



**CHOCHANA BOUKHOBZA**

**FOR THE LOVE OF THE  
FATHER**

ORIGINAL TITLE: POUR L'AMOUR DU PÈRE  
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Cover art: “Femmes Ghardaia” by Jules Lellouche  
Book design: Zanefa Walsh  
Published with the support of: Dr. Phyllis Hammer

The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA  
2016

## About the Author



Born in Sfax, Tunisia in 1959, speaking Arabic and Hebrew as a child, Chochana Boukhobza immigrated to France in 1964 with her family as most of the Tunisian Jewish community was uprooted. She moved to Israel as a teen to study mathematics and physics in Jerusalem, a period that has greatly influenced her writing. Upon her return to France she worked in radio, television and press as a journalist, and she has written several screenplays. Speaking of how her writing is influenced by memories of her childhood in Tunisia and its abrupt end, Boukhobza has said: “I don’t know how to tell you about that. I can’t. It’s erased...I don’t know if I write in order to remember, or if I write to create my own memories.”<sup>1</sup> Her many novels are critically acclaimed, and although none of her books are announced as autobiographic, they include autobiographical elements that engender searching and a coming to terms with loss, exile and survival in narratives that question the effects of memory in family relations and identity.

Several of her novels present mysteries that bring the characters

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<sup>1</sup> In *Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane*, ed. L. Sebbar, Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule, 2012, 81.

on internal or actual journeys, as they search for answers to questions left behind or raised by enigmatic figures. Boukhobza has alluded to her inclination for invoking searches for sources and answers as perhaps stemming from the fact that her grandfather, a rabbi, *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) and scribe in Tunisia, was the author of several manuscripts stored away somewhere unknown in Israel. In her family's heritage there is thus a hidden and forgotten voice to which she has no access but which represents a literal witness to the link of her family's Jewish past in the North Africa

About her North African Jewish heritage and identity, Boukhobza has said: "Strange people, really, my people, torn between a lost homeland, a country in which to live, get married and work; and a promised land. Strange people squeezed between the past, the present, and prophesy."<sup>2</sup>

A prolific writer she is the author of many novels. The first, *Un Été à Jérusalem* (1986) received the prestigious Prix Méditerranée, and the second, *Le Cri* (1987) was a finalist for the Prix Fémina. Her other works are *Les Herbes amères* (1989), *Bel Canto* (1991), *Pour l'Amour du père* (1996), which is now translated into English, *Sous les Etoiles* (2002), *Quand le Bible rêve* (2005) an illustrated children's book, *Le Troisième Jour* (2010), which received the Prix Wizo, and is translated to English and Italian. *Fureur* (2012) received the Prix Landerneau Découvertes, *Métal* (2013) and *HK* (2015). She has also written and directed two documentaries: *Un billet aller-retour* (2005) about the connections of French Jews to Israel, and most recently *Les petits héros du ghetto de Varsovie* (2013) about the Jewish children who survived the war in the Warsaw ghetto selling cigarettes and trinkets to Poles and Germans by sneaking through to the Aryan side.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 85.

## Introduction

*For the Love of the Father* is about the effect of exile on a Jewish family from Tunisia as they immigrate to Paris, France. It is a gripping novel that tells a story at once intimate and universal. It is universal in that it narrates the traumatic experience of displacement and of the challenges of resettlement in a new country, shared historically by many people, and in postcolonial times especially. In Boukhobza's novel, the Saada clan represents but one family of the nearly 500,000 Jews who were uprooted from their native countries of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco in the 1950's and 60's; many of these families had roots there going back to before the Arab conquest in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. As many as 235,000 settled in France in this period; and with their identities and stories deeply anchored in their North African and Judeo-Arabic cultural heritage, a unique character and flavor was added to the multicultural immigrant narratives to flourish in France in the late 1900's.

The Jewish immigrants from North Africa brought with them a *joie de vivre* that altered the face of French Jewry, since they did not come from a culture that had historically devalued their Jewishness the way many Ashkenazi Jews had experienced through the centuries in Europe. Also, less devastated by the horrors of the Holocaust, they infused the French Jewish scene with a new and much needed vitality.

It is through the eyes of Alice, the youngest of five siblings, now a 38-year old single woman and successful defense lawyer in Paris, that we are given a close look into a family ravaged by loss: first that of their mother Chachïa, who dies just months before their dramatic departure from Tunisia, when Alice is only 8 years old; followed by the loss of their native country, and finally the loss of Sassou, the sister who as a young woman runs away

from home. However, the most crucial loss endured by all the Saadas is perhaps that of each other, since they spiral deeper into silence, estrangement and loneliness as they try to grapple with the many challenges of their life in France. Looming over the family conscience is the fear and compulsion of finding out what has happened to Sassou, and Alice has to decide if she can liberate herself from her family's painful past and recover her traumatic childhood memory, without renouncing the love of her father. We follow this independent and strong, yet vulnerable woman as she seeks to understand herself and her own fears, while confronting as well as consoling and seeking consolation *and* answers from her lovers, friends and family.

Today, France is home to the largest Jewish and Muslim populations living side by side outside of Israel, with approximately 4-6 million Muslims and 5-600,000 Jews. Sometimes they have co-existed quite well in various neighborhoods, within schools, shops, restaurants and cafes; other times it has been tense, complicated and, as we know too well, violent. This waxing and waning has been deeply affected by a complex set of catalysts: among them the baggage from the colonial era, the arduous process of decolonization, social inequality in France, and of course by events in the Middle East as they radiate out into the world and are adopted as personal battles by disenfranchised Muslim youth as well as by French Jews in their support of Israel as a Jewish homeland. In light of the current tensions among Jews and Muslims in France specifically, and in the Middle East and worldwide generally, the fact that many French Jews, like those depicted in Boukhobza's novel, share significant life experiences with their Muslim compatriots only lends further weight to the timeliness and relevance of such literary manifestations.

In the works of Jewish writers like Boukhobza, we see how the Arab-Jewish relations are not easily severed. In this novel one of Alice's lovers is an Arab, and in an intimate moment it's Arabic, the

language she grew up with, that slips from her mouth. Boukhobza and her contemporaries help shape current debates about French national and cultural identity, and about what is specifically Jewish as well. Works like hers invite discussions about the shared history and culture of people otherwise depicted as carriers of mutually exclusive and divergent histories.

Scholar, critic and translator Ammiel Alkalay has said that the texts of Jewish writers from North Africa and the Middle East are like messages in a bottle, waiting to be discovered and understood. It was during my doctoral research that many such bottles – filled with beautiful stories written by francophone Jewish women born in North Africa – drifted onto my shore. These authors contribute to a reimagining, a redefining of what it means, not only to be French and a French writer, but also a French Jewish woman writer of North African origins. With the translation of Boukhobza's moving novel, I hope English language readers will realize the gems to be mined in the vast body of Sephardic/Mizrahi Jewish literature yet to be translated.

This translation was made possible by a generous grant from the Hadassah Brandeis Institute, and I am most grateful to the HBI for their continued support and inspiration.

Nina B. Lichtenstein  
January 2016



*Pictured: Nina B. Lichtenstein (l) with Chochana Boukhobza (r)*

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# Chapter 1

One day, when Alice was still a child, her father said to her: “If luck is not with you, then nothing that you undertake will succeed. But if you have luck, it’s because God has blessed you!”

Throughout the years, her father repeated this phrase about luck. He wouldn’t give it up. For him, wealth, love, happiness were all a question of luck, as was power. He used to say that a prince could become a pauper and a pauper could rise to a level of a prince, that God could make and unmake kingdoms, fill the wombs of women or keep them sterile. He said that beauty does not save you from loneliness.

For a long time, Alice believed her father. Until the age of twelve she never questioned what he said. Her father was in the league of the prophets: he knew everything.

But one evening when he came home from work in his threadbare leather jacket, his tool belt slung across his shoulder, she seemed to be seeing a different man. Since then, she never forgot that silhouette coming down the courtyard of the apartment building, his head a bit lowered, his body stooped over.

It was as if she had let go of her innocent illusion. She looked at this man as one looks upon a stranger, with harshness. He seemed worn out, his hair covered with lime dust. Deep in his own thoughts he didn’t even notice her as he passed through the courtyard. He was eager to put down his tools and sit down at the table. Since they moved to France, the father accepts all the work he is offered. He does not say that he is a plumber but affirms that he knows how to do it all, plasterer, mason, roofer; he listens to the men of the trade; he learns the gesture, the technique; he defends himself. He exhausts himself.

He was about two or three meters from his door when he saw the child. He stopped. He called her: “Alice! Alice!” Alice didn’t

move. He repeated himself, thinking it was a game: "Alice, my dear!" So, she scampered toward him reluctantly. She let her father kiss her on her forehead, caress her neck. His hand was frozen and rough from not wearing gloves. She went inside with him. He had not yet figured it out. He had not understood that he had just lost his power.

A long period of silence was about to begin between them.

For Alice, this silence is like the sky in Paris. It has its color and texture. The gray air of the city hovers over the house, winter and summer. The years pass and it's still gray. The weather is always dreary. Her father just can't recover from Tunisia. He spends his time comparing. He compares the savor of the fruits he ate back there with those he buys at the Clichy market. He says that in the sun life was easier, that it had taste and that poverty was easier to bear. In Paris, he says over and over, anyone who lacks anything is in distress. The city is too big, a person has no neighbor and life is hard. He says France is a country where old people live alone without their children. He says in this country young people dump their parents in old age homes. He says that he's afraid of the future. He doesn't say that he fears that his five children will abandon him, but it's as if that's what he cried out to them.

*Ana barani.* I am a stranger.

When father speaks, his words are stifling.

Because of father's words, Alice never had a childhood. Long after her childhood had passed, she came to understand that she never had one. Very soon she wanted to die to escape the pain. But then there was this mystery about luck. How could one know that luck was with you? How could one know that one was blessed?

"Live, and you'll see!" the father had answered.

Now, Alice lives in an apartment near the Luxembourg gardens; she even owns it. The apartment consists of four rooms,

a bathroom, a kitchen, closets everywhere. The windows look out over the garden. You can see the sky from all the rooms.

The apartment is furnished with rugs, vases, bronze sculptures. When her father comes to see her, he remains intimidated despite Alice's efforts to make him feel comfortable. He waits, standing until she says: "Here, dad, sit down." She puts her arm around him and directs him toward a comfortable armchair. He says: "Thanks, dear" and he sits at the edge of the chair. He doesn't sit in the chair; he doesn't lean against the back; he doesn't cross his legs one over the other. He is on the defensive.

Seated like this, he seems small, more fragile than when standing. Alice knows what her father is thinking about, in spite of himself, every time he sees her. He thinks that she's alone. She doesn't have children and she doesn't live with a man. He thinks that, in a certain way, all this luxury has created her unhappiness

He feels bad for her.

He never stays long. Only about half an hour.

She serves him a beer, his favorite drink. He looks secretly at the label of the bottle. "It's cold!" he says as he takes the first swig. He hasn't worked for the last ten years. His clothes are clean, a scarf protects his neck, but his face and his nails have kept the thin layer of lime and cement he used to bring with him when he came home in the evening. The wrinkles in his face are deep. His hands are deformed. He hides them as best he can. He is ashamed of them.

He drinks his beer in silence.

Alice asks him if he has won anything at the racetrack this week. Yes, he says, a hundred and fifty francs. She says happily: "That's great!" He agrees: "I've caught up on my losses." They become quiet. A strange emotion grips them. What they say has nothing to do with their feelings. To fight against the silence she asks: "You gambled away the money?" He nods, but is clearly thinking about something else.

Finally he asks: "Why are you so sad?"

- No, listen, really...

He looks at her, his eyes filled with doubt.

“When you were little you almost never smiled.

- I know...

- You are a woman now and you still don't know how to smile!

Is it my fault?

- No.”

They are silent. He looks at the small objects in stone, in mother-of-pearl or in ivory, scattered on the low coffee table.

“Whose fault is it then? the father continues.

- I don't know.

- I'm old now he says stubbornly. I can take anything.

- Dad!

- I know well that it's too late, nothing can be repaired. My daughters are women. And I have come to the end of my life.”

The conversation makes Alice uncomfortable. She looks at her father's feet, lined up neatly next to each other, then she looks at his hair turned white with age. What does he want, she asks herself. Why does he ask all these questions?

Suddenly, the father stretches out his hand and grabs a trinket, an owl or a cat, Alice couldn't see which one.

“I wasn't able to buy you toys, he mumbled, in a hoarse voice. If you only know how badly I feel about it...

- Dad!”

He clenches his teeth. He says that she was his last little one, that he would have loved to spoil her, but that the money melted away as soon as he received it, too many things to pay for, the rent, the food, clothing.

“You were wonderful!

- Not enough. Not enough.” he says looking at the object of stone warming up in his hands.

So Alice says in a soft voice: “Do you remember the doll you won for me at the lottery?” The father lifts his head, his look fills

with light. He laughs. “She was almost as big as me!” adds Alice. She describes the lottery booth to him where he had won it at the Porte de Clichy. On the shelves there were stuffed animals, tin soldiers, and then there was her – the grand prize – standing up with a straw hat, a dress in pink silk, shoes in plastic. The father is still laughing. He loves that Alice speaks to him about this doll. They remember the discomfort of the stallholder, his anger. “Poor guy! I ruined his day!” he said shaking his head.

Alice goes into her room and brings back the doll. The pink petticoat is ripped, the hat lost and she’s missing an eye. The father squints, content.

When he’s done with his beer, he gets up.

Alice offers to put him up; there are so many empty rooms in the apartment, he wouldn’t disturb her. Why would he go across town? One night, what’s one night?

He smiles. It’s no, definitively. Within seconds Alice again recognizes that quiet determination, obstinate and imperious, which had subdued her sisters and her brother. The straight hair, the pointy chin, his look screened by his eyelids, this too is the father’s face. Once he has made up his mind, it is rare that he would yield. Sassou was the only one of the five who knew how to convince him. But Alice still dares to, her voice a bit low: “Take a taxi.”

He sticks out his chest. “A taxi?” he says, surprised, as he starts to move down the hallway. He is in front of the door when he shoots out with a sarcastic tone:

“Are you afraid that I’ll be attacked on the metro?”

The father left, but he has left a feeling of disaster behind him, of kindness and harshness. Alice goes from the living room to the kitchen without being able to calm down. She throws the owl in the trash, rinses the glasses. The doll is back in its place in the back of a closet. The doll needs darkness like certain memories that one is afraid to awaken.

The mess is quickly picked up. In a few minutes the traces of the visitor are erased. Nevertheless, the father seems to still be sitting in the armchair to the right, in the twilight of the room. How he laughed when she talked to him about the doll! How his eyes became bright. Alice could hear his laughter and she stiffened up, her heart touched. With her eyes closed, she tries to master the pain, or at least to reduce it. She doesn't just feel badly about her childhood, but about her whole life. She sees his smile again, his gait. She thinks again about his questions about her sadness, about the toys he didn't know how to offer, the comfort he didn't give. If he had accepted the invitation to stay over that night, maybe they could have been able to have a heart to heart. Alice is certain they would have ended up talking about Sassou.

Sassou!

Immediately, Alice shrugs. The father has not mentioned her name in twenty-five years. Sassou is dead to him. She does not exist anymore. The father could not imagine the imperceptible fracture that was created in Alice's soul the day he chased away her sister. She sees her, delicate and slender in her blue-turquoise dress, hair down, eyes distraught. She was alone in front of the group that they formed, Juliette, Robert, Edmée, her father and her. This image of Sassou has frozen in time. Sassou is older, she must be happy but Alice has never managed to forget that moment when her sister begged for the help that no one gave her. Alice was thirteen. Her input would not have counted. But maybe yes, after all, possibly the father would have kept Sassou if Alice had thrown herself in her arms.

Repressing the vision, Alice tells herself it was good in the end that her father left; the delicate balance which rules the family is thus maintained. Twenty-five new years of silence can sink back into her heart.

"The one I have become..." Alice murmurs, pensively.

She walks around in the living room trying to be reasonable.

She picks up the phone. Béatrice will know how to distract her from her sadness but she hangs up after having dialed the first few digits. To each his own problems.

She puts on a raincoat and goes out.

She immediately regrets having gone out once she is outside. The Boulevard Saint-Michel is full of tourists and students, she can't take it anymore. Everywhere there are couples walking arm in arm, talking. It's barely eight o'clock in the evening.

Someone grabs her arm. She turns around and recognizes Antoine Charlin. He seems happy to see her. Charlin, looking Christ-like with his too long hair, his beard, his jean jacket, tells her he just got back from Milan. He has spent three months there photographing workers in factories. He says he's happy to be back and he talks about the light in Paris which is softer, more tender on the faces of people. Alice smiles. Charlin hasn't changed. He loves to express himself in a sort of gibberish poetry, difficult to follow and exhausting to the listener. Usually, Alice rushes him a little, but not tonight. By appearing in the crowd, Charlin has distracted her from her pain.

When Charlin stops talking, Alice says that she knows only the South of Italy; she has crossed only through the North on the highway. Too bad, says Antoine, the North is a phantasm of the South. Alice laughs, because she doesn't understand that sentence. That means nothing, she says gently, and the photographer, slightly irritated, starts a fiery explanation of Italy, part political, part social. His words are confused, but she lets him speak. Charlin could have said anything and she would still have listened to him with great interest.

