daughter of Semiramis, queen of my dreams. She was so close, yet, I couldn't reach her.

"Did you get your answer?"

"Why would my amnesia be selective only of matters concerning you?" she asked, almost in a whisper. "No, I only have more questions."

You should ask your real father, I thought, the immortal one who poisoned me.

"Weird I know," I answered.

"But these memories are mine, and without them I am incomplete. This is unfair. I want to remember. Please tell me everything," she said.

"You aren't missing much, trust me."

"Just stop lying!" she shouted, slapped me and left my side. "Sorry," she said right after.

I didn't feel anything. Maybe I lost another tooth.

Don't I want her to remember? Of course I do. But feelings and memories are entities of their own. They influence one another, but they are not the same.

I prepared a mattress for her with clean sheets in the living room. "You can sleep here. I am going to bed now, if you excuse me, I am tired."

She said nothing, then turned the desk lamp on. I stepped back into the shades.

"Really? You are going to keep hiding from me?"

Again, no words came to mind.

"So you did frame my photo after all," she said after seeing it on the desk top. Then she held

the manuscript in her hand and said, “Is this yours? Did you write this?”

To think that I wrote that novel to impress her, to prove her wrong. Now for some reason, my motives seem futile, infantile.

“Yeah.. I did.”

“Can I read it?” she asked.

“Help yourself. I am going to sleep.”

▼

Stella sat at the desk, and under the desk lamp, she started leafing through the novel. I crawled under the sheets and tried to fall asleep, but sleep never came. For hours I watched her from the darkness of my corner, flipping page after page. Occasionally she’d leave her seat to stretch, sip from her cranberry juice, or she’d just stop reading and stare back at me as I feigned sleep.

After four hours and a half, right after the first call for prayer and before the first rays of dawn, Stella read the last page. She leaned back on her chair and stared at the ceiling for some long seconds, then back at the palms of her hands, studying them, as if seeing them for the first time, then finally at me.

She left her seat, stood by my bed, then slowly, she lifted the sheets and joined me. She glued her forehead to mine and rested her left on my side. Her breathing slow and warm.

“It’s good,” she said.

“Yeah?” I whispered.

“Yes, very good. You’ve.. changed much since I last read you.”

“Thank you, flattered.”

“However..” she trailed off.

“What is it?”

“Something is really.. dark about it. Something is.. terribly right, or terribly wrong. I am not sure I understood it fully, I’ll have to read it again. Or perhaps.. I am afraid I actually understood it perfectly.”

The truth of all truths.

“I will take that as a compliment,” I said.

“You don’t understand.. I am shaken, from the inside. I almost can’t believe it was you who wrote it. But at the same time, I am certain it is you, or it could only be you.”

“Talking like someone who knows me very well,” I said.

“Well, I used to, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“Somethings you just cannot forget.”

She leaned closer, and landed a kiss on my cheek.

“Is it okay if I do that?”

“What about Jack?”

“Jack.. he’s sweet, but..”

“But?”

“If you knew me, if you know me, you’d understand why it couldn’t have worked out.”

“I see.. I told you so.”

“Indeed you did, I should have listened,” she said, and kissed me again.

“Now you know what not to date,” I said.

“Tell me something about me, from when we used to be.. close friends.”

You drink your coffee black, without sugar. You have a special craving for mandarins. You have watched ‘*The Office*’ five times. You read ‘*The Picture of Dorian Gray*’ three times. *November Rain* is your best song. You hate no one. You like to sleep with the lights on. You hide your thigh gap from everyone. You get recurring nightmares. Sometimes you stare too long at your naked body in the mirror. Your dad’s camera and the photos he took are the only things left that remind you of him, that’s why you have a knack for photography. You like to be kissed on the left side of your neck. You only smoke after midnight. Sometimes you wake up at dawn and you start weeping for no reason. Queen Semiramis is your spiritual mother and you pitied your real mother. “You always tap a rhythm with your fingers, it’s like there’s music constantly playing in your head,” I said.

She smiled and said, “it’s true, I do that.”

Then she told me about how she was selected for an international youth program, ‘*The Eyes of Africa*’. How she’d be traveling for months through Africa with a group of photographers and young artists. She explained the rest of the project and what it aimed to achieve, but all that buzzed in my head was, Noah is going away, she’s going away, and I’d be truly alone. Oh well..

“I never told this anyone.. but I am really excited. This will be a huge leap for me. It’ll open all kinds of doors for my career. I will do more volunteer work in other parts of the world, and hopefully, someday I’ll land a job in one of the big magazines, *Aperture*, or *Afterimage* or even *Exit*.”

“And? To what purpose? After you get your dream job, would you feel fulfilled?” I asked.

She gave it some thought, then said, “I just want to fall in love with life again.. and if possible, capture some of its beauty.”

“I see.. It’d be a real shame if the world were to end soon right?”

“I don’t need much, maybe just some forty good years, then I’d die happy,” she said jokingly.

I chuckled, then felt real pity for her.

“Hey, I am going to say something weird, but it’s only weird if you make it so alright?” she whispered.

“Don’t be weird.”

“Wait for me. It’s just one year, then I’ll be back. I might be a candid romantic, but I have a feeling our story doesn’t end here. If anything, it’s just the beginning. There, I said it.”

My heart raced. She’s ruining everything.

“Do you have a crush on me?” I said teasingly.

Stella then started to kiss me. Slowly at first, then she guided my knee between her thighs. We

snowballed into a fervent embrace. Chest against chest, legs entwined, tongues danced and fluids exchanged. After a while the heat gave out and she settled in my arms. To kiss and to hold the woman you love, to be kissed and held by the woman you love, is there a sensation more sublime?

Do I really wish I had never been born?

Is life really a scam?

Is one single moment worth a life time of suffering?

What a fine closure.

18.

Gamblings

A Simple Man

The *Room* had one door and two ostentatious windows. One overlooked the real world, the world where the laws of physics ran smoothly and people still argued whether you dip fries in ketchup or pour the ketchup over the fries first. The other window overlooked another world, where the laws of physics are the metaphor and a ketchup dipped French-fry could be the axis of a mad angel's dream. You get the gist.

Mr. Dandy and Mr. Qalam sat on comfortable chairs facing the window overlooking the real world; they chatted:

"I always used to think that the best kind of woman is the woman who'll actually just kill me," said Dandy.

"*Until you eventually met her, was she the really best?*" Asked Qalam.

"Oh please, she was unstable, insatiable, but definitely the best," answered Dandy, with a laugh.

"*You don't seem to regret it,*" said Qalam.

"Let's not talk about the past, shall we."

"*Indeed, the past is but memories we burn in the hearth of our souls to keep us warm, until the cold eventually triumphs. Say, would I be so mistaken if I thought you actually want him to fail?*" Qalam asked Dandy.

Mr. Dandy gave a sigh, then said, "I do want him to fail."

"*Shame, but I get it,*" said Qalam.

"Shame?" asked Dandy, "Could it be.. that you want him to succeed?"

Qalam remained silent.

"Ah.. huh. Now I get it. Very amusing indeed. The famous Mr. Qalam, the scribe of God, actually wants out.."

"*Don't we all?*" said Qalam.

"So you poisoned him knowing full well it'll just make him more steadfast on completing it?" asked Dandy.

"*He's a simple man. I could say the same about you. You didn't really encourage him nor gave him any guidance,*" said Qalam.

"Oh please, you're not the only one wanting out," Dandy confessed.

"Very amusing indeed," said Qalam.

"I guess we have a conflict of interests after all," said Mr. Dandy.

"Shiva would be disappointed with you," said Qalam.

"God would be disappointed with you," said the cat man.

"I doubt it," replied the man with the misty visage.

"Poor man, I see no scenario where it ends well for him," said Dandy.

"Your daughter is leaving his apartment, Shall we?"

"Let's go."

19.

Wasted day. Wasted life. Dessert, please.

“The purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved.”

Kurt Vonnegut

Stella is gone, out of my apartment and out to the world.

And something is changed; the hourglass is flipped upside down.

I go back to my room, I open the door, and instead of my bed crammed up in a corner and my desk in another, I find myself in a great hall, expanding out in the darkness towards an end I cannot see. On both walls rows of candles are hanged, lit, the flames still like a picture. At the center one chandelier hangs low, exuding the same cold orange hue on a round table just below it. There sits Mr. Dandy on the left in his burgundy tuxedo and bowler hat, Mr. Qalam on the right, still in his long dark coat and his top-hat, and Ms. Shiva in the middle, always in yellow; an empty chair awaits me and a full dinner is served. Quiches, chicken salad, and Selecto soda on the rocks. Maybe they should've added a steak; oh well. I sit. I don't touch anything.

“I hope you don't mind the change of scenery,” said Mr. Dandy.

“Not at all. I see you've already made yourselves comfortable,” I said.

“This is an important occasion,” said Lady Shiva.

“Is this supposed to be a celebration dinner, or my last supper?” I asked.

“Just courtesy,” said Qalam. Then he left his seat and in a strange swift move he put his gloved hand over my head. I felt my lungs fill with cold gas and I started to cough smoke. I coughed a lot of smoke before I calmed down. Afterwards I felt a surge of energy burst through me.

“You're healed. Now eat,” said Qalam.

I stared at them hard and long. Why are they together? why is he lifting his curse?

“But you haven't heard my answer yet,” I said.

“I apologize for the inconvenience, Mr. Razi. I never intended to end your life, but the show seemed necessary. Besides, my daughter seems to be fond of you,” he said.

“I would argue it was unnecessary,” I replied, then looked at them all, “are you all here to hear my final answer?”

"The Quiche is getting cold, but yes, we are," said Qalam. I devoured one Quiche in two bites, downed it with a sip of soda, then realized I had a massive appetite, so I devoured two others, folded the napkin in half and dabbed my mouth, then said,

"The answer is *no*. I am not going to do it." My eyes straight at Lady Shiva's.