"I read your article yesterday in *Le Monde*, Charlin concluded, agitated. You're right...the reasoning of humans is incompatible with that of politicians."

More than ten minute pass as they stand talking in the middle of the sidewalk. Antoine stops a man who is passing by. A

handshake. Charlin turns toward Alice.

“Pascal Deslandes. A friend I never see, except in the street!”

A regular face lined by a mustache, brown hair, an arrogant smile. The man seems to be making fun; she is bothered and starts to slip away.

“If you need a lawyer, contact Alice Saada. She is awesome!” continues Charlin.

- I know! says Deslandes.

- You’re really famous! says Charlin, his mouth tugged by a tic. Not like me, who is hardly known.

- Oh c’mon, says Deslandes politely.

- No, really, exclaims Charlin, I wouldn’t have such a difficult time finding a place for my photos.”

And he starts to talk about his trip to Italy again, the man and Alice are quiet. Now and again their eyes meet. Alice looks away each time. She is waiting for Charlin to be quiet before she leaves.

“You know his work?” asks Deslandes, in order to contain the stream of the photographer.

Alice jumps.

“Yes!” she says. She avoids specifying that she has seen only about ten of the photos from an article Charlin had done on prisons.

Charlin turns serious. He looks at Alice, Alice looks at the traffic in the street. The sky has become blue, it’s starting to get dark, and the air has the transparency of crystal.

“What are you thinking about?”

Alice wants to answer, “it’s curious.” It’s the only adjective that comes to mind to describe these photos, but she’s afraid to hurt the photographer’s feelings, so she settles on a nod.

For Charlin this movement was enough, and he resumes his chatter. He moves his arms and talks. Alice and the man smile at one another. All of a sudden they are very close, as if this smile had connected them.



Alice excuses herself. She says that people are waiting for her. She adds that she'd love to see the photos of Milan, and that Charlin should call her if he would like. Moved, Antoine Charlin kisses her. Pascal Deslandes makes a move that Alice cuts short by extending her hand.

When she leaves, what remains from this touch is like a burst of light before her eyes, which delights and overwhelms her.

## Chapter 2

She makes her way through the crowd. She knows that he is following her, that he'll end up stopping her. She read it in his eyes when she went to shake his hand goodbye. She feels inclined to stop and wait for him. To explain to him in three brief words that the past is dead, and that she wants none of it. Her eyes fixed toward the sky, she prepares her words, scathing words, without slowing down the pace, fleeing the man she imagines behind her. Meeting him is as if she had seen Philippe again. It puts her heart in the same state, if not worse. Why worse, she asks herself, barely avoiding a car. Angry honking. A fist appears from the window, a scream calls out, "Bloody bitch!": her eyes are fuzzy, her ears too. That's it, worse, she tells herself as she follows the flow of people crossing the pavement. She was already down because of her father who didn't want to spend the night, and because of Sassou whom the father did not speak of anymore: Sassou who is her obsession. Worse, worse, she repeats to herself, randomly fixating on a woman's silhouette, a moustache, at times the contours of a face. Maybe Pascal Deslandes will give up on the way? Perhaps she is mistaken, that he's not following her. Actually, she would like it if he met up with her. From the day Philippe had brought him along, she did not trust him, nor he her. They never got along, spoke little and always with irony. Philippe calmed down the mockery with a brisk voice when their sarcasms threatened to turn things sour.

After Rostand Square, it all of a sudden gets darker. The street is quiet, deserted until the intersection. She listens, tries to pick up the sound of a step, but doesn't dare to turn around to check. Ten more meters. She enters the code to her building when she feels a hand on her shoulder.

"Good evening, Alice!"

Her intuition had not betrayed her. She turns her head, tries to

seem casual. They look at each other, manage to smile.

“You haven’t changed.

- Neither have you!”

It’s crazy, she thinks, how one can say such banalities while the heart is pounding. In the dim light he seems calm, imposing. He pushes away the lock of hair brushing her forehead, and for a split second Alice thinks he will take her in his arms and kiss her. When she lived with Philippe, she felt this electricity that circulated between them. But Philippe kept an eye on them and the feeling subsided. Months after their break-up she knew that Philippe and Pascal had shared women; a friend had told her.

“Excuse me,” she says, her voice back to normal, “I have to get up early tomorrow.”

- I’m happy I met you again!

- Me too.”

He laughs.

“It’s not true, but that’s ok...”

- Yeah, yeah...”

She doesn’t know what she is saying anymore. Her fingers run over the keypad with panic. She has lost the code; this damned door will stay locked. He watches her try the number three times. The green light finally blinks.

“Let’s have dinner together one night this week.

- I’m not available.

- So, let’s have lunch.

- I can’t.”

His eyes shine.

“Say that you don’t want to!”

He comes closer, helps her to hold the door ajar, blocking the opening with his arm. He is so close to her she can smell his cologne.

“I have things to tell you,” he says. “It’s urgent”

- We haven’t seen each other for two years...and you have

something urgent to tell me. It's incredible!"

He laughs with a nonchalant movement.

"Before, there was Philippe and all your drama. Time has passed, life has healed certain wounds and...

- Not for me...Sorry."

He nods several times. He's enjoying himself, Alice is sure of it. Suddenly he touches her cheek with a finger.

"You are a real pain in the ass."

Soon after, he is far away; a silhouette moving toward the noise and the light of the square.

She doesn't think about going home anymore. She simply looks at the gate of the Luxembourg garden, the heavy shapes of the trees, there is a sensation of a weight killing her shoulder.

The door.

She has sat down in the living room in the moonlight shining through the curtains. She has put a record on the record player. Fado. Amalia Rodriguez. Then she poured herself a light whiskey. Any stronger dose of alcohol would have doubtlessly made her sleepy, but she doesn't want to sleep, just relax and try to understand where this excitement comes from.

It's been a long time since she has felt like this. Two years, an eternity. Since she aborted Philippe's child, she has let time carry her along. It was easy. Work, family obligations, the father. She was pulled from all sides, everybody's prisoner. Nobody noticed that she wasn't doing well, that she talked, ate, slept like someone hallucinating. She was still standing, that was enough. A success at the court house, an informant whose sentence she managed to reduce or keep from going to jail, and she was pumped up for another week. Her life made sense then. What did it matter if she still slept alone or on a pile of folders tall as a tower, or didn't sleep at all. Philippe had taken away her desire to love. Sometimes, a lover would help her get through the night. When he called back,

she would refuse to see him again.

“A pain in the ass...”

Her glass is empty. She does not have the strength to get up to fill it. She feels like she is heading full speed toward a wall, toward the hoarse voice of Amalia, intimate and close like that of a sister.

## Chapter 3

The woman has a tired face. Alice listens to her in a sort of a fog. She hasn't slept more than a couple of hours in the morning on the sofa in the living room. Her neck and her head hurt. But with the cynicism of a lawyer accustomed to interrogating, she continues to extract snippets of truth from her client.

"I have committed forgeries... We were living in a whirlwind... We always needed more money... the car, the apartment, the children's private school... I learned how to manipulate my book-keeping... then to speculate in the stock market... I wasn't lucky with my investments.

- I understand." says Alice, who is only thinking about a coffee.

The woman throws her a grateful look, lowers her head.

"Do I risk going to jail?"

- Forgery and using false papers..., says Alice with a sigh. It's defensible... The court will give you six months to a year with deferment.

- A year! the woman cries out. I am a mother... They can't lock me up. They can't!"

She hides her face in her hands.

"It's a possibility, not definite... And you are not judged yet..."

Alice gets up, the woman also. Her eyes are full of tears.

"I am not a thief... the taxes and social security contributions... it was a game, you understand?"

- Yes! says Alice as she walks her out. Be confident.

- There are people who burn their stocks to get the insurance premium... Those who stage a bankruptcy..."

Alice keeps silent. She looks at the woman who does not move from the threshold despite the open door. The one

hour appointment was not enough for her. She has suddenly understood the force of the law, its relentlessness. To what point can she count on help from Alice?

“We don’t have any savings...The revenue service will seize our apartment, right? Will we be forced to sell the store?”

- I don’t have all the details. I will call you in a week’s time!” says Alice with an

impatient gesture. But as soon as she smiles, the woman doesn’t want to see anything else but the smile.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Durell.”

The noise of a stamper sounds in the stairwell. The breathless head of Suzanne, who tries to make up a few minutes of her late arrival, appears at the top of the stairs. Noticing Alice and her client, the young woman slows down, nods to greet them and slips into the office.

“I had problems with my train...Sorry! Suzanne says when they are alone.

- Good morning..., says Alice.

- You don’t look too good.

Suzanne hangs her raincoat on the hook. She wears a red short dress, and her discolored blond hair, barely gathered by a clip, covers her cheeks messily. Alice met her five years earlier in the common room of a prison. The young woman had been a drug user. She was also dealer in order to pay for her little daughter’s boarding school. Alice had seen a double of Sassou, a bony girl whose life seemed hopeless. She had promised her that as soon as she had done her time in jail, she would hire her in her office. In less than six months, Suzanne had managed to learn some accounting, some stenography, to type a letter, to answer the phone. She had taken her daughter back who had been placed with the DCF during her incarceration; it seemed she was doing better, but she remained fragile. Alice loved her like one loves a child who never grows up.

“I’m exhausted!” Alice admits with a grimace. “I’m going down for a coffee.”

She takes a blue folder from the cabinet, dictates a letter to Suzanne, then a second one. Fifteen minutes later, she is still there.

“I’ll take care of it, Suzanne says gently. Go.”

Finally Alice is on the landing, when Suzanne calls her back. “Telephone. It’s urgent!”

Alice would have recognized this voice from a thousand. Intrigued, Suzanne watches Alice with her back against the wall, then, because of the young woman’s nervousness, only looks at her secretively.

Alice hangs up, very pale. She puts her bag down, takes off her jacket, goes into her office.

“You’re not going out anymore?” wonders Suzanne.

Alice lights a cigarette and positions herself in front of the window streaming with light. Pascal is not accepting her refusal to see him. He’s on his way up, she is sure of it, just like she was sure the day before that he was following her. Now that he has her, he will not let her go. She thinks of nothing else than this man who leaves the bar, who crosses the street, who reaches the tiled threshold of the glass building and whom she is prepared to face.

Pascal slips into the office just as she lights her third cigarette, and this is how he surprises her, as she’s leaning over the ashtray, looking like a woman about to secretively eat a forbidden dish. He is wearing the same jacket as the day before, the same shirt also, visible by its crumpled collar and wrinkled body. Alice straightens up and right away she attacks him, with a voice made piercing by her anger.

“Let’s stop this. What do you want?”

He looks at her quietly.

“To see you.” he finally says.



She measures him scornfully, almost with contempt.

“I said no, yesterday.

- Your eyes said yes...

- You're hallucinating!

- Yes, it's a serious case. I've had the feeling for years!”

He already has his hand on the doorknob. It's a trap, she feels it, she knows it. The doorknob turns, he is going to leave:

“Wait, Alice exclaims. Explain yourself.

- I thought you loved me!

- You are crazy!

Pascal has closed the door. He moves toward Alice. He does not touch her, he merely watches her; her eyes blink, while she senses an immense force emanating from him, a force which would protect her if she had the courage to surrender to it.

“You never loved Philippe. But you loved me, just as I desired you, from the first day we saw each other, in that café... do you remember? You were wearing a black dress, there were ten people surrounding you, you were reading a book...Philippe introduced us, I have never forgotten your look...

- No.

- I wasn't expecting any affirmation, he says with a subdued voice. You never listen to your feelings...You are a machine who refuses itself everything, happiness, love...”

She is furious and admires him all at the same time. Nobody, except Philippe, has ever dared speak to her in this tone of voice and still, she had to admit to him having aborted their child. For two nights and two days he shouted his revolt, broke vases in the apartment, screamed that she was dishonest and an idiot, that she was the reason for everything: his failures, his alcoholism.

“Leave!” says Alice.

Pascal wearily shrugs his shoulders seeming tired. This movement saves Pascal in Alice's heart. Because it's her father's

gesture when he is struck with powerlessness. She was never able to resist that.

“I loved Philippe, mumbles Alice, dropping into an armchair,

- I don't think so.”

She looks at him, lights another cigarette. She blows a mouthful of smoke toward the ceiling, and with a tight throat asks him:

“How is he doing?

- He got married a few months ago.

- That I know.

- He has a child.”

Alice quivers.

“A boy? she asks turning her chair around.

- A girl!

- What...is her name?

Alice asked this question almost automatically, and Pascal hesitates: then, without letting go of her with his eyes, he sighs: “Alice...” She misunderstands, thinks that he's calling her, but he, suddenly ironic, almost cruel, repeats: “Yeah, Alice...”

She springs up from the chair, approaches the window. She watches, without seeing them, the cars, the pedestrians. Everything seems so small down there, a universe of dolls.

“His wife knows...she's named after me? she says turning toward Pascal.

- Yes.

- It doesn't bother her... that...?

- That what?

- Naming me...Me, in their little daughter...Me, there, always between them.

- Muriel is an intelligent woman. She has chosen the future. And the future, in the end, comes from respecting one's past... Don't you think?

Alice shrugs, fatalistically.

“There is some truth in what you are saying, and something false.”

He laughs.

“You are stating the case of all human speech.

- You don't know what happened between Philippe and me...

- After you broke up, he took refuge at my place. He was...”

He interrupts himself. The phone rings through the partition, a murmur is heard. Then silence.

“I had to do what I did, says Alice.

- I'm not judging you!

- I accepted his affairs, but the alcohol... That, I couldn't.”

She smiles, adds, as if to erase her sentence:

“He had always drunk a lot. Always concerned with appearances... He hated scandals.”

She lights a cigarette.

“And then his mother died.”

She says nothing.

The year following this death, Philippe had not been able to touch her or speak to her. Only drink and sneer. One day, he brought home two tickets to Prague. She became hopeful again. But once there, he didn't want to leave the hotel, he said the whole city was a cemetery. The houses were weird, so dark, when what he needed was sun and ocean, and so she had walked alone, haphazardly, feeling enclosed in an unspeakable distress.

She only came back at night, called up to the room from the reception to warn Philippe. Then she'd wait about ten minutes, an hour, sometimes more, in the reception, under the quizzical gaze of men who slipped by on the polished tiles. When the girl passed by, only then did she go up to join him. She opened the windows, gathered the sheets, picked up the glasses,

emptied the ashtrays. We'll go out? she'd say, in a neutral voice. He answered "go to hell..." She shrugged, took a book. He mumbled "I disgust you, uh? Say it..." She didn't answer. All of a sudden he smiled. "She was good, that chick...You should have stayed with us!" "I have told you that doesn't interest me!" He sneered. "You Jew...! You don't know what's good, you defend bastards, perverts, crazies, and you don't know shit about life."

Until the last night.

That night, they made love. She had promised that she would not leave him. She had sworn that she loved him. One night when they were both drunk. A month later, she was pregnant.

"I couldn't take it, she repeats while looking at Pascal. And there were other things too."

She finishes in a low voice:

"We were suffocating together, we were losing ground... Keeping the baby in those circumstances..."

- He doesn't drink anymore."

Alice's eyes widen.

"He went to rehab?"

- His daughter has changed his life...Some would say he's too involved...that he's an unhealthy father...But that's another story.

- If he doesn't drink anymore..." mumbles Alice, dreamy. She has a hard time getting over this change. She remembers Philippe, narrow eyes, dirty hair, sweaty skin, remembers his stumbling when drunk, his screams during his sleep.

"She must have some guts, this Muriel.

- She loves him.

- Me too, I loved him...But I didn't know how to help him."

He seems to not be listening anymore. He moves along the

walls, stops in front of a painting, considers it, moves on to assess another one. Just then Alice realizes that Pascal has been standing during their conversation, that she had forgotten to offer him a seat.

“You like boats?”

- I came to France on a ship. I was eight. Since then, to travel, I only go by plane. I am afraid of the ocean.

- And you buy maritime art?”

She smiles.

“Depends on the bargains, I guess... This one is magnificent, no?”

- The frame is too golden for my taste.”

She stares at him, dumbfound and suddenly laughs.

Suzanne knocks, announces a client and offers to get him a coffee. Alice nods. This brief interruption has changed the mood between them.

“So, this dinner? Alice says tentatively.

He looks at her, eyes partly closed.

“You accept?”

- I have things to talk to you about too...” she says as she opens the door for him.

On the threshold, he holds on to her hand. She tries to loosen his grip, but he holds on a little tighter. Then he bends forward and kisses her hair.

## Chapter 4

That same evening Alice has dinner with Beatrice in an Italian restaurant on Rue des Ecoles.

Alice tries to talk about her meeting with Pascal Deslandes. All she can talk about is her father. Without understanding the reason, she repeats his words about how he never was comfortable, how he never was able to give her toys.

Beatrice listens attentively.

She's a woman with brown hair, a powdered face, a gold cross around her neck. Her dark eyes inspire calmness. She is an editor in a women's magazine. Her texts are pointless, light. In ten lines, she tries to spark the taste of the coquette in her readers. Reading her makes one think of a happy woman. Just the opposite of her life. Jean, her lover, died of AIDS one month before Laura was born.