A moment of silence. The flames flickered and shadows danced.

"But the book is already written," said Lady Shiva, and crossed her legs. I couldn't read the tone of her voice.

"I know, and I am sorry to disappoint, really."

"Are you certain, young man?" asked Mr. Dandy.

"I am not," I said, then stared at my drink for some long heartbeats, trying to understand my own decision, then said, "look, I understand the logic behind it. Your arguments are sound, lady Shiva, why should an existence painted with misery, where we are but marbles gliding down the oblique whimsical surface of fate, not knowing why we are here or where we're heading, should prevail? We do deserve better. And if ending this world is what it takes to put a stop to all of this, or maybe open the doors for better alternatives, then by all means yes, this world should and must end. And no offense, Mr. Qalam, I still think your story telling prowess is pretty poor, or pretty fucked up. The plot sucks man, if anything, there is no plot at all. But.." I trailed off.

"But?" Lady Shiva asked.

"You see, there are two people I like a lot, and they have big plans for the future. I can't say I understand their motives fully, but they have found a mean to fall in love with life again, and I don't intend to rob them of that," I said, though four was the right number. A pair of twins wants to find love and venture out into the world. The small gifts Red and Blue gave me that day in Oran won them a special spot in my heart. Why would anyone give Pringles and chocolate to a stranger who's about to end their world? Why such infinite kindness?

"Honestly," I went on, "real is a word I hardly use. I could find Achilles tendon in every truth and shoot the arrow of skepticism right at it. I am a buzz kill in that matter, but, what I feel for those people has no Achilles tendon. I care about them and that's my only truth. That's real. So if those two want to take their shot at life, then I don't care if the whole world suffers. Let them have it, and let my book burn to ashes.

"A genuine laugh with a true friend, and a warm embrace born out of strong connection, that for me is of more importance than any other need to heroism or glory. I know I should think about all the other people, about posterity, but I am sorry, I don't care about anybody else.

"I want to see those two happy, that's all. I am sure you can find someone else for the job, Lady Shiva. I just hope you'd wait until my friends pass away, peacefully. But I understand if you can't. It just can't be me who does it.

Lady Shiva chuckled, then exchanged a glance with Mr. Dandy, then back at me.

"At the end, they're all the same, aren't they, my lady," said Mr. Dandy.

"I thought this one might be different," said Lady Shiva.

"Don't beat yourself up, we all have our weaknesses," replied Mr. Dandy.

"I am rarely surprised, but today I am," said Qalam.

"You get to keep your job after all, at least until she finds another one," I replied, and handed him back his paper-weight. "I guess I'll no longer need it, and you have some more writing to do."

“You could’ve had it all, Razi boy,” said Lady Shiva.

“I know, what a shame. Sorry to have wasted your time, but I am only one other selfish man. At the end of the day, I go for what serves my own pleasure. I am a buzz kill, even for myself.”

“Still, it is poetic, I give you that,” said Mr. Dandy.

“I guess the world could always use some poetry, don’t you think, Qalam?” I added.

“*I’ll keep that in mind,*” said the smoke man.

“How about one last dance, before we part ways?” asked Lady Shiva, as she stood up and offered me her hand.

Why not.

Tandava

“Tandava is the cosmic dance of creation and destruction. It is the dance of the universe, and we are all apart of it.”

Sadhguru

I held her hand, and rested the other on her waist. A waltz music started echoing from everywhere and nowhere, and our footsteps followed, bom bap bap, Engelbert Humperdinck’s *Last Waltz*. We swirled out into the darkness. The chandelier and the dinner table shrunk and shrunk, until she leaned close and whispered in my ear:

“And on the epitaph, these words appear: ‘my name is Razi, fool of fools; look on my works, ye nescient otiose, and sneer!’ Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of olden dreams, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away.

“And to his name, the daughter of gold, alone and shy, sheds a last tear, and sways a farewell dance.

“Goodbye, prophet of doom, it’s all over now.”

Part III

“Shiva is the destroyer, the destroyer of the world, and the cause of all destruction.”

Shiva Purana, Section 2.2

20.

Ω

I wake up in the *Room*, my memory dipped in fog. How long have I been unconscious?

I skim my surroundings, chairs, a table and an Armoire. But what catches the eye in the room isn't the furniture but the two massive windows on opposite sides. Each seems to overlook a whole different world, as if this room sits at the chasm of what is known and unknown, in limbo, *Araf*.

Inside the Armoire, a burgundy tuxedo is neatly hung, ironed, clean, in a plastic bag, right out of a cosmic laundry. Beside it a box inside of which lays the bowler hat and a small note.

I see.

Don't beat yourself up, I've made the same choice, a long time ago, and I don't regret it. Now it's your turn to serve Lady Shiva. That's the little price you have to pay.

You once told me that you wished you had a burgundy tuxedo, to visit googols of worlds. Now you do; I hope it fits.

Your new life might be a little lonely, but once you get used to it, it's not that bad.

Dandy.

I heaved a sigh, put on the tuxedo, the bowler hat, and jumped out of the window. Now I can go anywhere I want, and I have two worlds to discover. At least until I am called by Shiva.