"He's a funny one, your dad! says Beatrice. What game does he play?"

- He doesn't play, says Alice, he talks to me."

Beatrice sprinkles parmesan on her pasta. She neatly turns her fork and lifts a mouthful.

"He breaks you down..."

The two women look at each other.

"My father is a modest and simple man.

- Yes, yes...

- I can't be angry with my father. He is old, he needs me, says Alice, serving herself some more wine.

- Try to set some limits with him."

Beatrice keeps her parents at a distance with all her might. She permits them to come only on Sundays to get Laura. They are crazy about the child; they have forgotten that they had pressured their daughter to abort once they knew about Jean's

sure death. They had announced that to bring a child into this world who would not know its father was a dreadful decision, that Beatrice was egoistic, that she thought only about herself.

After Laura's birth, Beatrice fell into a depression. Her parents took care of the baby for six months. When Beatrice got better, she began working again, she enrolled the baby in nursery school. The parents felt dispossessed. They wanted to keep the child. They were retired; they had so much love to give. Beatrice made no concessions, to each generation its own.

She is not able to forgive them their remarks regarding Jean's illness, her resentment had even intensified over the years. She says that they have not changed. After having challenged her choice in what man to love, they are now criticizing the education she is giving her daughter. They claim that she goes out too much, that she abandons Laura. Beatrice remains impassive, but these remarks which trouble her cause her to drink even more, leaving Laura night after night.

"You are thirty-eight years old and your father talks to you about toys."

They laugh.

"That's a good one! Beatrice continues.

- It rather moved me, actually.

- You are not a little girl anymore."

Alice shrugs. It's impossible to explain that her father's remorse is profound. That he is afraid of having ruined the life of his youngest, like he had once ruined the life of Sassou.

"He's an Oriental, mumbles Alice, her mind elsewhere. He will treat me as a little girl as long as I don't have children."

The name of Pascal Deslandes burns her lips. She feels that she is going to say it and that she should not pronounce it.

Beatrice shakes her head.

"If you meet him one day, you will understand..., says Alice, thinking only about Pascal.

- You want me to meet your father? Beatrice says, her eyes half closed from the smoke from her cigarette. You're kidding, right?"

Alice cracks up because of the misunderstanding.

"We still have time, right?" and to the waiter: "Two coffees, please!"

It's barely eleven thirty when they leave the restaurant, but Beatrice has to get home before midnight to let the student go who is watching Laura. The two women take a few steps toward the taxi stand, at the corner of Boulevard Saint Michel. That's where Alice ends up blurting out Pascal's name. Beatrice, who was motioning to a car, freezes. She turns toward Alice, looks deeply into her eyes. Alice feels forced to admit everything. Words jumbled, she says that Philippe has a daughter, and the name he has given her. She tells her that Pascal came by the office, that she couldn't refuse his invitation to dinner.

"You, says Beatrice, you're throwing yourself into his trap!

- I swear...

- One piece of advice, mumbles Beatrice squeezing Alice's arm, don't see him again.

- He wants to have an affair with me." It's a sad excuse, but it's the only one she could come up with. Beatrice isn't stupid.

"Are you ignoring me?

Awkward and abrupt, she adds:

"You haven't already suffered enough, because of those two? You can't forget them?

- I didn't bring on any of this...

- You're not resisting it either.

- Get out of here, quick! Alice says in a dry tone. Beatrice is right of course, but she has had her fill of reproaches for one evening. She moves toward the street. A taxi appears in the distance, the white light lit up. A gray Mercedes breaks in front



of the two women who kiss each other goodbye, Alice with some restraint, Beatrice with all her heart.

“Don’t give me that face!” her friend scolds her. Alice tries to smile.

With one foot in the car, Beatrice adds in a different tone, full of tenderness: “No bullshit, uh! You promise?”

When the door slams shut, Alice bends down and cries out: “Kiss Laura!”

She is alone on the sidewalk.

Alice walks home, her fists in the pockets of her raincoat. Paris is deserted. Her apartment is empty. Might as well stay outside. The evening weighs on her. Alice hears herself say “he wants to have an affair with me” and sees Beatrice’s shocked face, her eyes darkened by concern. “You haven’t suffered enough?” Suddenly she feels tired of herself, of her own life. What was the use going around telling people about such confusing and tangled things? She always had to say too much, never knew when to stop talking.

Pascal, yes, she will see him tomorrow, but that doesn’t prove much. She will resist him. She has managed all these years. Whatever kept her from throwing herself into his arms before will still hold her back today. But she knows that it’s all false pretense. Yesterday was yesterday. Since then there is this loneliness. All these lost painful nights. And Philippe has remade his life.

This thought makes her heart turn to ice. Philippe with a child. A little girl named Alice. She would cry from laughing if she had the strength. Alice! What a provocation! He knew how to have the last word. She is defeated. Crushed. Annihilated. Her pain becomes intolerable. Alice. Alice...

Tomorrow, she will call Philippe. She will say to him bravo, you are a father. I am charmed. Disarmed. Desperate. I hate

you...And she will hang up. I hate you. I hate you...Although it's not true. She doesn't hate him. She loved him too much. And he too...He who dared to give her name to his child by another woman.

She walks, pale, trembling. She feels weightless. No, she will not call him. This child is not responsible for anything, not the stupidity of adults, nor for their sinister regrets. She's happy just being alive. Blond like Philippe, surely with the same blue eyes. Beautiful eyes reaching toward the future.

Suddenly, as if this long detour had brought her back toward him, Alice thinks again about her father, she has a dizzy spell. She is eight years old. She is looking out at the sea, seated on a pole at the docks. Her family is behind her, in a shaded corner. Nobody has slept for two days. They are waiting at the docks to board. They could have waited in the hotel, like the other passengers. One of their neighbors who is emigrating to Marseilles told Juliette, the oldest sister, to be wary: sometimes, a boat is scheduled for a certain day but ends up leaving the port a day or two early. Juliette consulted with her father and the two of them agreed to stay close to the ship. Sitting on their suitcases, they observe the traffic of the port and never take their eyes off the black hull of the *Ville de Tunis*.

Alice remembers those two days precisely. She remembers the murmuring of the crowd and the cries of the seagulls circling above the ships. Since that time, waiting has a sound, and it is ear splitting.

For lunch and dinner they opened cans of sardines and tuna. Juliette bought the bread at the port from a peddler.

It was very hot. The sky was perfectly blue, perfectly pure. Ten minutes away by foot, there was a beach with fine sand, and Juliette could have taken Alice there, but they were afraid to get separated. The father had told them that they should stay in a group. Her father's face stood out against the blue sky.

Sometimes he would doze off, sometimes he would watch a bit overwhelmed, the boats blocking the horizon. It was difficult for him to breathe. It looked like he was choking, but it wasn't because of the heat. The father had already worked as a road repairman in hundred and twenty degrees, in the shade.

The rain starts and pulls Alice from her reveries. She quivers...Damned weather. She is exhausted, numb. She feels the fatigue now in her back, which pulls and hurts.

She retraces her steps along the streets where the apartment buildings are low, deteriorating, grey. For almost a half an hour, she walks without finding a taxi. At the Porte d'Orléans, she manages to hail one.

Crouched against the seatback, she lets herself be transported.

She thinks about those two days; she can't remember her mother's face anymore. Juliette said that Chachïa was buried fifteen days before their departure for France. Alice thinks she can see a shape sleeping in a bed. But this shape curiously resembles the ship on which they travelled.

## Chapter 5

Sassou went out every Saturday night. She went dancing at the Gibus club with some friends. The father let her. He had a weak spot for Sassou. He had never known how to say no to her. It was enough for Sassou to whisper, kneeling in front of him, “my daddy, will you let me...?” in order for him to sigh, already defeated.

Sassou had grace, and her eyes were blue. She wore old dresses like all her sisters, Juliette, Edmée and Alice. Different from them, she had found a swap shop near the Gare du Nord train station, and there she bought all her clothes, her coats, even her shoes. These articles of clothing were out of fashion, at least twenty years old, but on Sassou’s slender and fluid body the clothes became beautiful; they came alive. There was above all one dress, turquoise satin, that Sassou loved to wear with white ballerina slippers. Under the arms, two circles of sweat stains that resisted washing out.

It was Juliette who had alerted the father one Saturday night. Sassou was getting ready to go out. The father was reading his newspaper. Edmée was setting the table with Alice when Juliette and her husband Robert knocked on the door. Alice has never been able to forget that night. Juliette was wearing her gray coat buttoned up all the way to the neck and a black handbag. She entered the studio, and without as much as a breath, she screamed to the father that Sassou should not go out anymore. She told the father that his trust had been broken, she said terrible and insulting things.

The father looked at Sassou and Sassou met his eyes. She did not lower her head, she was not afraid. With a clear voice she said that she loved this man, that she loved him more than her life. She said she knew everything that separated them, but that these obstacles didn’t count, because this man also loved her. She also said that Jew, Catholic, what difference did it make; she said

that this man was prepared to be circumcised and that she in turn was willing to convert. Then she added while pointing her arm defiantly that Juliette would not prevent her from marrying, that she was not afraid of her, that she wasn't afraid of anybody.

"Hit her!" Juliette repeated. Her coat covered her like a bag, only her head, her hands and her ankles were visible from under the gray wool. Sassou on the other hand, in her turquoise dress, looked like a fairy, very slender, white, all arms and legs. She had curled her hair and the strands of hair that she had made wet and tacked onto her cheeks made her face seem perfectly oval.

Robert saw that the father wasn't moving and he approached Sassou. He said that this marriage could not happen, that a Jewish girl with a Christian, it was...it was...He didn't find an adjective, so he stopped talking. Sassou, imitated him with plenty of irony while stuttering: "It is...It is what...?" Robert had to answer back: an offense toward God or something to that effect, and Sassou cracked up laughing at the deficiency of his answer; she said that God was for everyone, for Muslims, for Jews and for Christians, there was no one God better than others, that God was God; and Robert slapped her. Sassou fell to the floor with an indolent look in her eyes.

The father suddenly got up, he screamed to Robert that he did not want him to touch Sassou, he said to him that he only had rights to one woman, the one you married; the others, he said, you don't touch. Robert sneered. Juliette yelled, she has slept with him, she's a *kabba*, a whore, what are you going to do? The father turned again toward Sassou, and he gave her the choice between staying and leaving the man, or leaving and never seeing him again.

Sassou's face changed. She begged the father not to chase her away, she said she loved him, that she needed him, she said to him, you are my father, I don't have a mother anymore, you are my father, a good man, tender and tolerant. Twisting her hands she said that she couldn't do anything else but love this boy;

she pleaded with the father to meet him, she asked him not to judge based on religious convictions but on the qualities and the character of a person.

Juliette interrupted her constantly. She yelled to the father, who was looking at Sassou surreptitiously, that he should not listen to her, that he should not back down. She said Sassou had lied, that she wasn't going dancing Saturday nights, but that she ran to hide in a hotel room that the Roumi had rented. And there, there..., she explained, Sassou undressed, she put on different clothes, things in silk, obscene things. Sassou stopped crying and with contempt called her a spy. Juliette nodded her head with sadness; she answered that she had acted out of love, like a mother. That had their mother lived she would never have allowed her to go out at night; if alive, their mother would have thought about their honor and respect for their traditions.

The lights were all lit, but the room seemed dark, as if a black veil had fallen over it. Alice and Edmée cried while holding hands.

Juliette sat down on a stool. She started to speak slowly. She advised the father to lock up Sassou; her liking this man could pass, nothing would be lost. She said she knew of a Jew who could marry her, a man from Tunisia, who was rich. Félix Habib was looking for a wife. He would not be demanding.

Sassou had put on her coat, put some things in her pockets, a comb that her father had given her, the photo of the mother, a necklace and a ring.

The father, sweat on his face, watched her do it. In the doorway she turned around. She smiled at Alice and Edmée. She threw the father a kiss with the tip of her fingers, her eyes were full of love, irresistible. She had waited, but the father had not moved; the presence of Robert prevented any reconciliation.

Sassou left. She had just turned twenty.

## Chapter 6

How Juliette found out about Sassou's affair, Alice never learned. Juliette must have kept an eye on her for several months. Their sister was too beautiful. Too free. She was out of place. The father's love for her had become disproportionate. He called his daughters by their first names, except Sassou, he called her only in Arabic, *omri*, *kedbi*, *ayouni*<sup>3</sup>. Sassou had the same intense love for him. It was she who, once a month, would give him haircuts, would wash his feet in a tub made of red plastic, that was only ever used for hand washing underwear. This was before Alice decided to throw it out, like she would throw out, give away or hide, one by one, all of Sassou's things.

Once Sassou ran away, Juliette tried to reclaim her place as the oldest daughter. But the father could no longer tolerate her. He, the head of the family, the hero who had made them cross the sea, had lost face. Sassou's departure had made him suffer immeasurably. The home had become a place where it was hard to breathe. The father had stopped speaking. He did not speak the entire year following the disappearance of Sassou, as if he was in mourning. He only expressed himself through signs. He was nothing, a body on a chair, a mouth in front of its plate, a body without a soul. He must have been speaking at work, but, at home, he was completely mute. In the mornings before leaving, he watered the yellow plant on the window sill, a gift from Sassou. He watered and cared for this plant and, when he came home, he would stand in front of it in a daze, as if praying.

Juliette came every evening to check up on him. Robert did not come with her; he understood that he had become an intruder; the father detested him for having dared to slap his daughter – later he hated him because of the poker playing. She sat down next to him, she talked to him about a thousand things, insignificant or

<sup>3</sup> "My life", "my faith", "my eyes" in Arabic

serious, she never managed to get a word out of him.

One day she began yelling, breaking the unspoken pact of silence between them: “Will you never forgive me for Sassou?” The father gazed at her; Juliette backed away, she put on her coat, and she left. Alice followed her on the street. In her gray coat her sister looked like a beggar. Occasionally, she stopped, leaning against a wall. Suddenly she noticed Alice. Her face hardened by grief, she yelled out, thinking only about the night that had fallen on the unsafe streets of Clichy: “Go home!” Alice did not listen. She stared at her sister. “It’s true, you are a grown up now,” Juliette admitted with a tired voice.

They had their first coffee together at the counter of a bistro which smelled of old cigarette smoke. Alice avoided speaking about the father or Sassou.

The following evening, Juliette was there again, treating her father with a deeply moving gentleness. She moved carefully around him, somber and undone, begging a look of acknowledgement for the meal she offered him, the pile of shirts that she had ironed, in an ever growing attempt at humility and tenderness. Regardless of what she did, just by looking at her, the father reminded her of her crime, the loss of his child.

At the end of six months, Juliette managed to bring him to a doctor. The latter said that becoming mute was a pathology seen often among immigrants. He asked the father if he wanted a sick-leave from work, the father, with his eyes only, indicated no. The doctor smiled. He said that the father was a courageous and strong man. They shook hands when they took their leave.

The father continued to climb scaffolding, to run along rooftops, to work outside in gusts of wind and rain. At night, Edmée and Alice heard him moan. Immobilized, warily, they listened to the complaints of a man they had seen as indestructible. Almost always, there was a shuffling of slippers, a stream of light that filtered under the door, the hissing of a turning faucet, another



shuffle, darkness, the squeaking of a mattress. Finally silence. The father fell asleep.

He spoke again when Gérard came on vacation for three weeks to Paris. It was October, a Sunday morning. Gérard just dropped in. He knocked on the door. Alice went to open. She jumped for joy when she saw her brother. Edmée rushed to the door, then the father. He didn't recognize his son. Tanned, wide shoulders, short hair, Gérard took up the hallway with all his body mass; he laughed, opened his arms to his father, he seemed huge, strange. The father threw himself in his open arms, and he cried without hiding it from the girls. On that day his silence broke thanks to Gérard's charm. The father admired his skin which had the tan of those who live near the ocean, he looked at his muscles, the happiness in his eyes. He took out a bottle of anisette. Gérard refused to drink. The father smiled. He served himself a glass and murmured *l'chaim*.<sup>4</sup>

The next day, the father asked the son to take him to Israel. Gérard said: "For vacation or for good?" The Father answered that he was going to think about it, he would perhaps leave for good. He said that his life had become as bitter as gall and he added that nothing kept him in France. He did not say why, he avoided saying Sassou's name.

During those three weeks with Gérard they talked about life in Israel. The father brought up his comparisons to Tunisia, he asked what plants one found there, what fruits one ate, what fish one caught. Gérard laughed. He said that the ocean that rolls onto the shores of Tunis arrives in the ports of Haifa, Ashdod and Tel Aviv. He said that the fruits were also as big, the melons, the peaches and the oranges. And the flowers, said the father looking over at the small yellow plant; the flowers, describe them to me.

And so it was for three weeks.

He ate better, he served wine with the meals, he brought his

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<sup>4</sup> "To life" in Hebrew, the conventional toast.

son to Belleville. He started to have an idea of Israel which was associated with the white light of Tunis, he thought the same smell of ocean and scent of roses reigned there, that life there was laid back, that he could grow old there in peace.

During the second week of his stay Gérard asked the father to get his passport ready. He told him, you need to take id photos, get your birth certificate, you have to contact the embassy. The father answered, tomorrow, tomorrow.