The socks that Mr. Dandy left me didn't match. One was navy blue, the other crimson red. That left me smiling.

This is my life now, a life I thought would last eons, but seeing how things unfolded, I was wrong.

Ω

At the MadBuddha, a little before midnight, Shiva sits by the counter, alone. J walks in and finds her. No one else is there. It takes him a little while to fully recognize her. He stands still, and by the look on his face, I reckon he is confused, perplexed, in disbelief. She says, "Hi J, been a long time." He walks behind the counter slowly, his gaze never leaving her figure, and serves two cups of coffee.

"Hi Siv," he says.

They don't say anything for some long seconds, then she says, "I am sorry J, I had to. But now is the perfect time." Then they talk, they talk for a long time. J, a little rusty and bashful at first, told her everything she missed about his life, since the moment she left, and she on the other hand, gave him her undivided attention. At some point of the conversation, Shiva held his hand, which triggered the cascade of the emotional part of the conversation. J, who thought he was over her, opened up his heart, a process which ended by the two of them holding one another.

"I think you have a book for me," Shiva told him, and that's when I was a little pissed off, because instead of telling her the truth, J showed her my book, *my* novel.

Of course, after editing it to his liking, adding the unmistakable J touch, deleting the imperfections of my pen, it looked and smelled like a J novel. But the core, the backbone, the stink and the colors are still mine. Colors that painted Shiva's truth, the poisonous, liberating pearl she'd been carrying inside her for ages. But as far as I was concerned, it was out of my hands. I was after all, by the time they met, reported missing for six months.

A few weeks later, on all social media, news channels, news papers and magazines:

"Famous writer J returns with his Eleventh novel, *Ain Soph*, and a first official appearing."

It was Shiva's plan all along. She knew J wouldn't follow through with her agenda, but he was her designated writer since the beginning. I've been used. J on the other hand, went along with a lie. Not once did he mention it was factually my book. His need to prove himself to that woman triumphed over his code, over his convictions. In a way, I couldn't blame him. When a man's strings are tugged masterfully, he would dance irresistibly.

His eleventh book, titled '*Ain Soph*' was his yet biggest success. Even the sharpest of critics wrote "*Brilliant, sublime, marvelous!*" And with the help of a major ad campaign, the book was featured in every library in all corners of the world, translated to most languages. Even those who had never opened a book in their lives purchased it. No one wanted to miss out on this event, no one wanted to feel left out.

J's appearance on television, on social media, gained him hordes of fans. He was articulate, charismatic, smart and mysterious. When he spoke everybody listened. His words both concise and opaque, were interpreted and discussed, and soon also was his silence. What added to J's fame was the woman beside him. Ms. Siv was his partner, his companion, his shadow. Who is the beautiful woman beside J? What's the nature of their relationship? Naturally, dig as much as they wanted, they found nothing on Shiva. Thus the polemic cloud enshrouding them, the controversy, made them all the more famous.

The final count down began.

Ω

Events snowballed fast. Soon readers picked up on the hidden truth in the book. They knew it wasn't an ordinary scripture, and in no time, the internet was flooded with videos of zealous people trying to decipher the novel. Some with a knack of conspiracy theories, sensed the bizarre circumstances surrounding the forthcoming of his latest novel. Why did J suddenly decide to appear? Why is the style and content of this particular novel differs from his previous ones?

Does Siv has something to do with it? Is she the devil with whom he struck a bargain? Something didn't sound so right.

One particular content creator even managed to link me to the whole mess, a guy we met me and J on our road trip in Algiers—whose face slipped my memory had he not showed the selfie he took of the three of us—who also happened to be by an odd strike of luck at the same restaurant where Shiva and I dined for the first time. She was hard to forget, and so was the waitress who dropped dead before all the customers. He realized I was a common denominator between ‘Siv’ and J, and his suspicions were heightened when he learned, after studious research, that I was reported missing shortly before the appearance of the novel. Surely, no one believed the guy, but props to him, he got so close. I even intruded on one of his dreams to tell him he was right. Yeah, perks of the burgundy tuxedo.

Although it was smart for some governments to recognize the threat level of the novel, they made the oldest mistake in the book; they banned it, which lead to an inflammation of the situation. There is no bad publicity, and of course people would be all the more interested in a banned book. Not only was the book available in illegal websites, but even the hard copy had been smuggled inside those countries. And in no time, the novel spread in banned territories like fungus in a petri dish.

It is also interesting to mention that, after a long meeting, all three religions agreed to declare the novel Haram, Asur, Forbidden.

Things took a rather serious and dramatic turn after that.

Thirteen years later, after the birth of both a philosophical and artistic branches from the book, a cult emerged. *Jeyism*, and they called themselves the Jeyists. It started as a group of fans but slowly developed into a structured organization and later on they had their own manifesto and beliefs derived from the book. Their aim was to grow and spread their dogmas, centered around the conviction that a universal truth lays hidden in the book, and that J was some kind of a prophet. With Shiva pulling the strings behind the scene, they had managed to recruit some very wealthy men behind them. They had bought an island in the pacific and made it their headquarter, at the center of the island, the first Jeyism temple was erected, inside of which, priests in yellow robes roamed about. They weren't a secret organization. They were plain and public and honest about their aims. Their numbers grew quickly and so did their power and reach. They didn't sell themselves as a new religion, but more like a spiritual fan club. In no time, their schools and temples opened doors in each major city and flocks of people rushed in. Some were just curious, some were receptive, and most were new members.

At the centre of the temple, in a secret room beneath the ground, laid on wooden stands the first copy of Ain Soph, the jar of J's twins from Leila, the two pairs of baby shoes, the Miyabi black 8-inch Chef's knife and the black and white photo Stella took of me that day after the college party.

Once a year, people pilgrimaged to that island for a whole week, from the 25th of may till the first of June, the national day of Jeyism. A day chosen by J himself, for reasons unbeknownst to even his closest acolytes; but I knew. It was the day when he first met Shiva years ago in Stockholm. On that day, the pilgrims would meet J himself, and he would give a speech, after which the day would end with grandiose festivities. J didn't like any of it, but Shiva always persuaded him into it, “please, do it for me.”

On June the first of the fifth pilgrimage, right after J had given a historical speech, and before everyone on the island and the world, he dropped dead on the arms of Shiva, who stood just beside him. The following conversation ensued the night before: “I finished my twelfth and my last novel,” said J to Shiva. “I thought your eleventh was the last?” Said Shiva. “Despite its success, my heart never set right with it,” said he. Shiva remained silent. “I am going to

announce it the day after tomorrow," said J. "Sure, let's finish tomorrow's festivities first." The following morning, Shiva gave J a piece of paper and said, "can you give this speech instead?"

J, taking his last breath in Shiva's arms, heard the following words whispered in his ears, "Now you die, so your legend can live." Shiva knew that J's next novel would surely be less good. As great of a writer he might be, his next novel would be his fall of the apex she put him in, a pinnacle reaching to the stars. It would destroy everything she worked for. His theatrical death instead, would lift everything he represented to an even higher, mythological stand. It was clear what she had to do.

Ω

I had a lot of time on my hands, and more freedom than to know what do with.

So I went everywhere, and I watched. I watched everything, and everyone. I became the worldwide number one voyeur. But not in perverted way, because whatever sexual drive I had before, it is all gone now.

I thought I could manifest myself to some people like Mr. Dandy did, but it turned out, I could only do so when Shiva allowed it, and Shiva never addressed me even once since I became what I am today. She never even looked me in the eyes. I guess she just felt ashamed; and she should have.

Absurdly enough, Mr. Qalam became my only buddy. My 'would have been' father in law. We hanged out at his abode most of the time. He showed me the ins and outs of his trade, and he even allowed me to make some suggestions, throw in some of my ideas. He is a superb guy once you get to know him.

Dandy was right, once I got used to my new life, it wasn't that bad.

Lamis Lamperouge

Lamis Lamperouge, now a famous poet and the high priestess of Paris' Jeyism temple, sat at her desk in an attempt to scribble down some lines that rhyme, but her process was interrupted by the droplets of coffee spilled on her turtle neck yellow robe. Lamis stared at the still wet stain on her golden fabric, but she was neither seeing the stain nor bothered by it; her mind was lost elsewhere. Her cancer was cured, not an impossibility but still a medical miracle. After extraneous mental effort, she came to terms with the idea of dying. She accepted and expected it. Now that she was cured, Lamis felt an extreme aversion to life. She had now everything she once desired. Her ex husband had the sudden epiphany that he still loved her, and made the necessary effort to persuade her into marrying him again. She now lived with her beloved daughter, slept in the same bed as the man she loved, and reached the desired success as a poet. Yet, now that she lives, her daughter is no longer the sweet girl for whom she carried abundance of unconditional love, but rather an annoying teenager that, at times, made her regret ever becoming a mom. Her husband's touch, for which she longed during lonesome nights, now felt like lukewarm cobble stone. The special eyes through which she beheld the strangeness of life, the same eyes that transmuted sensations into poetry, now seem to suffer from sever spiritual myopia. She was amazed she ever saw anything magical to life before.

Lamis finally came to the conclusion that she had traded her life back with something crucial to her, something she didn't know existed until it vanished. She wiped out the stain of coffee and continued to stare at the blank page of her computer, trying to write, but to no avail.

Noah

Noah lead a rather boring life. Maybe a little unconventional, but still calm. He finished his P.hd dissertation, was hired by the same university as an assistant professor, and did research with a team that eventually became his friends and family. They all shared a knack for traveling, for adventure (like all humans do) and so, they'd seize each vacation to travel somewhere, starting with the surrounding German landscape, expanding to Europe, and within a few years, their photo album covered most of Asia's, Africa's and south America's major touristic spots. Well, maybe not so boring.