Gérard understood that the father would not leave. That he did not want to leave because of Sassou. Nobody knew whether she was dead or alive, if the man she had met at the hotel married her or if they had left each other.

Gérard pushed Juliette to do some research. She told him that only the police would be able to find her. Are you prepared to contact the police? Gérard hesitated. Juliette pleaded with him to make an attempt, to find a trace. In case the father might have an accident. But Gérard turned his head away. Then he said in a low voice that the police were not the solution, he did not want to make trouble for Sassou. If she wants to come back to us, she will do it on her own, he added. So, we are going to continue to suffer, mumbled Juliette. Gérard just looked at her, but answered nothing.

The day arrived when it was time for Gérard to leave. The family drove him to the airport. Hugging their father, the three girls watched their brother pass through customs. One last time he turned around to wave goodbye. He had a big smile on his lips. A smile of love and happiness.

## Chapter 7

The boat was supposed to depart the port in the afternoon. At noon, the passengers began to arrive. By the tens, by the hundreds, families emerged from the city, coming out of all the alleys, weighted down by suitcases, carts, and children. They gathered to form lines in front of the customs officials. The father said that God should be with us, provided that they would let us pass. Alice gazed at her father. He was staring at the men in green uniforms, wearing caps with yellow trim, who had arranged rows of tables in order to open and search the baggage.

The drama of exile began there, with these men who stuck their hands in people's clothing, who lifted panties, dresses, pants, examined toys, books, all the trinkets we did not have the heart to leave behind, sell or throw out, before they would search the bodies.

They were looking for gold.

People were welcome to leave, but the gold was to stay in the country.

They said it arrogantly to people, leave your gold. People swore they didn't have any; only clothing, blankets, some provisions. The customs officers retorted, what have you done with your jewelry? What jewelry, the women cried in unison; and they stretched out their arms, they showed their necks; we sold our jewelry in order to pay for the cost of the departure, the papers, the passports.

The customs officers began to feel the seams of the clothing, loosen the heels of shoes, and break the locks of suitcases. They found or they did not find. More often, they would find. And this, they said, what do you call this?

When it was father's turn they said to him, so you pretend you have nothing, and how exactly are you going to live in France with all these children? Father swore to God that he was poor. He said he was going to work, that he was counting on friends. He negotiated for a long time. The customs officer stared at the wedding band on father's finger without listening. He ogled and repeated, so you're a widower, you're a widower...

Father understood. He let the ring glide into the outstretched palm.

Alice watched the ring roll into the depth of a pocket, the sudden dance of stamps in the passports. Around them were cries and tears; entire families stripped. Women gasped, as men clenched their teeth.

They climbed the footbridge of the boat in anger, despair, and powerlessness. They piled up in a corner of the deck, and they watched the commotion below, the war between the customs officers and the travelers. It lasted for hours. The departure was set for the beginning of the afternoon, at dusk there were still families waiting to pass through the customs post.

Suddenly, the port became empty and silent. A siren sounded. The docking chains fell, scraping the dock, splashing the surface of the water then the side of the steamship. We're leaving, somebody yelled. At the same moment a jolt shook the *Ville de Tunis*. We're leaving, we're leaving... The word spread from group to group as the ship left the dock, the land, Tunisia.

It was done.

It began.

The father goes to Belleville every Sunday. He goes there to

banter with his buddies in Arabic Three men who lived on his street and whom he met by accident, one at the butcher, the other in the metro, and finally the third one, drinking coffee at a bistro in Belleville. Down there, he greeted them with a nod, barely saying hello. In Paris, they are like brothers to him. Sacred.

One day one of them described the pharmacy in La Goulette. The façade was green, he said, and the paint was peeling by the door. He stopped talking. After a long silence his friend added that there were four pots tied together by their handles, dangling from a hemp twine suspended from the ceiling. No, five, said the other. That's possible, admitted the first.

According to the father, the game between the four men had started this way. Little by little, they had brought the entire neighborhood back to life, just from memory. They listed families, the profession of the man, the name of his wife, the number of children and their gender. They relived old intrigues, remembered the arguments, the reconciliations, stories without end. They laughed at being able to recover the essence of their life, its transparency, its simplicity. It was like returning to their true nature, the most authentic one. But sometimes they would also wipe away a tear, almost shamefully.

They have been playing this game for thirty years. They drink mint tea, nibble on semolina cakes. They never speak about the present, never ask each other indiscreet questions, they never dared to invite each other to their homes. At most they show each other photos from their vacations, most of them would be pictures of landscapes, the father specified.

Occasionally they share placing a bet. And if it happens that they win, they have an aperitif together.

The customs officers marked Alice's memory. They represent the arbitrary, the absolute power of the State, its irreducible injustice. Green uniform, yellow trimmed cap, brown leather belt. She has never forgotten those fat faces and mustaches that claimed the gold, those hairy hands that ransacked the clothing and robbed the wretched treasures of the fugitives.

For years Alice dreamt about the wedding ring which slipped from her father's hand into the palm of the customs officer. Keep it, take it back. That ring was the last connection between her father and her dead mother. The father did not buy a new ring, nor did he remarry.

This ring obsessed Alice in the depths of her sleep all through her adolescence, until it became impossible to discern what it was she was looking to recover with such intensity and fury. Something was shining in her dream, glimmering with a yellow and gentle glow, but it no longer had the shape of a ring.

This violence, to which she had been a witness has pushed her to choose the profession of lawyer. Her heart brought her forever toward the poorest, the most helpless of people, those who were crushed by the system, who would tremble for a permit to stay, those living in the country clandestinely. Her heart went out to the defeated, to all the losers.

Defending them, protecting them. At each trial, it seemed she was up against the customs officers, a ring slipping from one palm to the other. Alice haggles for the right to live in the country, for the right to be a foreigner.

Alice knows nothing about Chachïa, her mother, except that

she died from intestinal cancer. One day Juliette told her that in the last weeks of her life their mother did not eat without shrieking in pain. After a silence, Juliette asked, really, you don't remember *anything*? Alice shook her head. Juliette retorted that it was for the best, and she got up to put something away. This all happened in the kitchen in Clichy, in the depressing neon lights. Juliette was aggressive and sulky as she opened several cabinets letting the doors slam shut. Alice insisted that the death of her mother was like a raised wall preventing her from seeing her childhood, from seeing herself as a child; Juliette said that having forgotten the last moments of Chachiã made her marvelously lucky, she said it with such a muffled voice that Alice never dared to speak with her again about their mother.

It's stronger than her. Every time Alice meets her sisters or her father, their life unfolds in front of her eyes. She sees Juliette's silver silhouette. The face reflects a state of continual anxiety, the body is without grace, poorly dressed. Robert has managed for a few months to get her to smile, blush, sigh. Robert's vulgarity, his manly smell, his way of grabbing onto her waist, his laughter when he would caress her fanny transformed Juliette. Suddenly she became beautiful. She kept her dresses but she straightened out her chest and put on a bright pink lipstick. It may have seemed like the only change, but it was glowing.

Alice spied on the couple incessantly, she could not stop herself from looking at them. Her sister all frail, timid, amazed, and Robert with his butcher's build, his shamelessness, his hairy chest and his arms. They excited her.

Their happiness washed away when Juliette caused Sassou to

be chased away. The father began to despise Robert. Juliette once again recovered the dark rings under her eyes, her naked lips, her sadness. She lowered her head again. She no longer raised her gaze, but it remained sunken to the ground, nervous, fearful.

Nobody knew right away, it took years to learn that Robert played poker, that he gambled away his salary, his wife's salary. When there was no more money, he borrowed. Juliette dared not complain. She worked more. A wholesaler in the Sentier district gave her coats to take home; she would sew in the lining, fix the hems, sew buttons. Piece by piece. Even sick, she worked. When she had Patricia, she fed the child while working. One spoon of soup, one button.

In Belleville the father learned that his son-in-law was lost to gambling. There were notes of outstanding debt, threats of retaliation. The father liquidated his savings to save Juliette. She accepted the money; a fat roll. She told him that she did not want him to talk to Robert about it. She looked up at her father with a horrified look. She spoke quietly about her and Robert. The father clenched his fists listening to her. He grumbled swearwords in Arabic, son of a bitch, filth. She let him find relief. Then she made him promise to not speak about it, if he did, she said, you can keep your money, I'll have no use for it.

When she felt that she had broken down his resistance, Juliette stuffed the roll in her bag and ran off.



## Chapter 8

The father's despair. That's what the girls had understood at first. Edmée was eighteen. She was rather pretty, gray eyes, black hair. That same year, she began working as a secretary in an important import-export business. Soon the men there noticed her. They were attracted to her shyness. They wanted to walk her home and they invited her out to dinner or to go dancing. She declined all their offers.

She dreamt of love reading graphic novels.

The father began to keep an eye on Edmée. He asked what she was doing with her time, he waited for her outside her office building. Sometimes he was open about it, other times he hid while following her all the way home.

When the father questioned Edmée, Alice thought about Mr. Seguin's goat. She thought about his tricks to prevent the goats from leaving their pen and the goats that broke off their tether to go running in the mountains. Alice thought that because of his suspicions concerning Edmée, the father would encourage her to run off.

She was wrong.

Edmée did not think about insisting on her own freedom. She was mysteriously obedient of the father. Everything he asked her to do, she did; then, she waited for him to reward her with a word or a smile. But the father did not look at her. He did not see that Edmée repressed her own desires in order to please him. He did not see that his daughter was aging. Faced with the absence, this void that Sassou had brought upon him, he remained in a state of

shock.

Less than two years after Sassou's departure, they moved. Edmée got her own room. Alice also. The father slept in a storage room without windows, just big enough to fit a bed and a bedside table. He insisted that this space was enough. His daughters had not protested.

Edmée was twenty years old, then twenty-three, then twenty-five.

They never talked about Sassou anymore. The father never brought up her name. It was as if she were dead. As if she had never been born. The day after she left, Juliette had gathered all her things, her clothes, her trinkets, and put them in two cardboard boxes. Robert had taken care of bringing them to the hotel.

Basically, there was nothing left of her at the house, yet still, every now and then, a trace of her would appear, a ribbon, a letter, or in an envelope, a few dried rose petals.

## Chapter 9

Edmée ended up getting married at twenty eight with Felix Habib, the man that Juliette had intended for Sassou. She married him from fear of growing old without children. He was a currency exchange agent, he had a car, a comfortable apartment and he was fifteen years older than her.

Years went by, neither good nor bad; just years. They had two children. Edmée raised the little ones while Félix worked. That was their agreement. He left her the car twice a week. On those days, Edmée was free. She ran her errands and met Juliette. Edmée talked about her life, the children growing up, about Félix who was becoming loathsome as he grew older, and about herself who no longer had the patience to tolerate his complaints.

At thirty nine, what she had repressed in order to create a home swallowed her up, like a ground swell. She no longer accepted keeping quiet, ironing and cooking, for a man whom she did not love. They no longer had anything to say to each other, nothing. He complained about being tired and she about being bored. He had become obese; he ate avidly to compensate for his unhappiness.

He came home, sat down at the table, turned on the television. Edmée, disgusted, brought the dishes, barely ate. She tried not to look at the flesh squeezing out between the buttons of his shirt, this grainy and pale paunch, despite herself, she looked. When their eyes met he read in them the horror that she experienced.

Fights broke out, infernal ones, scary ones. Their yelling was a pretense for talking. Little by little they began to confront each other every night. It gave a meaning to their life, masking the amplitude of their isolation. For them, hating each other was how others embrace.

Living this crisis, Edmée dreamt of love.

She began to go out. At first she sauntered around without any

goal. One day she stopped at a café in the Latin Quarter filled with students. Boys were caressing girls on benches, kissing them. She returned home, transfixed. She lay down naked on her bed.

The following days she went back to the café. Hiding in the back of the room, she spied on the young people, she lusted for them with her eyes, but with so much anxiety that she would jump at the sound of a glass hitting a plate.

One guy in particular, with a mop of brown hair and brazen eyes, ended up noticing her. When he saw her, he smiled at her. Edmée felt faint, lost her breath.

She had picked up his name, Michel, because some girls were calling him at the top of their lungs. He had dark spots on his skin, one on his neck and one on his arm. Edmée imagined kissing him there, with her whole mouth, before throwing herself to her knees.

She went back to her car, completely smitten. Why go home? Full of hatred for the man who waited for her, she thought about killing herself; she thought about it all the time. She stopped her car and cried with her head on the steering wheel. Her life was choking her, causing a huge lump in her throat.

Alice pushed her to divorce.

“Leave...leave...”

Without listening to her, Edmée fantasized about Michel. She described the light in his smile, the rawness of his gaze. The passion made her vulgar.

“I want to fuck!” she admitted. And she broke out laughing.

Alice asked her why she was laughing. Her sister answered that she laughed in order not to cry.

“Your laughter sounds like sobbing,” said Alice.

Edmée’s expression changed. With her eyes full of make-up, her fitted dress, she was pathetic. She was forty three years old, but she remained without spirit, had no courage, as if she were still a teenager.

“If it had not been for the children...” she groaned.

What she was afraid of but did not say, was to become poor again if she divorced. She refused to work as a sales person or waitress for a ridiculous salary. She was used to a certain comfort level, and she liked her free time.

She wanted to continue living the same life, but without Félix.

Having understood her sister, Juliette whispered to her that raising two children by herself would be hell. She told her, push your husband into a different bedroom and let him bark like a dog.

## Chapter 10

Since Pascal came to get her at the office they hadn't managed to say ten words to each other. They walk across Paris in silence. The streets are crowded with people everywhere, on the road, on the sidewalks; people who are strolling, deaf to the honking of cars.

The scenery changes, becomes green and quiet. Ten minutes later, Pascal stops in front of a restaurant along the Seine. A pergola, massive wood doors, a wagon filled with geranium pots; they see it all from the car, the house with bright windows, wisteria and ivy; trees. It's a nice place for drinking wine. A place you leave to go home and make love.

The doors of the car slam shut. They walk along the walkway strewn with gravel. A woman greets them, leads them to a quiet table.

"I'll take the same as you." Alice says without looking at the menu.

Pascal makes a face.

"Salmon and beef ribs?"

- Perfect.

- It will take a while. It's busy tonight," warns the hostess.

Once she leaves, they are again faced with their awkward silence, in order to have something to do they let their eyes follow the waitresses running in all directions.

Alice plays with her knife. She feels like annoying Pascal, to attack him.

"Philippe knows that we have seen each other again?"

He frowns.

"Philippe? What's bothering you?"

- I wouldn't want to be trapped.

- I don't get what you're talking about.

She looks at him with spite.

“They say you shared women.

- They? he says, teasing.

- They..., she insists.

- For heaven’s sake, Alice.”

Laughter is heard, it drowns out the quiet talking.

“Is it true or not?

- I’m not going there.

- Are you afraid of my opinion?”

He laughs.

“Maybe.”

She sends him a scornful look.

“I have my thoughts about it...You can keep yours. You can speak. I really don’t care.”

He has a spark in his eyes revealing his anger. A few minutes pass. He lights a cigarette

and smokes it in small puffs while observing her, on edge.

“We were very close, Philippe and I. We don’t have the same taste anymore.

- So it was true.

- Once or twice.

- You are such a bloody bastard!

He jumps, more surprised than hurt.

“I’ll say it again: it’s finished...There are things one does and others one doesn’t do anymore.

You think? she says pushing the knife away impatiently. What are you doing with me this evening?”

He understands that she has led him where she wanted, that he fell into her net. He tries to smile.

“With you, it’s different.”

The waitress who brings the bread and the wine creates a diversion. She’s a skinny woman, dressed in a black dress with a white apron. Her hands are calloused, her nails cut short. She drives the corkscrew into the cork, gives it three turns. The cork

bursts out with a pop. The wine flows into the glasses. The woman disappears.

“I never trusted you, says Alice bitterly. You felt like the devil around us, stealing

Philippe from me and trying to steal me from Philippe!

- I see.”

He sips from his glass, remains calm and does not take his eyes off Alice.

She picks up her glass and drinks. The wine is good, rough at first with an after-taste of pepper.

She hesitates, looks at the delicate table cloth, the silver plated cutlery, the roses standing in the vases, the slices of bread resting in the basket. What good is it pursuing this situation? The past is the past. Nothing will come back, not life with Philippe, not the child. But Pascal didn't notice the change having misjudged Alice's silence, he continues in a gentle voice, a voice that makes the woman's head spin.

“It was all over with Philippe long before I came into your life!

- That is not true!

- You were croaking from boredom together. I understood that from the first evening.

- Well, yes, she says with a quick laugh, that famous evening when I was reading surrounded by ten people?

- That famous evening...And the other evenings...You followed him everywhere, but you were never with him... Distracted, absent, lost among us...That's not what I call loving!”

She feels a pinch in her heart. She grinds her teeth. Her eyes rest on a tree lit up by a spotlight. The trunk is engulfed by ivy. As high up as the eyes can see, the ivy is there, stubborn, twirled around the suffocating branches. This is how she was with Philippe early on. Or, at least this is how she thought they were, inseparable. They were happy for three years.