Noah never married, not because of his undying love to Lin, but for the simple reason that he met no one in particular that made him want to sign a pact before God and the government, although he lived with one woman from of his researchers' team for a couple of years, a fugitive Syrian, and had a girl with her. He named her Zelda.

Noah would, on rare occasions, wake up in the middle of the night screaming. His deleted genetics memories, which were once meant for me to acquire, would return, and flood his mind for partials of a second. For infinitesimal snippets of time, Noah would live all of humanity's experiences. He would scream from the top of his lungs, though right after, he would remember nothing of.

Seven years after Noah traveled to Germany, on one of his travelings to the south coast of France, in a little village near Montpellier, he met Lin, shopping at the town's supermarket. A chance encounter. Or maybe Qalam's doing. The day after, they met over coffee, and they talked for hours. "Isn't it getting late for you?" Noah asked. "It's okay, there's no one waiting for me at home. My husband is on a business trip," she said. "No kids?" he asked. "We decided not to have any," she answered. However, she lied. Lin was barren. Although her husband was a rational man, and understood it was in no way her fault, but never could she shake the shadow of reproach in his stare. Eventually, he suggested to adopt, to which Lin, for reasons still unclear to her, said no. After numerous arguments, some of which escalated to physical abuse, her husband gave up. The natural course of action would have been divorce, but he loved her a little too much. Lin's charm had worked his way into the innards of his soul. Try as he might, he couldn't let go of her. But the bitterness remained, and thus the infidelities began. Lin knew. She smelled the perfume of other women on his clothes, and saw the lies behind the excuses he made whenever he came home late, but she said nothing. She understood it was merely his own way to balance the unfairness she'd burdened him with. Other than that, she was a good wife. She stayed at home, cooked, cleaned, jogged, read her Japanese novels, and fulfilled her marital duties. Her heart however, remained in Algeria.

The next day, she invited Noah to her apartment. Dinner was served but not a spoon was touched. They plunged in each other's arms the moment the door closed and silence settled. Despite the years, their lips still danced in harmony, and the tip of their fingers remembered the bony tubercles and depressions of their bodies. Memories unlocked memories that unlocked buried coffers. Lin understood in that moment why she said no to adopting. Without knowing it, she left in Noah a tiny piece of her soul without which the whole couldn't naturally function. Now that she had it again, she felt an intense urge to be a mother, to hold a newborn in her arms

and watch him grow before her eyes. With each piece of clothing that fell off her body, a chapter of her unborn, unadopted child flashed before her eyes. His first day of school, his first judo match, his first girlfriend, his graduation, his car accident, his wedding, family dinners with her grand kids. She wanted it so badly that she started to shiver in Noah's arms. Noah on the other hand, sensing Lin's warmth, also understood why he never married. Like a lost roaming asteroid that finally found its orbit, Noah felt in orbit with Lin, and only with Lin. Thus, the two dreamed of a family, a home, a dinner table, as their bodies mingled and quavered.

However, they didn't have sex. Naked in bed, they held one another, like that night, many years ago, Lin and Noah never went all the way. They never spoke their hearts either. Midnight ticked away, and with it Noah said, "I should better leave."

He left, and they never saw each other again.

Stella

After Stella read J's novel, which was five years after its publication—she just kept putting it off—she called her agent and made it an imperative that she would get a face to face time with J. If it was anyone else, it would have been near impossible to meet J in person, but Stella wasn't anybody. Her agent tried many times, but he only succeeded when she relayed a special message to J, '*Why does it say J on the cover and not Razi?*' Shortly after, a rendezvous was set up, and the location took Stella by surprise.

At the MadBuddha, they had dinner.

"Why here?" she asked.

"I am the owner." It was then that it all made sense to her. The connection between me and J. She saw me there before.

"Can I order a special song?" At her request, *Stella by Starlight* started playing, which took *me* by surprise. It was the song that played the day Stella and I first met, right at the exact table they then dined. Did she remember? "I feel especially nostalgic to a certain boy tonight, I don't know why," she said. Everyone in the room furtively stared at them, some made the leap of faith and asked for selfies. Some came for Stella, others for J, and most, for both of them.

"Why did you steal Razi's novel? And where is he?" She asked.

"Are you the girl Razi showed his writings to?" J asked.

"Sometimes he did, yes."

"Huh.. Did you know he wrote this novel to impress you?"

Stella absorbed J's words into the mud of her soul. She said nothing for a while.

"Did you steal it to impress someone else?"

"I guess I did," J said. "I am ashamed. I wish I never did it. You know how one mistake could ruin everything you are? It's unfair, but now it's too late. I can't undo what I did. And I don't know the whereabouts of Razi. I don't know why he disappeared, or whether he's alive or dead. It's been five years now."

The bastard is now playing the victim. I hope it was all worth it. Shiva never told him the possible consequences of his act. And he'll die before witnessing it all.