Then Philippe began to look at women again. The pain came



like a storm; she brushed aside everything, peace in the morning, peace at night and sleep. Alice began to live on constant alert. Every woman was a rival. He said that he loved her but that he could not resist the others. At first he lied to get away for an hour or two, then he just stopped inventing, he didn't bother hiding his affairs. He wanted to share them with her, he claimed it was a proof of love. She asked him to stop talking, to protect her. He laughed. He called her a little bourgeois girl, made fun of the values of her father, values she had believed in and that she had respected. But even when he didn't say anything, she could tell by looking in his eyes that he had just made love. He had a way of walking, of laughing, that would have made her throw herself at him with clenched fists. She followed him across the rooms screaming, what are you looking for, let's call it quits, you don't love me. He would lock himself up in a room or he'd take off; he would leave her with her tears, and she would end up calming down, putting on a poker-face, the only way she managed to hide her pain from him. When he'd show up again after an hour or a week, he'd tell her that she was the only one that mattered, that he loved only her. The others meant nothing. Nothing, nothing, he repeated. He kissed her, carried her toward the bed. He said don't be mean, I need you. She let it happen, like a corpse in his arms. With a strange voice, hot, feverish, he repeated, you are the only one. And other words that made her anger melt away. He put his cheek against hers, his lips on her neck. She cried in silence, her eyes closed.

He thought everything could be erased like this.

She swore to herself she would leave him, but she wanted to do it in her own time, when she wouldn't have a gram of love left in her heart. She would have arrived at what seemed to be a distant place, the idea of forgiving would have become absurd and impossible.

That's how she started to dream about Pascal: by closing her

eyes in order not to see Philippe. She never spoke to him, she avoided his eyes, but she had started only listening to him. And desire overwhelmed her. Even when he was far away he seemed close, in his voice, his laughter, the movement of his body in space. She had to lower her head, never look in his direction because he took up the whole room. When their eyes met, she felt a shock. Her heart ran away from her. It lasted for a second. Then she got her breath back. After, she was nothing but a body on a chair, waiting for Philippe to signal it was time to leave.

“What are you thinking about?”

He asks the question as he caresses her hand. Alice shudders, burning from the contact.

“I would like to leave.”

She picks up her bag. She has to avoid looking at him.

“Sit down!”

More than the casual tone, it's the changed voice, almost white, that breaks her resistance. She sits back down.

“I can't stand messes. All existences have strange trajectories, all have their complications. You and me, we met at a point in time that was not great...It was six or seven years ago, I don't know anymore...”

He leans toward Alice, adds:

“Six or seven?”

She bites her lip.

“Seven. She finally says.

- I could have sworn it was less,” he says, ironic.

He pours more wine. He leans his elbow on the table. With coaxing eyes, in a low voice, he says:

“So you were... a woman in full bloom, I thought of you as a nightingale. Your lawyer's cloak, the black clothes you always were accentuated this impression. I never saw you smile. Something wasn't right, Philippe? Your past?”

She shrugged, moved.

“It doesn’t matter. One thing was sure, you were afraid of being measured, judged...”

He stops talking. Chews on a piece of bread. He looks at her, amused, about to say, c’mon, help me a little, no? I’ll continue alone? Very well... You like it, basically, when people talk about you.

A couple sits down in front of their table. In a loud voice the woman complains to the waitress about the table she wants to give them, too far from the water, from trees, too far back. The noise calms down, then becomes a mumble before it is quiet. Heads turn. The waitress stiffens, bothered by the business on the terrace. She retraces her steps, squeezes through two rows of tables, stops at one.

“You see? trumpets the woman. It works to scream. Right away you’re understood!

- Idiot,” Pascal mumbles.

Alice giggles.

Pascal understands that this laugh is in his favor. Now Alice can be conquered.

“What was I saying?

- You were sketching my portrait and it wasn’t flattering.”

He smiles.

“Clearly I don’t have what it takes...I’ll try in a different way. I love your face these days. It has taken on a beautiful maturity. It’s pretty, the look, the smile...Over the years I have thought about how to seduce you...I have wanted to approach you a thousand times...in vain. When I thought you were ready to listen to me, you found a way to dodge and flee. Satisfied?

- Will you never speak to me in a serious way?

- Sure, always... That’s exactly it!”

The waitress comes with their meals, large, white, plates with a golden trim. In the middle lie the salmon slices, marinated and bright in the light from the candle.

“Forget about Philippe. You left each other!

- It’s true...But to love you is in a way to relive it all with him.

- I’m not like him!

- He will always be between us.

- Where is the bad in that?

- Clearly, you’re crazy!

- I prefer perverted polymorph,” he says with such a happy irony that it takes away Alice’s reservations. Their eyes meet, melt in the light. He lifts up his fork, waits to begin eating to see her dive into her dish.

There’s silence between them.

“I love it here..., he finally says. I usually come here alone. I rent the only room for a night or two. I read, I work...It’s like my lair...

- You have already brought someone here?

- No!

- Why me?

- I felt like it.

She smiles.

“And I wanted to run away...How did you say it, the other night? A pain in the ass?

- I have a weak spot for witches,” he says cheerfully.

Alice tells herself that she really doesn’t know this guy. What she knows about him she got from Philippe who sometimes let out a sentence or a comment. Little by little, Alice had made up her own opinion about him, without a doubt a very false one.

The waitress brings the beef ribs. In a sweep, she takes the ashtray, straightens the candle which is tilting, then walks away called upon by others.

She listens to him speak of his life, the choices he has made, sometimes made for him; about love. When he stops talking, she does not question him. He says that he has loved each woman that he has caressed, those he lived with and the one-night stands.

He remembers them all. Perhaps he remembers with a certain tenderness the ones who didn't demand anything in return.

"To you I'm a demon. But I was taught that women are the compensation of angels. In my family, seducers are saints."

As a smile appears out of the corner of his mouth, he adds maliciously:

"You have judged me with such merciless severity! Totally merciless! Just now, still... You were about to kill me for rumors that nobody has proven to you. If only for the sake of morality... If you heard your own carelessness, you would approve of me.

- No.

- I love as much as I can."

Alice puts down her cutlery. She crosses her arms, tries to smile.

"It's not good enough. I'm a romantic.

- I will not be able to love you like you want me to.

- Well, too bad! Let's stay friends, then.

There would be no point in pleading more. A sport, he bends his head.

"Let's see, he says, let's see."

As the waitress passes he waves at her with his index finger in the air, like in school.

"Coffee?"

Alice agrees.

"Two coffees and a cognac."

Then, silence, she smokes, her eyes off in the distance toward the line of trees. Pascal savors his cognac.

"What are you thinking about?"

- Of this maze I'm diving into, that should make me happy."

He laughs.

"Happy? Really, you are a child!"

- And you, a guy too old to understand me."

Again they become quiet. For quite a while this time. When their gazes cross, Alice turns hers away less quickly, accepting the

emotions vibrating in their eyes.

The tables empty one by one. The air is heavy and warm and smells of orange. The roses in the vase have lost petals. The petals curl up on the table, burned by the wax dripping from the candle. Sometimes, a gust of wind jolts the poplars outside, and Alice, as if lashed by the movement of the jarring branches, shudders with desire. The rain is not far away.

Everything is quiet around them. They are the last guests.

He wanted to walk along the river before going home. The wind made the dense and black water rise in folds. They barely take a few steps before it starts to rain. Hard and warm, the first few drops crash down on the ground with a flat sound. A crack of thunder sounds. The air becomes yellow and dusty. The car is more than a hundred meters away.

“Quick!” says Alice.

But Pascal slows down and pulls her close to him. He puts his hands on her hips, looks at her, whispers her name. She hears his breath, a short breath, wheezy between his closed teeth, a breath mixing with the noise of the wind in the trees, and the noise of the rain which increases and intensifies with violence. She tries to smile, her face whipped by the rain. Her legs shake a bit from having drunk too much. She shakes, and it's no longer because of the wine. They face each other in the dark. Lightning strikes, breaking up the darkness. The dark feels like a coat and at this moment Alice smells his mouth near hers, she recognizes the smell of the wine, the perfume of the coffee, the smell also of the only cigarette he smoked.

When they separate from each other, the rain falls more gently.

“Are you ok? he asks.

- I'm ok, she whispers.

- You're not cold?”

He pulls her to the side toward the branches. They slide on the

mud, hold on to one another, they don't laugh, they kiss again; feel their wet clothes with their fingers, their wet hair... To just fall down right there, on the ground embracing this man, united with him, to die for.

"Your cheeks are frozen, he says as he holds her tightly. Let's hurry to the car," and with the same movement he uses to push her toward the car, he holds her back to kiss her. They walk stuck to one another, their shoes tacky with mud, surrounded by a smell of wet moss and bark. Eventually they leave the path, walk down the street under the street lights on the gleaming asphalt. They both have twinkling eyes and a sore mouth.

He opens the car door.

"Where do you want to go?

- Where you want to..."

The desire dissipates, suddenly.

He makes sure she gets in before he walks around the car. She brushes aside a strand of hair, stretches out her legs. An unexplainable sadness overcomes her. She hears the car starting. Soon they are on the highway. They go very fast, faster than the other cars. She doesn't pay attention to anything except Amalia Rodriguez's voice singing in her head. Fragile and violent, she creaks like chalk. She evokes days gone by, a man, the silhouette of a man who was neither quite there not quite absent. A man she had wanted to suffer as much as she had because of his continuous betrayals.

Suddenly Alice realizes that she did not stop thinking about Philippe while Pascal kissed her. And that she still thinks about him, while squeezing Pascal's fingers, as he drives with only one hand, the other to hold on to hers.

## Chapter 11

Two glasses, ice cubes, orange juice...Alice puts it all on a tray, hesitating in front of a nearly empty jar of olives. There's not enough to fill a ramekin. So, no olives. The thought that there's never anything to eat in her kitchen strikes her. Completely opposite of Juliette who lets her fruits and vegetables rot in the fridge, who stuffs her cabinets with pasta, sugar and flour as if war was about to break out.

Juliette's face floats on the door. The contemptuous expression of her eyes with faded irises: "You are going to sleep with him? In the same bed as...?"

Alice knows that this sentence is nothing but the echo of her own thought. She lifts the tray and leaves the kitchen. No more thinking about Juliette. If Alice isn't careful, in ten years' time, she will be just like her, trait for trait. Same precocious weariness of the eyes, same withered mouth.

When she reaches the doorway of the living room, Pascal is kneeling in front of the low coffee table, an open folder in front of him. He reads a newspaper clipping. Alice freezes with the clinking of the glasses. He puts the clipping back and gets up.

"You made me wait so long, he says, taking the tray from her, I got my revenge reading things about you..."

- Don't do it again."

He laughs and pulls her against him.

"Do you want me?"

- Yes.

- This folder was open. I read nothing else but very public things...A newspaper fragment, I promise.

- You could have happened upon other things...the life of a guy in jail.

- The famous professional secret."

He clowns around trying to relax her. Alice's look softens but



she doesn't smile. He says that she makes him think about Lewis Carroll's heroine, always passing a mirror. A little girl, he adds, who can't stand being big, and who lives in another world, in another dream.

"I desire you, Alice! he whispers. I have for such a long time...I want your ass...If you only knew!"

He puts a hand on her crotch. She pushes it away.

"Leave me alone!"

He looks dejected, a look she would like to bring back to light.

"What's the matter?"

- I don't like your manners!" she says.

He looks at her, surprised, then he laughs and walks over to the bar. He takes out a bottle of whiskey, pours himself a big glass. Then he begins to walk around in the room with quick steps. He tries to avoid her stare, she knows that he is spying on her from the corner of his eyes, furious, trembling. "My manners, he mumbles, my manners..." She faces him, distraught. Juliette just won the first round. It's suddenly so obvious that she wants to throw herself in Pascal's arms. But she does not move.

"Should I not have said ass?...Madame is romantic...She wants to come without dirty words...Come properly...And I never understood, sad jerk that I am."

He stops in front of the piano, lifts the cover, hits an angry note.

"I am vulgar, what do you want?"

Another note, higher this time.

"Vulgar, libertine...You haven't seen anything yet..."

She is nestled on the couch and starts to laugh out loud from the words that tumble out, too big, too strong. If he turns around, she knows that he will relax. But he doesn't turn around. Suddenly, his hand touches several keys. A melancholic melody arises.

"You want to change what cannot be changed, Alice..."

Who was it, before him, that had already pronounced these

words? The father? Philippe?

She remains silent.

“You have too many principles...And I love free women! The two of us will not last...”

She waits for the continuation, but he is quiet and plays. A dim, rainy light, hurting the eyes, enters through the windows. Tiny details of wood veneer, raindrops flowing together, separate again on the bright windows. In the rising music that she tries to recognize and name, she observes the purple lightning, the next clasp of thunder. The anxiety which grasps her heart pulls her up, pushes her toward the man standing, playing with his head lowered, slumped shoulders, one knee leaning on the stool. The sweat makes her shirt stick to her waist. So many images of him, all together. This violent love she feels for him, love without hope, frozen from fear of suffering, love beating in her heart like a door knocks in the wind, her sleeplessness while Philippe slept, the questions asked in a neutral or slow voice. A love like an illness from which she thought she was healed each time, and that was continuously reborn and stronger.

Music. Music. As long as it makes him stay! In the end, between them it's like between children. The first to say sorry, to say I'm scared, will lose.

He gently plays the last chord, turns his head.

“You recognized it?”

She shakes her head.

“Should I?”

- Schumann. *The Carnival*...he says disdainfully. I played it poorly.” Keeping his eye on her, he pulls the stool closer and sits down.

She watches him roll up his sleeves to above his elbows, is dazzled by this gracefulness that he shows her, even more stunning because it is slow and deliberate. His legs apart, head held high, he is very handsome. The curve of his forehead, the line of his

eyebrows, the mouth with its capricious bend, the bulge in his unwashed jeans. The light throws a dark shimmering reflection on the neckline of his shirt, revealing the silkiness of the skin. She focuses on just watching his hands which he crosses over one thigh, finishing her cigarette in slow puffs, spaced out. The voices of the late-night people in the street are in the background. There is the muted tick-tock of the clock on the mantle.

Once her cigarette butt is put out in the ashtray, she does not know anymore what to do, she can't stand the silence, this tension between them. When he suddenly stops, she is about to get up to serve herself a drink.

“I loved kissing you, earlier.”

Alice leans against the back of the couch.

“Me too...,” she objects.

He raises his eyebrows, without letting her go with his eyes.

“I thought we had settled the question about Philippe

- You had, perhaps...Not me...

- Do you think that...?”

He sees her provocative smile and finishes his glass in one gulp. Then he says shit. Shit, shit, he repeats. He doesn't look at her anymore, but stares at a spot on the carpet.

Feeling suddenly relaxed and moved to tears, she throws herself into his arms with her whole body.

“You are so difficult...Why?” he mumbles hugging her close.

The kiss she plants on his mouth has that truth in it which words don't have, passionate, humble, completely crazy. A new string, she thinks, which resembles the old...Maybe he will track down Philippe, and their rogue secrets. But then again maybe not. Perhaps he is sincere.

“Wait!”

She has to talk to him about Philippe, tell him how much she suffered. That she wants to experience something else with him, a peaceful love, founded on a contract...or on a child. But words

suddenly seem ridiculous.

In their hurry, their clothes don't slip off easily. The buttons get stuck; shoelaces have triple knots. The belt buckle refuses to slide open, their hands grab fiercely, their nails scratch each other; they let out a cry, the one who got hurt, the one who hurt the other.

Surprised to be naked, their fetters of fabric and leather lying at their feet, they move apart. Streaks of moonlight run across the walls. The entire room dances in Alice's eyes, the ridge of a wall, the frame of a painting, the body of a lamp, and, in this fragmentary vision of space, Pascal's eyes appear again and again, black and weighty, enlarged as if under a magnifying glass.

He pushes her out of the living room, she guides him down the hallway, enters in the sultriness of her room, then melts onto the bed. Just enough time to notice a face outlined in the darkness and she sinks under the caresses of rapid hands. "Alice." Her name pronounced in a vibrating voice, so soft that it rips her heart. "Alice." She will not cry. Once as a child, she climbed along a steep drop, one hand holding onto the rock, the other flailing. She remembers the anxious voice of the father calling her from below. Was that before or after Sassou's departure? What was she doing up there? Stones, there was nothing but stones. And the sky. Stones, sky, and the sharp drop. The bitter taste of death on her lips. Her eyes in awe before the emptiness. It had given her a sort of high, an impression of intense existence in the summer light, when she could die.

"Are you sleeping?"

She should make him leave right away.

## Chapter 12

When she opens her eyes, startled, it is morning and she is alone. She feels the force of the quiet in the light flooding the room. A breath of air from the garden swells the chiffon curtains, as if it came from an entire forest. Her eyes make the rounds of the room, the books, the lamp, the small goddess in plaster sitting on the window sill, and her heart beats very fast, very hard. Where is Pascal? Did he leave?

Finally she gets up. She goes into the living room, then to the kitchen. To have a clear conscience, she pops her head into the bathroom. Not a word of goodbye, no trace. Nothing.

Slowly, tainted by resignation, she finishes the ridiculous movements of the morning ritual. The kettle on the fire, four spoons of coffee in the filter, the rounded and black coffee maker that needs to be rinsed out. While the water warms up, she lights her first cigarette. She thinks of nothing. She is there, in the middle of the silence of the kitchen, without noticing the cans and the dirty glasses lying around on the sideboard. When the water kettle sings, she pours the water over the grounds, first a few drops to release the aroma, then enough to fill the cup. She waits, her hand suspended. She pours more water, attentive, a sure gesture. Instinctually, she knows that the coffee is done. She puts the kettle back on the fire, throws the filter into the drain. She finds a white coffee cup in the cupboard, her favorite. No sugar. Alice likes her coffee bitter.