On her journey around Africa, Stella realized she wasn't the only good photographer out there. As a matter of fact, there were many much more talented, and she was but an amateur among them. The competition wasn't easy, nevertheless she enjoyed the thrill of it anyway. However, along the way, something unexpected happened, when the head of their team, another photographer who was in his own world somewhat of a hot-shot, caught a glimpse of Stella without her Liquette. Naturally and immediately, he was flabbergasted by her thigh gap. His photographer's reflex enabled him to catch that moment, that image, Stella, in that short instant when she took off her Liquette during a field trip in Cameron because she thought a bug had

slipped inside. Her life changed forever.

Despite her steadfast refusal, that photographer published her photo anyway. Some self-absorbed prick who doesn't take no for an answer. Stella was furious but she couldn't press charges in the middle of the trip. Her heart and her opinion however mellowed gradually when she witnessed the feedback of that one single photo. In just the first month, five modeling agencies and several professional photographers tried to reach her. Eventually, Stella gave in to the temptation. The fame, the money, the trips, the contacts. In a matter of few years, she became a Vedette. What she had was, after all, the mythical legacy of Qalam and Semiramis. She went by the Alias name '*Stella*'.

The price she had to pay though, no body heeded attention to her work. Try as she might, she was the art, she was the object of the photo, she was the center of attention. All the objects, scenes, people she photographed, and despite their unique style and artistic value, waned in comparison with her own silhouette. She murdered all her work.

"I have no proof to back my claim, but I can promise you this, I will tell the world about your lie someday. I have nothing against you in person, but I owe it to Razi. And I don't care if no one believes me," she said to J.

"You do your thing young lady, I deserve it," said J. They shook hands, and parted ways.

Ironically, she married Jack. Well, to be fair, he did find himself eventually. He always played the guitar, and I still think his guitar playing skills are nothing to brag about, but he was somewhat of a good speaker, and through some error and trial and a little bit of good luck, he managed to find his place in the vast universe. He became a public speaker, motivational one, mind you. '*Never give up! The calling you feel in your heart is there for a reason! God created you for a reason!*' If you only knew buddy. He also set up his own company for training speakers, and it did very well. You'd be amazed by the number of people who want to motivate instead of being motivated, who want to speak instead of listen. Me personally, I'd rather pay for a knitting class. But again, you could say the same thing about writing. Either way, the world needs more ears and less tongues, more readers and less writers.

They settled in Bone, had two kids, and lived quietly. Stella created her own culture magazine, '*Zeitgeist*' for aspiring photographers and short story tellers. It featured mainly that, photos and short stories. It started slow but eventually gained a number of subscribers, enough to sustain itself.

Her first print featured my short stories I had once written for her. About the couple lost in an uncharted island. About the guy who was bad at fishing and the girl who liked to discuss the nature of morals, on empty stomachs.

Stella never told Jack about me.

Red

Red and blue grew up to be two fine women.

Red became a dentist, married a dentist, and loved a dentist; only, not the same dentist. In a nutshell, the dentist she loved was an atheist, and she, who adopted the ‘Ikhwan’ (Muslim brothers) doctrine, could not marry an atheist. So she married his friend, the theist dentist, who had his own dentist office and who loved and treated her well. She too, eventually, had developed stable and warm feelings for him, and never failed to perform as a wife. However, Red, who on the outside wore the gown of religion, was a disciple of love. She who read the Koran but also read Honoré de Balzac and Mary Shelly, who watched the ‘*Before*’ trilogy three times, and who listened to Charles Aznavour albums, always felt the cravings of love. That one true love, that one timeless connection, she always dreamed of as a child. What tortured her at night, is that she felt it with the godless dentist. She knew it was it. ‘*this is it*’ she thought, once when she was with him.

Red, who chose God over love, prayed for one thing only: to make her feel for her husband what she felt for his once friend. Only then, will she be truly happy. She prayed everyday, and surely, after long enough, her prayers came true. She focused on her work between the hospital and the university, she focused on her three kids, on her husband, and on her new found hobby, cooking. Before she knew it, the seed of her husband (not that seed) blossomed into an exotic green flower in her heart. One day she woke up to realize, “I love him.” That day, she felt merrier than ever, and that night, she made love to her husband like never before.

When she rejected him, he disappeared. She only heard rumors about him from friends. He works in the desert. He works in Oran. He’s married. He’s in France. But they were all only rumors. True, whenever his name came up, she’d feel her heart skip a beat, or at least a P onde. But like waves washing away words written on the sand, that sensation soon fades only to leave behind the quietness, gentleness, reassurance of her new found feelings for her husband. And she’d smile.

They well all rumors, she never knew where he truly were, until she met him at a dentists’ convention in Tunisia.

During the whole weekend, they never left her hotel room.

Blue

Blue became a journalist—She *dropped out* of med school to pursue journalism. That's when she and her twin sister parted ways; ultimately, also, kind of, disappointed her parents. Blue turned up somewhat of a rebellious. She craved experience, adventure, danger. She believed Journalism would swing her into the world she desired. To travel, to meet interesting people, and to cover wild stories. Her father had connections, she had a beautiful pen, and she was attractive. Finding a job at a big newspaper company wasn't that challenging. However, she was, ultimately, also, kind of, disappointed. The salary was good alright, her coworkers were nice and she had six weeks of holidays, but, for Blue, something was lacking. The stories she covered were flat. The people she interviewed—according to her own opinion—didn't deserve a single line of press, and she could never publish anything that didn't serve the political agenda of the newspaper. After two years, she quit.