She drinks several cups, her eyes fixed on the sky which looks divided up in the squares of the window. The weather will be beautiful, she thinks. A perfect day. Spring is sweet and she is alone. She can't manage to separate from this thought: Alone; it is such a pain, sharp, unbearable, she almost wails. Before, she never feared loneliness. But little by little, fear had taken hold, invading the entire space of her consciousness. Now she suffers from

everything, from day as it rises to night as it falls.

Several minutes go by trying to battle against the distress she feels. What had she hoped for? Things had happened, she had had her adventure, this famous and long awaited “night” waiting almost seven years. There was really nothing else to do from now on than to face life, head on. Work, sleep, forget this need for love. She turns on the radio, then turns it off, bothered by the noise coming out from it. Her head hurts, as well as her entire body. In the living room her eyes collide with the piano and it is as if somebody knocked her legs from under her. She doesn't know what do for the rest of the day. Go to her sister's like every Sunday, work or hide at the movies. She realizes suddenly that she does not have Pascal's phone number, she can't stop thinking about him.

Alice calls information. Unlisted number.

In the mirror she sees her eyes darkened by eye liner, her pale complexion. Thirty eight years old. At her age, all-nighters are worth nothing. She dissolves two aspirin in a glass of water and goes back to bed.

The phone rings around noon. Alice was listening out for this sound. She jumps up and answers. It's only Juliette.

“Are you coming? I've prepared a fish couscous.”

With fish? Alice says no; she has work. She is exhausted. Juliette worries, offers to send Patricia over. Because of her insistence Alice promises to come over for coffee.

It's after 2pm when Alice parks in the alley of Louis-Le-Grand. Rows of apartment buildings covered in graffiti. The periodic rumbling of the train that passes by a few streets over makes the walls of the city vibrate until well after midnight.

The stairway has the mustiness of poverty. At each landing, a plant tries to maintain an illusion.

The last step creaks. The white wood door with a *mezuzah* fixed to the right doorframe. Alice turns her head away.

Patricia opens the door, headphones covering her ears, the Walk-Man hanging from her belt. Blond, with green eyes darkened by thick eyelashes, curly hair, she does not look at all like Sassou. But every time her niece provokes the same kind of reaction in Alice. It's Sassou, without being her. Her entire face invites this impression which dissipates as soon as her mouth opens. Sassou disappears. There's only Patricia. Then again, with her smile, Sassou comes back.

“Hi auntie...Come in!

- Hi sweetie.”

The hallway smells like fish and over-ripe melon. In the kitchen stacks of plates, dirty pots and pans, flies buzzing over the garbage. Patricia notices the look of her aunt and closes the door.

“Come,” she mumbles. She puts the headphones around her neck like a necklace and smiles. “You're here, so I will stop the music.”

Alice shakes her head reproachfully.

“Issues with your mom again?

- We don't get along...I can't take it!

- Oh sure you can.”

Patricia puts a finger on her lips and moves aside for Alice to pass. Juliette, Edmée and the children are around the table. The father is not yet here. Félix is absent, as usual. At the sight of Alice they all get up in a racket of moving chairs and go to kiss her. First the two sisters, then the four little ones.

“And where is dad?

- He shouldn't be long, he's playing *boules*”, says Juliette who adds: “I kept your plate warm in the oven.

- I'm not hungry!

- Make me happy...I found *bourri*.<sup>5</sup>

- Give me a beer.”

Alice sits down with a sigh. The junk filled apartment reflects

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<sup>5</sup> Mullet (fish).

Juliette, her battle to survive. After a silence, the yelling and screaming resumes between the little ones.

Juliette sends them to play in their bedroom.

“So?” asks Juliette.

- Nothing, says Alice sipping her beer.

- You look tired.

- I didn't sleep well.

- Because of work?

- Yes...

- Not for other reasons?

- No, says Alice, fishing for her box of cigarettes in the bottom of her purse. She gropes around searching between papers to find her lighter.

“What are you looking for?” asks Edmée.

- A light.

- Here!” says Juliette and she throws her a big box of matches.

Alice opens the box. Used matches lie next to new ones.

“Oh, this obsession!” Alice grumbles, pulling out the tips of darkened wood.

Juliette laughs quietly. She is forty-six years old. She looks ten years older. Her hair is graying, her body is heavy, deformed by her three pregnancies; her legs are sheathed with support hose to manage her varicose veins.

When Robert was found dead in the back room of a bar, she did not complain. She simply dressed in black. She was always hard, stayed hard, like the oldest sister whose life was never fulfilled. Alice gave her money until she found a job as a waitress in a cafeteria. Her shift starts at six in the morning. At 1pm she is free to go.

Sitting straight, Edmée, bright red lipstick, hair done and loaded with perfume.

“Can I serve you some *bourri*?” repeats Juliette.

Alice picks up a one-eyed doll lying on the floor. From its



ripped chest a few horsehairs stick out.

“She is really ugly, Alice says with a sigh.

- She’s known a few hands, this one, exclaims Juliette, who puts a plate of steaming couscous in front of Alice. She’s been tortured for fifteen years!”

Sitting around the partly cleared table the three sisters begin to tell each other about the happenings of the week. They let sentences run with silences, with gaps, eyes scanning the children that come and go, wondering if the little ones listen in, and to what extent they understand what the adults are talking about.

When the children finally close the door to their room, only then do they talk about Félix. Edmée tells them about their last fight: about a burned dinner which caused things to degenerate into screams and insults. Félix raised his hand. Edmée defended herself.

“I hate you! says Edmée. I have to get a divorce!

- So you can live from allocations? Juliette says ironically.

- He’ll give me alimony!

- It won’t be enough.

- I’ll manage.

- Don’t worry; if it’s necessary, I’ll help you, says Alice.

- Ah, you! says Juliette with barely contained anger. Don’t encourage her!

- She’s unhappy! Alice asserts.

- And the children? Do you think about them? The oldest isn’t even thirteen.

- They haven’t been spared anything...Not screaming, not hitting...Now that’s really helpful!

- It will be worse after the divorce, says Juliette with a grimace

- Why? Alice insists.

- A woman without a husband is vulnerable.

- And a woman who lives with an ass?

Edmée breaks out in a nervous laughter.

“That’s right, you said it, he’s a real ass. An ass coupled with a tyrant. Nothing interests him except eating. Never a word to his children, never a word to the neighbors. And he speaks to me like I am his slave.

- You don’t know how to take him! Says Juliette.

- I’ll gladly give him to you!

- Do you know what I think? You are too spoiled. If you worked, it would occupy your mind and you would stop whining!

- I am tired of life...

- Enough, you’re not fifteen years old anymore... Your dreams of love, bury them already!

- Shit! says Edmée.

- You see, we can’t say anything to you...” Juliette says triumphantly.

That is the tone on Sundays when the father is absent. Juliette teases Edmée who stiffens with rage. Alice referees their fights with growing anger, which she hides by smoking cigarette after cigarette.

“You’re driving me crazy! Edmée says, annoyed. I am forty years old, he’s sixty. What do I have to do? Give up on life? Stay glued to the TV?

- Ahem, scoffs Juliette. Forty three, fifty eight...

- What is she saying? Edmée sputters, turning to Alice.

- That you are forty-three years old and Félix fifty eight, Alice translates, unconcerned.

- She’s making fun of me? While this guy’s killing me?

- This is the only thing that can make you die! Juliette says, waving a knife. Like Robert!” She stops talking, puts the weapon on the table, because Patricia has entered the room.

“Go to your room!” Juliette commands.

The young woman pours herself a cup of coffee and tastes it, eyes fixed on the wall. Alice knows that her niece dreams only about leaving, that she will run away with the first man who proposes to her.

“Since your husband died, you’re doing better!” Edmée suddenly yells out forgetting in her rage that Patricia is there.

- Do not compare us! Juliette screams, besides herself.

- Why?

- Robert gambled away everything, the children’s food, the furniture. Remember when I came home to bailiffs emptying my house...

- Shh! Alice cuts in, but too late.

Patricia breaks down, her face in her hands. Alice wants to hold her, but the young girl pushes her away. She starts to kick all around her, the table, the buffet, the TV stand.

“Patricia! shouts Juliette, who gets up.

- You, be quiet!” her daughter instructs, shooting darts with her eyes. Crushed, Juliette sinks onto her chair. She can’t manage to calm herself down like she used to, by giving her a slap in the face.

“I love you, my daughter...Forgive me.

- Your love? What love? You’re destroying me!” Patricia screams, shaking the pile of clothes stacked on the chair. Change, papers fall from the pockets. She takes a jean jacket from the heap with the label *Bad Boy* and puts it on. Before leaving the room, she grumbles between her teeth:

“You don’t know how to say anything but ugly things!”

The front door slams. Alice gets up.

“I’ll take care of it, she says quickly to Juliette. If you see dad, kiss him for me...”

Alice hits the stairs, rushes out into the alley. She sees Patricia walking slumped over toward the train station and catches up with her in a few strides.

“Will you come with me to Paris?”

- No.

- I’ll take you to a movie.

- Leave me alone.

- After, we can go out for pizza.”

With tight jaws, the young girl says no again shaking her head, no, no and no, but her steps slow down.

“Make me happy!”

Patricia stops in front of Alice, her face suddenly bare. There is so much suffering in those eyes that Alice shudders, overwhelmed. She recognizes that look from the eyes of the detainees she defends, it's the look of Sassou by the door.

“Don't be afraid. Your life will not be like ours. You will live with a man full of love and happiness, because you want to be loved.

- I hate her, Patricia says sobbing. If you only knew how much I hate her.

- Don't say that!

- She's a witch. She hates men. She put her poison into my veins!

- Juliette loved your father, Alice says gently. He loved her too. But then there are those damn cards. Sometimes your dad didn't play for months, for the love of your mother and for the love of all of you. When he'd begin playing again, he always thought he would win big so that he would finally be able to give you what he dreamt of giving you. A beautiful apartment, furniture, trips. He really believed it.

- He never thought about anyone else but himself. Never about us.

- He started playing poker when you lived in Argenteuil. Those gray apartment buildings and the noise from the trains made him despair. Him, he came from the sun, from a town that looked like a garden, with low houses facing the ocean. He went crazy.

- He didn't need to have children!”

Alice stops talking, runs out of arguments.

A minute passes. With her eyes, Patricia makes the rounds of her universe. The laundry hanging from the windows, the scattered trash. When the girl looks back at her, Alice sees that the distress

has subsided.

“Got a cigarette?” Patricia asks. And she lifts her head toward their apartment building, to defy her mother who must be looking on from the window.

As they walk toward the car, she grinds her teeth and says:

“Poor woman...Poor bitch!”

## Chapter 13

The pizza was barely better than the movie, burnt on the edges, undercooked inside. But Patricia uttered no critique.

Back home, Alice listens to her messages. Patricia is curled up on the couch like a cat. Three messages unwind, one from Béatrice, tender, imperative. “I love you lots. Let’s have dinner tomorrow night.” Pascal did not call.

“It’s nice at your place, says Patricia once it becomes silent again.

- You should tell your mother you are here.” Alice looks at her watch.

“Are you kidding?”

Alice frowns.

“She will worry...”

- There are nights when I don’t come home...She’s never told you?

- No,” says Alice, surprised. And after a silence: “She doesn’t ask where you sleep?

- Sure...

- And what do you tell her?

- That I’m at your place.”

The answer worries Alice. She’s bluffing, she immediately thinks. Juliette would have checked. Unless Juliette was afraid to make the same mistake with Patricia that had been so fatal with Sassou.

“If what you say is true...

- Well, obviously, what do you think?

- And where do you go?

- Here, there... What does it matter?

- But where, exactly?

- At girlfriends’, Patricia says defiantly.

- If it’s just at girlfriends’, then why do you tell Juliette you

come to me?

- So she doesn't go digging up shit!

- She doesn't like the people you hang out with?"

Patricia grimaces in disgust.

"She can't stand anyone..."

She is provoking me, Alice thinks again, while forcing herself to be patient. She looks for help in her niece's eyes, but Patricia's tone and attitude make that difficult, collapsed as she is on the couch, twirling a lock of hair around her index finger.

"I don't like that you use me.

- I don't have a choice!

- You lie to your mother, you lie to me...

- What are you going to do to me? says Patricia mockingly.

- Do? I am not going to spank you. But I can no longer trust you.

- I don't care...In any event, I am alone."

Silence settles over the room, deepened by Alice's stupefaction. She looks at Patricia, her blouse missing a button, frayed cuts on the jeans. It's a look she wants. The grunge type. The latest insult of suburban kids. But on her feet, soft and elegant shoes.

"Alone? Explain that better, says Alice, back on her feet.

- I'm not going to draw you a picture.

= Juliette isn't easy, but...

The girl scowls. She goes over to the window, opens it up and the warm balmy air from the garden enters the room.

"I'm fed up of being poor..." says Patricia without turning around.

Alice goes over to her, leans on the railing of the balcony. She has to let her speak, hear her out.

"You have no idea..., Patricia murmurs.

- I have lived a long time without a cent.

- Shit, one would never say so..."

Patricia turns around, and with her hand motions to the living

room.

“Your paintings, your rugs, your sculptures... You don't live like us, in Argenteuil.

- I have studied. Worked. Do as I do.

- It's not money that interests me anyway... I'm fed up, that's all.”

And in the same breath:

“I've already thought about dying, you know... Several times.”

Alice's loses her breath. The whole drama from her youth comes back to her, the story of the father, the one of Edmée, of Juliette. Words bounce around in her head, surely pronounced by Juliette, not new ones, nor original ones. Words that the young girl will not hear.

“What is wrong?

- Nothing.

- You are beautiful, young... Life is yours...

- The whole mess, yes...

- You have friends?”

Patricia sneers.

“Confused ones, like me...

- Who?

- I'm not going to give you names, like to the cops.”

Alice stops talking, her eyes fixed on the treetops. She feels ants climbing up her legs. The softness of the air, the perfume from the garden make her numb. The weather is good for roaming the streets all night long, that's really what Patricia wanted to do and Alice prevented her from doing, because of school in the morning. She thinks about Juliette, about Sassou, whose story she should tell Patricia. Later, not right now. Not tonight in any event. The right time has passed. Or maybe it has not yet arrived. It's not cowardice, just the feeling that Sassou's secret doesn't belong to her, that it belongs to an entire family.

Patricia sighs, shifts about a bit. Finally she says: “I'm counting



on you, for mom...I feel bad for her.

- You don't love her." Alice says weakly.

Patricia slips out into the living room. The conversation is over, she won't say anything else. She drags her feet, turns on the TV. She asks for a glass of Coca-Cola that she drinks while puffing on a cigarette. She doesn't watch TV, doesn't focus on anything, she looks at her nails, gets up to look at herself in the mirror, sits back down with a sigh of boredom. Alice sends her to bed. Patricia gives her a kiss and goes without protest.

Alone, Alice picks up a book. I've thought about dying...Me too, me too, Patricia. She sees the studio on Clichy, the mattresses piled up against the wall, the cracked faucet, the grimy walls of the small yard. All the smells of her childhood. To die...Suddenly, all the things she should have said earlier pour out like water. Me too...The day Sassou left, and still other days....to die, when I would read books, take exams, love Philippe, lose Philippe...To die...One always understands too late...

She tosses the book down and goes back out on the balcony. She doesn't look at the moon, or at the lights shining an antique gold tint onto the Luxembourg fountain. She can only think about Patricia's accusations.

When comparing her means to those of her mother, Alice felt a burst of blood pumping in her heart, like a deadly flood. Such a remark was bound to surface one day, although Alice had helped Juliette, spoiled the children, paid for their vacations at the beach and in the mountains. The girl has no idea about those checks at the end of the month. Nor should she. That would only deepen the gulf between her and Juliette.

The weather got cooler.

Alice closes the window, draws the curtains. She turns off the lights, and goes to her room. In front of Patricia's room, she stops. The door ajar reveals a sleeping shape. Careful not to make the parquet boards creak, Alice crosses the hallway.

She is almost sleeping when a thought strikes her.

Patricia is right.

Alice wanted to get at Juliette, dominate her, crush her. Strip her of her status as the oldest child.

She has never been really aware of this, but each time she so easily paid a bill or several, she felt an immense satisfaction. Two, three times, Juliette struggled on her own. Very quickly, she'd buckle. "I need...If it's not too much...I will pay you back..."

That humble voice will never erase the one who had said to the father, hit, that had said, banish...with such vehemence, such unspeakable cruelty.

Since then the oldest was Alice: for the father, for Edmée, for Gérard in Israel. Alice, who has imposed their name on everybody in this France where they arrived poor, stripped of everything. Alice, the lawyer.

## Chapter 14

It has been a few days, everything overflows, as if the full measure of silence had been reached. She is alive, Alice is sure of it. How could one imagine her dead, anyway? The family survived, of course...ransacked, dismantled...but alive. No, she's alive. Hiding under another name. Alice must have passed her a hundred times without seeing her.

Sassou...On board the boat during the crossing she kept Alice's hand in hers the whole way...She spoke to her about Paris, a big city, she said, you will see, more animated than Tunis, cars everywhere, movie theaters, cafés, schools...Don't cry...We will have a beautiful house, we will be happy, don't cry, don't cry... Look at daddy, he isn't crying, is he? The two of them standing there, on the bridge of the ship, among the other passengers, under the lustrous blue light of the sky. The air was fresh, salty on the lips. Breathe, Sassou kept saying. Deeply. Like that, bravo. Stand in the wind. It's fun, no?

And then in Paris...She would come home with combs, ribbons, a broach, all bought for four cents, it's for you, she would say...When you grow up I'll take you out dancing...The expression in her bright blue eyes when she said it...Juliette would intervene, she's only ten, don't give her any ideas...Sassou's smile. She isn't mean, just grumpy, she would say.

She would forgive everything...

After taking Patricia to the station, Alice goes to her office. "You have dark rings under your eyes" Patricia had said as she kissed her goodbye. Then dashing off: "Don't betray me..."

"Get out of here!" Alice had answered. Laughter, the car door slamming. The jacket labeled *Bad Boy* moves away, squeezing its way through the crowd at the Saint Lazare station... Driving fast Alice turns on the radio and listens to jazz. Suzanne is already at

the office, dressed in a green latex dress with a leather belt and high heels. A pile of letters and newspapers is heaped on her desk.

“Coffee?”

Alice smiles and opens the newspaper *Libération*.

“Yes, thank you...Did you have a nice week-end?”

- I have a new friend...He gave the little one a toy.”

Suzanne hands her a cup, props her rear on the armrest of a chair.

“This time, I didn't say a peep about the drugs and the jail...”

They look at each other, complicity.

“I told him I worked with you...He knew your name. He was impressed.”

Alice brings her cup into the bathroom, rinses it, puts it on the shelf.

“Ready to get to work?”

- Ready..., Suzanne says, without moving.

- Get me Mrs. Durell on the phone. This afternoon I'll be in Fresnes. Etienne Chander's trial starts in ten days...”

Suzanne yawns. Alice goes into her office and closes the door. The spell that her job has always cast on her works again. The morning passes. Beatrice calls around 11am. They'll meet up at 8pm, at Sélect. Ten minutes later, Juliette, taking advantage of her break in the cafeteria, calls Alice.

Alice reproaches her: “You could have called yesterday. You would have gotten your daughter back.

- I was afraid to, says Juliette. Did she...talk about me?”

- No, lies Alice.

- I can't handle her anymore. Help me!

- I wouldn't know how.

- She admires you...She wants to be like you.

- Be honest with her...Talk to her...” Alice throws out in the same breath: “Talk to her about Sassou.”

She immediately regrets the advice. Juliette has already hung

up. An hour later as she is getting ready to leave for Fresnes, Suzanne announces Edmée on the phone.

“What did you say to Juliette...? She can’t stop crying.

- Enough already! Alice sputters. I can’t take your dramas anymore!

She adds in a low voice, her hand on her forehead to fight back a migraine:

“Comfort her...Tell her I am sorry...Tell her I love her.”

Alice runs off from the office. The only thing missing now is a call from the father. And he will call, Alice is sure of that. Juliette probably got to him also.

Alice gets in her car, turns the key and starts the engine. But her hands shake, the steering wheel slips, and her car hits the bumper in front. Nothing serious. Not even a broken light, but she is choked from the jolt.

She turns the car off, feels tears coming. Calm down. Find new landmarks. It’s been too many years. The family. The Saada clan. Three neurotic women tied to their father. Their lives are wasted, each without a man. She has to break the seal of the curse. But how? How?

She finds herself back on the highway. Then in front of the gate of Fresnes. A few moments later Etienne Chander enters the box. He does not complain. He says he’s ok; he’s holding it together. He confides in her. You are strong, he says with a big smile; you will get me out of here. Alice looks at him coldly. A hothead. Aggressive and paranoid, the psychiatrist had noted. His folder is loaded, three months with deferment, then two years of real jail-time. This time he is charged with complicity in the murder of a woman beaten to death before being thrown into the Saint-Martin canal. He says that he didn’t kill, that he just watched the event and perhaps, thought Alice, egged on the killer. “I was wasted. I didn’t realize that he wanted to kill her...” He repeats himself like a machine. “I was wasted...wasted...” For months since his

imprisonment he has not said a word of regret. Alice observes the bulging eyes, the thin lips. Orphaned by his mother, raised by the DCF, placed as a mechanical apprentice in a garage from where he took off. Lived off begging and theft. At twenty, jail has become his second home.

“Do you b’lieve me?”

Alice sighs. “It’s the jurors you have to convince to avoid a life sentence.

He suddenly understands the danger he is in, grabs Alice by the elbow.

“I didn’t kill her...I swear...I didn’t get that she could croak... We were just having fun...c’mon.

- It would be fun for you to be beaten to death? says Alice in a weary tone.

- In the neighborhood, all the guys beat their women...There was nothing bad about that...

- Yeah, right. They would ask for more.”

He bites his lip, stupid.

“Just don’t say those kinds of things during the trial. Nobody would appreciate it.

- My mom...I think she died from being beaten,” he says slowly.

Alice consults his folder. If it were true, the jurors would soften. Already the words for the defense are coming together...But no, he’s lying. His mother died of cancer at the Villejuif hospital.

“It’s written here..., she explodes, waving the death certificate. Who gave you that idea?”

He sinks down on his chair and stares at his hands.

“The police have run their investigation...They know everything about you...Tell the truth...And if you can manage to think about the horrible death of this woman...”

His protruding eyes remained fixated on her lips, as if the guy was trying to learn a lesson by heart.

On her way back, Alice stops at a bar to call Suzanne. The young woman reads off her messages. Nothing that can't wait until tomorrow. Pascal Deslandes has not called. That's all Alice wanted to know. She drinks a coffee that's too weak and gets back into her car.

Back home, she takes a shower, washes her hair. A blue linen suit and high heeled pumps. She is ready. Her bag, her keys. One final glance at the silent telephone. Passing through the entryway she takes a quick look in the openwork wrought iron mirror covering the wall, observing this moving spot which pierces the middle of the glass, and toward which she is walking. Her body, her face with its drawn look, her hair; all of her. She does not recognize herself anymore. The time when she still felt like a woman seems long gone.

Passing over the threshold of her building, she sees simultaneously the powdered light of the moon on the Luxembourg fountain, the fine mist rising from the sheaves of water, and the yellow luster of the streetlights on the gates of the garden.

"I have to live," she thinks.

Beatrice is already sitting at a table on the terrace, a glass of port in her hand.

"Hi..." says Alice. She notices her grey silk dress, the gold earrings, envies the ornaments, the confidence in make-up.

"You seem a little down, says Beatrice.

- No."

They look at each other; try to find a way to start a conversation.

"What's new? Beatrice asks, after a silence.

- I slept with Deslandes," says Alice, defiantly.

The young woman smiles.

"Was it good?"

- Do you want details?

- No, thanks, says Beatrice laughing. Let's talk about something else...

- I'm shot. I've had a difficult day.

- Well then, let's go eat.

- I want a child with Pascal!

Beatrice shrugs, fatalistically.

"You're not saying I am crazy?"

- Well, I had a child with a dead person...

- Oh, be quiet!

- It's the truth...

- You were in love, you and Jean...

- Yes..." says Beatrice sounding doubtful. She is quiet. Then, avoiding Alice's look: "Why are you botching up your life?"

Alice does not answer. She looks at the street taken over by a crowd, a springtime crowd, bustling and colorful. The conversation wanes. Then Beatrice says that she is hungry. They hesitate. Should they cross the street and sit down at the Coupole? Alice says she prefers to eat outside. At the Coupole there would be noise and smoke. They end up ordering hotdogs, a salad and a pitcher of wine.

"Do you remember the professor who yelled at me: young woman, calm down?...," Beatrice begins.

They laugh.

"Totally, says Alice. At the time you were into politics... You would come to class with piles of leaflets and with the look of a conspirator.

- I had a lover who was a Trotskyite... I wanted to please him and I spoke for him.

They laugh again.

Beatrice continues: "For a year I would fall asleep on *Das Kapital*... I have never read a more erotic book since..."

- You haven't changed, Alice mumbles.



- I'm wallowing in futility.  
- You are seriousness itself.  
- Because I fuck guys I don't love?  
- Not only.  
- Well, what about my daughter?  
- Laura gives you joy.  
- So, where's the problem here?  
- You're waiting for a devil or a messiah to emerge, one who would change your life... That's the problem.

- Or melancholy," Beatrice puffs, adding:  
"That line from my professor, I'm passing it on to you today:  
Calm down, Alice!

- But I want a child!  
- That's your right, but why with Deslandes? He will crush you  
- Through him I will get my revenge on Philippe, admits Alice  
- That's pretty momentous.

Alice lights a cigarette to hide her emotions. She smokes while looking at the sky.

"Can I help you? Beatrice says hesitatingly.

- There's nothing to do... I lost my mind. It was enough to see him for my lucidity to shatter..." And after a silence: "I haven't managed to make you forget Jean."

Beatrice's expression changes and doesn't answer. "I am sorry" says Alice, suddenly sad. "Sorry," she repeats squeezing her friend's hand.

It's only 10pm. They pay the bill and walk toward the Rosebud. The room is smoky and already dark with people. The air is very warm, despite the open doors. People are drinking shoulder to shoulder, brushing against one another, talking to each other in the narrow passage between the tables and the bar. Heard above the crowd is Rita Hayworth singing *Put the blame on mame, boy...*

Alice is moved, listens to the words. When the voice stops, she whispers to Beatrice:

“These lines, I could have written them. It’s the story of my life.”

A swarthy man with a thin mustache and black eyes, a handsome face on frail shoulders his eyes meet hers. He laughs.

“It’s mine too...” As Alice smiles he adds: “My name is Saïd. And that’s Max.”

There is a disarming simplicity about this man. Alice introduces herself, then Beatrice. As a table becomes available near them, there’s a shuffle. Not knowing quite how it happened, the four find themselves seated together.

“You’re from my country..., says Saïd looking at Alice. Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco?

- Tunisia, says Alice.

- *Tunis el hedra...*” he says, his eyes full of tenderness.

Alice laughs.

“You understand?”

He looks like an intellectual, a slender body, almost fragile, eyes with narrow eyelids, stretched a bit toward his temples.

“Tunis the Green?”

They have to yell to hear one another. Or speak almost into one another’s ear. Alice has forgotten Beatrice. Or pretends to have forgotten her. Because Max is rather handsome and Alice noticed Beatrice’s eyes as they perked up, her smile and her hands too.

An hour later when Beatrice gets up, Max offers to take her home. His car is just around the corner. Beatrice accepts. Alice and Saïd remain alone. Alice talks about Tunisia, the trauma of the departure which erased her already scarce memories. She talks about Arabic, the language she hasn’t forgotten, not her. She says, the words have remained alive in me like embers. Saying this, she thinks about Edmée who gets all fired up listening to Arabic music, her hands on her breasts and her hips swaying, without respect for the father who is watching her, not caring that her husband is practically croaking from rage.

“So, let’s continue in Arabic...” Saïd suggests.

Alice refuses, her Arabic is too mediocre, she understands better than she speaks. Saïd says it’s the same for him with English. They laugh at the comparison.

“And you, where are you from?”

- From the suburbs of Algiers.

- How long have you been in France?

- Fifteen years...My father was in the FLN. He took up arms to get rid of the French.

And me, well I love Paris, the streets, the bars, the booze. You get the paradox?”

Alice nods.

“I have a visa...so it’s a pain. But I don’t have the balls to apply for my citizenship.

- I didn’t realize, Alice says laughing, that the Immigration Service checks in the pants.”

Saïd’s eyes began to gleam.

“You’re a tease, aren’t you?” He motions to the waiter to bring them two more whiskeys.

Soon, Alice stops counting the drinks. Her hair sticking to her temples from sweat, she talks about herself, sometimes dozing off a bit.

With about a dozen other completely drunk customers they step out to the street once the bar closes. It’s cold and humid. Alice shivers, tenses up. Saïd takes off his jacket, throws it around Alice’s shoulders, offers to take her to the taxi stand.

But, from one street to the next, despite their fatigue, they postpone the moment of separation. Saïd talks with bitterness about Algeria. He explains his fear of fundamentalism, talks about his friends who have been assassinated. Alice listens to him, tense.

“I know, she says, it’s terrible!”

Saïd stops walking. He puts his lips on hers.

“My first time kissing a Jewish girl!

- And what do you think? Alice asks, ironic.

- I didn't die from it.

- That's what they say in your family? That Jews kill you?

- Before, we were like fingers on the same hand...But Israel has separated us.

- I have a brother over there..., says Alice in a soft voice.

- Are you a Zionist?

- I don't think so; I've spent some time there...But I do carry the mark of forty years of pain, mourning and rage within me, despite myself.

"Like me, he says. Exactly..."

He takes her hand. They turn onto Boulevard Saint Germain, go up toward Luxembourg. Alice limps. Her pumps have become too small for her swollen feet. Taxis fly by, lights out. Men and women emerge from the entryways of apartment buildings, their faces listless from sleepiness, their steps stumbling. The first workers who will wake up the city.

In front of her doorway, it's Alice this time who bends forward and kisses Saïd.

"I would have been able to love you if I didn't love someone else.

- If you forget him one day...

- I'll call out your name in the street...

- If you call my name, I'll come running...

Alice smiles and puts her hands on Saïd's shoulders.

"You won't come...But I'm touched by your words..."

She looks at him closer, and all of a sudden she breaks out in tears. He hugs her close, awkwardly. He asks her what is the matter. He says: "Answer me, please, answer me." Alice is silent, upset. This body, she knows it, the slimness of the torso, the narrow shoulders, the small bones.

She knows now why she found this man so attractive at the Rosebud: Saïd, it's her father in his younger days, it's the memory

of the father's body when Alice was twelve.

“I am exhausted from battling...Loving without hope...

- There's always a hope...Even far off in time...,” he whispers.

She stands back, notices the weariness of the man, how he tries to keep his eyes open to stay awake. She is upset with herself for having taken advantage of his patience.

He waits for her to hit the code on the keypad. She enters her building, and turns around. Standing with his legs apart, he tilts his head, smiles. And his eyes shine like two black moons.

## Chapter 15

It's very early the same day, barely seven in the morning, when Pascal calls.

"Did I wake you up?"

- I was just getting in the shower..." says Alice, her voice hoarse from exhaustion.

Silence.

"I haven't been able to call you earlier, he apologizes. I've been so busy.

- Me too..."

Another silence. Alice reaches for her cigarettes, changes her mind. She smoked way too much the night before.

"Are you good?"

- And you?

- Aside from work...It doesn't end."

Yet another silence. Then, with a voice so sweet, so sweet that the young woman in her is stirred, he asks:

"Can I see you tonight?"

Having hoped for this call for two days, she immediately comes up with an excuse.

"I'm having dinner with a friend.

- I want to see you, he retorts. Midnight at Rostand? Does that work for you?

He notices that she hesitates. So, tellingly, before hanging up:

"Make yourself pretty."

She couldn't decide between seeing a movie or working until her date with Pascal.

She finally decided to take refuge on the second floor of Cluny. She loves this room always full of bored older people and people who come to write; the smell of tea and the woodwork and, above all, the view created by the bay windows. It's a bit like being God. The people, down there, walk around not knowing they are being

watched. They move toward their misery or their love in a constant flow.

She stares at people stopped at the intersection and thinks of her brother at the kibbutz. She came here to write to him. Gérard is the only one who knows that Alice could have had a child. She chose him as a confidant, because he is far away and because it seems to her that he can understand everything, after the three wars he's been through.

She begins to write the letter, but the beginning is always difficult. Even though they write each other regularly, she doesn't know much about him. They haven't seen each other in about eight years. To prevent being forgotten, he sends her photos; in some he's with his children, in others, with his wife, Dorit. His hair is thinning, he has a belly, his legs in shorts are strong and tanned. Only the look in his eyes hasn't changed. Under his thick eyebrows, it glimmers like honey.

One day he wrote her that he had taken out a subscription for *Le Monde* so he could follow her in her work, that he cuts out all the articles on her cases. When Alice read that letter she cried. She showed it to her father. He read the letter carefully. Sliding the paper back in the envelope, he said that he feels bad about his only son being absent. About Alice's success he had nothing to say.

Alice started the letter five times, ten times, thinking about Saïd, about Patricia and about their father. A secret bond unites these three, their way of speaking, of walking, of laughing. The day just does not seem to end. The light from the streetlights fights against a twilight which lingers on, in suspense. Down on the street people walk faster in order to get ahead of the nightfall.

Suddenly, Alice puts down her pen and tears up all the pages. Gérard, in the greenness of his kibbutz, with his shorts and his children with hair turned blond by the sun, will not understand anything of her story. The war, that he knows; and the fear of dying. But the fear of aging? This fight will seem absurd to him. He

will answer her: what exactly are you afraid of?

What is it, exactly?