Her life changed when she applied for a vacant reporter position at the 'Zeitgeist'. Mainly because of the job, but also because she met Stella. Blue was instantly smitten by her, enamored, enraptured even. Immediately she knew, that's the woman she wanted to become. Classy, accomplished, kind, with a mysterious element. With a zest, a panache, the 'je ne sais quoi' something. "This is mainly a photography and short stories magazine, but I am planning on adding a new *people's* section. I want to shed light on North African youth around the world, mainly Algerian youth. Artists, scientists, athletes, or anyone with a story worth telling. So I need someone who's free, and who can move. Do you have passport?" Blue's pupils dilated, her answer was, "Yes, yes and yes."

Blue soon became her right hand, her shadow. She was available, motivated, and Stella needed someone she could trust. They traveled together, ate together, and made money together. Swiftly and naturally, they became close friends. Blue was grateful for Stella. She gave her more than she deserved. She felt grateful, and euphorically free. Unlike her family, Stella never asked her, "why aren't you married yet?" Blue could never bring herself to tell them, "I like women." And even if Stella asked her, she would still lie, because she couldn't tell her, "I am deeply in love with you." Blue never expected anything remotely romantic from Stella. She was careful not to ruin anything they had. However, the nights where they shared hotel rooms during their travels--mostly in separate beds, but sometimes not--were the hardest on Blue. She never slept on those nights. The thought of Stella sleeping next to her, breathing slowly, so defenseless, so beautiful, sent her heart racing. On countless occasions, Blue almost risked it all. If I kiss her, just once, then I don't care what happens next. The sheer strain of not giving in to those impulses exhausted her beyond anything she knew. But despite the torture, Blue would exchange those nights for nothing.

One moonlit and quiet night, Blue and Stella slept in separate beds in one of Istanbul's hotels. Stella had a shooting session for a prominent Turkish magazine, and Blue were to interview a young Algerian who made it into the Turkish cinema. Blue as usually, couldn't sleep. From her bed, in the middle of the night, she studied the silhouette of Stella with dreamy voluptuous eyes. If only she could silently join Stella, get under her bed sheets, and hold her in her arms. Ideas cannonballed in her head, until suddenly, Stella woke up.

Blue feigned sleep, but she watched her with eyes half open. Stella sat at the edge of her bed for a while. Did she have a bad dream? Elbows on knees, she covered her face with her hands. Then, she stood up, walked towards Blue's bed, and gently, lifted the sheets, and joined her. Blue's heart palpitated like drums of war. She didn't know what to do. Her body stiffened. Stella wrapped her thin arms around Blue and buried her face in her neck.

It took blue a moment to realize that Stella was weeping.

"I remember," Stella whispered. *"I remember everything. I am so glad."*

THE END OF THE WORLD AND WHAT-NOT

Thirty seven years had passed since the release of J's novel. By then, everybody knew.

Why watch it alone when you could have company.

In my own room at the chasm of what is known and unknown, I'd set up six chairs facing the window overlooking the known world. In between, a low table serving the finest of drinks and cuisines. On the record player, I played *Twisted Sister-The Price*. It seemed the right song.

I took my seat.

The first guest arrives, my buddy, Mr. Qalam. "*I brought Quiche*," he says. "Of course you did," I go. And he takes his seat.

The second guest arrives. Stella looks around, skims the room, confused, then looks at me.

"Don't think much about it, this is but a dream, come sit," I tell her. She says nothing, and sits between me and her father, Qalam.

The third guest, Noah, also looks around, his eyes flat. "Is this a dream?" He asks. "Yes, yes, it is. Sit your ass down, the show's about to begin," I go.

The fourth guest enters and immediately, upon seeing me, falls on his knees and looks to the ground, "I am very sorry. What I did was unforgivable," says J. "To err is human, to forgive is divine, and right now, we're neither human nor divine, so, just forget about it, sensei, let's just enjoy the show." He takes a seat.

The last guest arrives just on time. The ruthless of all Vandals. Shiva and I only share a glance, a tacit accomplice smile, and a nod of head. We put our differences behind. After all, does it matter now?

She takes a seat, yellow and glamorous as ever.

When the clock stroke midnight in Bone on new year's eve, the night sky started to turn white. At first, only shades of gray, but it kept getting brighter and brighter. In Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Cape Town and in every city on the globe, people looked up.

The sky kept getting shinier, glossier, more vivid, until it became white. The whitest white you could imagine. The quintessence of white.

People kept looking up.

Qalam heaved a sigh of relief.

J understood.

Noah remembered, again.

Brighter and brighter it became.

A bucket of light spilled over the world

Stella pressed on my hand.

Shiva wept.

Light flooded the All, and the All was no more.

Sort of.

I:Now what?

GOD:Now I dream again.

I:A better dream?

GOD:A different dream.

The End.

About the author:

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