Her chin resting on her fist, she remains dreamy in front of the bay windows. Time goes by. The waiter doesn't come upstairs anymore. She is alone in the empty room, in front of the deserted benches, facing the night which is closing in on the windows. Outside, the same anthill, lit up by bright neon lights and the headlights of cars. Occasionally there is laughter, muted, like enticements.

She leaves Cluny, exhausted. She buys a slice of pizza and nibbles on it while walking. The night is warm, without a moon. It has to be past midnight, because the young kids are hitch-hiking on the streets.

Alice walks faster.

Pascal is leaning over the bar. He is drinking a beer, his body partly facing the street. He sees her, throws a coin on the counter. He approaches her, frozen on the sidewalk. Without a word, he puts his arm under hers. She is braced, tries to say something to him, but he pushes her, guides her. Soon, they are in the stairway, in Alice's apartment.

The door closes behind them, he pins her to the wall and kisses her. She does not notice his features, only the black luster of his pupils that shine in the dark.

"Wait. I'll turn on the lights."

She wants to escape, he catches her, carries her into the bedroom kissing her the whole way. She closes her eyes and lets herself be undressed. The gray walls seem to melt away in an interchange of light and darkness. Sassou is in front of the door. In her blue dress. Patricia is leaning on the balcony. All her ghosts are there, Juliette, dressed in black, Edmée, with too much makeup, the father with his sad face. Pursuit of happiness, the terrible pursuit of happiness. She opens her eyes, peeks at Pascal. He has



crazy hair, his face twisted from the pleasure. Under his eyes, large dark rings. He is handsome. He can help her erase Sassou, Patricia, Edmée and Juliette. He could do it all. But he's a gypsy, a bandit, who steals his loot and runs away.

"Come, he mumbles. Come."

By now she is just a long amorous moan. A grievous sound, almost freaky, when the lips of the man stick to her skin.

Taken like this by his hands, his cock, touched in her depth, something finally releases. She tells him in Arabic that she loves him. In Arabic, the forbidden language, the language of exile, the language of the father. Then she is quiet, for she notices that he is looking at her.

She leans against the wall, pulls the covers over her breasts.

"What are you blabbering? I didn't get any of that..."

- I was inventing words."

He throws her a piercing look.

"You were speaking a different language. Which one?"

- The language of pleasure."

He laughs.

"That's strange. I would have said Arabic."

She gets scared, hides her embarrassment with a laugh.

"What are you looking for..."

- Translate what you said!

- I'm tired. Can we go to sleep?"

He is quiet, not taking his eyes off her. Judging from the smile showing on his lips, he's making fun of her fluster and her avoidance.

"Serve me a whiskey, will you?"

- You know the place... The bar is in the living room.

- I'm your guest" he says, pushing her out of bed.

Standing in front of him, she stares at him, then shrugs and leaves the bedroom. When she returns holding a tray, he is asleep or pretends to be sleeping. She puts the tray down on the

nightstand. He sits up, crosses his arms under his head.

“Did you think about the translation?”

- No.

- Try...! he whispers. Or repeat the words...I loved the sounds...”

She lights a cigarette, sits down on the edge of the bed.

“Is there a woman...in your life?”

- That’s the translation?”

She feels a spurt of blood flooding her heart. “No.”

He takes a glass. He leans on his elbow, tastes the whisky.

“You came looking for me, she whispers, then you disappear... This morning, you call, pressing me...”

He ensconces himself against the pillow. She looks at his profile, and his entire expression changes with the flatness of the nose. This way, his face seems more determined, also more energetic. The thought of his beauty overwhelmed her again.

“I was busy, I told you...”

- Did you see Philippe...?”

He remains silent, his eyes on the wall.

“Yes, you saw him again. You used to call each other every day; used to meet several times a week... There is no reason why the intensity of your friendship should diminish. So, you saw him again. Did you tell him that...”

- No, he says, turning his face toward her. You have to believe me.

- You would have hidden it...? Why?

- I don’t want to make him unhappy.

- Unhappy? she says, stunned. He lives with a woman, he has a child...”

With the tip of his index Pascal caresses Alice’s knee, she stiffens and does not look at him any longer, Alice who stares at the white wall, the nightstand light, the tray filled with glasses and cigarettes. There is dust on the furniture. With her finger, she could

have traced a line, like him, play-drawing on her skin.

“Everything about you makes him sad... That’s just the way it is. In a certain way, he hangs on to you.

- He is happy with this...with Muriel?

- Yes. But you, you represent his youth...his first love. “

She takes her glass, empties it half way. The alcohol does her no good. “He hangs on to you.” These words reverberating in her ears, she knows they will obsess her for a long time.

As if he had guessed her thoughts, Pascal pulls her toward him. She snuggles her head into his armpit.

“Are you sad?

- A little.

- Don’t be. I love women, and I like you...”

She smiles bitterly.

“I know that song, having already heard it coming from Philippe.

- You choose strange guys for lovers.

- I know,” she says.

She turns out the light. She lies down at the edge of the bed, but he takes her in his arms, seeking her feet, her thighs, her hands.

“I’m happy,” he whispers before suddenly falling asleep.

## Chapter 16

A strange relationship has developed between Alice and Pascal, full of suffering for her, free and easy for him.

Several days go by before he calls her. Alice waits. She learns to wait, dizzy from the buzz of life, people, the office, her family. She doesn't want to work anymore. She feels waves of nausea, she is stifled by sadness, she dreams that she falls asleep to wake up a different person. The day goes by, another one comes, yet another. He doesn't call. He hasn't called. She imagines that this love is making her grow old; sometimes she cries.

When he finally does call, at the mere sound of his voice Alice feels a warmth in her heart. She is reborn. Her voice cracks. She asks him how he is, he says fine, before he complains about the weather. This rain, he says, what a drag. She nods, surprised. This rain? So it rained? And you? he says. She answers haphazardly.

He talks about the film he saw the night before, while all she feels is being tortured. The film, she knows it, has been showing for a month at Saint-André-des-Arts, five minutes from her apartment. He was strolling in her neighborhood while she thought he was at home. Why hadn't he rung her doorbell? Something sharp pierces her heart. Death. It feels like death.

Suddenly she thinks that he must not have gone alone to the movie. He was surely with a woman. When the film was done, where did they continue their evening? She feels dizzy. She imagines the couple on the street, their looks, Pascal's, demanding and sensual.

She feels weak. Weak and full of rage. A voice whispers to her that she would be foolish to demand from him what he will never let go of, his freedom. It's only an affair; that's already a lot.

A lot? Why?

She hears herself say that he would make an excellent critic. He laughs, flattered. She listens to him laugh. She imagines it would

be easy to make him happy. He is like a child, inconsistent. She tells him so. He laughs even more, defends himself. He asks why she thinks that about him. She keeps quiet and he insists, playing around; he repeats, explain yourself, why these words? She says she can't justify her impression. She adds that she will never trust him, that he scares her. He isn't laughing anymore.

"You're not trustworthy, she concludes.

- You think?" he mutters, with such an inflection that she feels herself melt.

This argument can remain insignificant; it would be enough to laugh.

"You're angry? Why?"

She doesn't answer, hangs up. She needs a glass of something, whiskey, whatever.

She opens a bottle, drinks straight from it. Behind the bar there is a mirror. She looks at herself with hatred. Her black silk dress is tight at the waist, has a bad neckline. She has never known how to dress. With hard eyes, suddenly ugly, she stares at herself. She thinks her face looks like a mask, frozen. She won't see Pascal again, she won't feel any more pain. From now on, her serenity will be absolute.

Her eyes are drawn to the piano. Under the beam of light from the lamp it resembles a quiet well-bred animal. She lifts the cover, looks at the keys, their perfect alternation. If she had known how to play, she would not have had to fight this invisible oppression. The music would have relieved everything.

When did it all start? She doesn't know. Ever since she knew to observe the game of the people around her, she saw that they were blocked by their limitations that a sudden fury pushed them to throw off their chains. Some, in their distress, would do crazy things that would land them in jail.

The first time she had entered Fresnes, she was shocked. The guard whom she followed was going to lock her up with the others,

the prostitutes and the criminals. She would have darted out of there if the man had not turned toward her to explain something she had not heard. He must have read the mixture of fear, boldness and determination in her eyes. He had said, brusquely, the jail, it bothers you...? She had stiffened, unable to answer.

She could never get used to this borderland, this crossing from the free world to jail. As soon as she parks her car in the lot, her legs start shaking. She slams the door, moves toward the visiting room, one hand on her briefcase, her eyes lowered. Nobody would guess that she is numb with fear, that she is unable to breathe normally.

She flops, undone, into her armchair when the doorbell rings. She listens to the ringing, doesn't move. Her head is heavy, her feet like lead.

Finally, she goes to open.

Pascal is on the doorstep.

"You," she says.

He brings her close to him. His jacket smells like rain. The scarf he wears around his neck tickles her nose. She tries to get away. She says that she wants him to leave her alone.

"You stink like alcohol," he says plainly.

He leaves the room, comes back with a wet towel. He wraps it on Alice's forehead, orders her to lie down. Then he covers her legs with a throw. She watches him, while he takes care of her.

"Do you want coffee?"

- Later."

He brings an armchair over, takes out his cigarettes. With her eyes she tells him that she wants to have one. Pascal offers her his; takes out another one from the pack.

"What are you thinking about?" she says.

- About your hysterical outbursts.

- She smiles.

“I have my worries.

- So you make a scene for me?

- You didn't have to come.

He clenches his jaws.

“You are right, he says. I'm crazy!”

He gets up, paces the living room.

“You don't like it when people break up with you, right?” she mutters, following him with her eyes.

He stops cold.

“Because you want to leave me?”

- My head hurts too much! I don't know anymore, she admits reluctantly.

- When you feel better, send me a notice.

- Stop, she says smiling. Come here next to me!”

And since he can't decide, she holds out her hand.

Mind you, he says, it's true that I try too hard. For a month, I've been running after you, at your office, at your place; I call you, I worry about each of your tantrums. Like this evening...

- Come here! she repeats.

- No, he says, sullenly. I'm too annoyed.

- Fine, she says, folding her arms over her belly. As you like.”

He hesitates, looks at her sideways.

“I'll leave you to sleep!” he says in a tone used only by someone who wants to be held back. She lets him get all the way to the door of the living room. When he is about to step over the threshold:

“Life is strange, she exclaims. You feel that you make all the efforts, and I feel that I don't do anything else. Who is right?

He shrugs, doesn't turn around.

“You are a complicated woman.

- I am afraid of being betrayed.

- What do you want?” he says turning around. He comes three or four steps closer, and blurts out: “That I should ask you to marry me?”

She laughs.

“I want more presence...

- I call you, I come to see you. But that's not enough for you. Because you, you want words. One single “I love you” and you would be reassured.

- Like all women, Alice says gently. Do you know some that don't like terms of endearment?”

He rolls his eyes, irritated. She takes his hand and puts her lips on it. He shivers, while she tenderly kisses each one of his fingers. She looks up, she sees that his lips tremble and his eyes are closed.

“Kiss me”, she breathes.

She holds around his knees, trying to make him lose his balance. He stiffens more, but the tension in him lets go little by little. His look lightens up.

“I don't feel like it,” he defends himself.

- Sure you do, she says, I see it in your eyes. And you're even trembling.

- I'm cold. My clothes are wet.

- Take your jacket off...this scarf.”

She gets up, pushes him. Finally he smiles.

“I would like to..., she begins, sitting next to him on the couch. I would like to...”

She caresses his hair, thinks about the child she would like to have. This desire, which isn't going away anymore, readies her to reach what had always escaped her, the talent to love.



## Chapter 17

The young woman told the story of her whole life in a trembling voice, her mother a secretary in an accounting office, her father a taxi driver doing night shifts. She started by talking about their happiness, their vacations, picnics, the house in Ardèche, bought in order not to have to move around in a trailer the whole summer, to have something of ones' own, roots. Finally, a pretty house in stone with two stories, with a garden in front, a big property out back. The furniture had been chosen one by one, not modern furniture, but country style, in beautiful dark wood, found at fairs or second-hand dealers.

She stops, closes her eyes, bends her neck. Alice offers her a glass of water. The young woman declines.

“You see, she says, hoarse, my grandfather was from Aubenas. Dad used to think nonstop about his childhood home...”

Alice blinks to say that she understands.

The bills were cumbersome. The parents had miscalculated their budget. The father had found a different job, this one under the table, in order to fill the gaps, truck deliveries to do every morning, once his taxi was parked for the day. Very soon, fatigue and lack of sleep made him irritable. He would begin to yell without stop.

One night, his wife was late coming home from the office.

The next day, the father had said in a hateful voice that he would kill her with her lover.

That was six months ago. This is how the hell had started, by a delay of two hours, due to an end-of-year statement of accounts.

Some nights, the father would scramble through the apartment three, four times, open closets, look under the bed. “Don't hide, come out from there if you are a man...Come out, come out!” Other nights, last minute, he would decide not to go to work, hawking over the phone. “You won't be able to warn him! he

gloated, parking himself in front of his wife. I've got you!"

Nobody would come. In the morning, he would fall apart. He would promise to get help. "I'm depressed. I will get better and we'll go to Ardèche."

He had started to take tranquilizers.

Last evening, he had ended up killing her.

The young girl finally stops talking. Alice pulls out a newspaper, flips the pages to find the latest news. The murder was the subject of a short article. The man had used a blunt object.

"You want me to defend your father, right? says Alice in a slow voice looking at the girl.

- Yes.

- I am going to ask you a question... Tell me if you..."

Alice hesitates, moves her pen around.

"...if you still love him...? This murder? Your mother...? Do you understand what he has done?"

It seems to her that, if *her* father had committed such an act, she would not have gotten out of bed anymore, or she would have run far away. But she would not have had the courage to go to a lawyer to ask her for help.

The young woman clenches her fist. Finally she says, in a hoarse voice:

"It's my father!"

And as Alice wrinkles her eyebrows, she adds, almost hostile:

"He killed mom, but it's for him that I feel bad. You can't know the kind of man he was...before. Always gentle and happy.... Available..."

- Still...Alice insists.

- He didn't get it. He messed up everything...Does that give me the right to judge him?"

Alice looks at the young woman: dirty blond hair in a short cut, acne on her cheeks, a frail body drowning in a black dress. She

is twenty years old. Only twenty. Alice feels a repulsion brewing inside. The true crime of the father is the one toward this youth. It's his daughter he should have thought about the day before, before massacring his wife.

Alice lights a cigarette. She will not defend this man. She can't. She is going to give the name of a colleague, when her eyes meet those of the young woman. Troubled, Alice hears herself say:

"I will go and see your father...If he agrees, I'll be his lawyer  
- His name is Georges Doucet," mumbles the young woman.  
On the way out, Alice notices that she has a limp.

"The poor soul!" says the father when Alice finishes her story. The father has seen the picture of Doucet spread all over the newspapers during the last two days. His daughter knew how to seduce the journalists like she knew how to conquer Alice.

"You feel sorry for him?"

- Sure. You don't?

- I don't know."

Outside, the market is done. The merchants are taking down their stalls and packing up the merchandise into trucks. A few transactions take place in haste, without a scale, with some latecomers. Little by little, Belleville Avenue begins to look messy and dirty. Waste is scattered on the ground, crates filled with rotting fruits, carrot tops, broken vegetables pile up around the bottom of the iron poles.

"You don't know? the father says, surprised.

- His daughter upset me...She is twenty years old and she is lost. Her mother killed, her father a killer...What kind of future does she have now?"

Coming from nowhere below the gray skies, the beggars have arrived. Old women, scarves on their heads, young men, old men. In their hands they have a knife or a pocket knife. They choose a vegetable, wash it, stuff it into a plastic bag.

“This is terrible...! Alice starts. A woman almost fell flat on the garbage, saved herself holding on to a pole. “Here we are, in a restaurant, and they, over there...”

The father grows pale. His hands tighten.

“I did that once, he says.

- You? Alice says, confused.

- I had a choice between food stamps or scavenging after a market was done... What would you have done if you had five children to feed?

- When was that? How old was I?

The father shrugs.

“Our first winter in France. I didn’t have work for several weeks. I would have done anything at the time, even steal. But to beg, I couldn’t do.

- And what about Juliette? I thought she found a job as soon as we arrived?”

The father pushes his plate away.

“She earned two hundred francs a month, he mumbles, wearily. Enough to pay the rent.

- Oh, says Alice.

- In the suitcases, he adds after a moment, there was nothing but summer clothes. No sweaters, no coats, no boots. It was warm in Tunisia, we came here, what cold...what cold...! As if we had landed at the North Pole. At first, I didn’t think we would make it...

- I see...

- No, you don’t! the father reproaches her, lightening in his eyes. Everything has been so easy for you!”

Alice flops. What is it they always hold against her? First Patricia, today the father. Her money, does she steal it?

“Why do you say that, dad?

- Because of that taxi-driver who went crazy because he worked too hard.

- But what does that have to do with me?

- You, when you enter a store, you just say I want this, you sign a check and leave.”

Alice lights a cigarette with trembling fingers. She takes a drag, remembers the unintelligible folders they had piled on her, it was her first case, the one on the home of Saint-Ouen that the City Hall planned to tear down, her pleading to prevent bulldozers from entering the site. The success, which since then has not stopped. She looks at her father. He is old, she tells herself. He doesn't understand. He would want me to be like Juliette and Edmée, forever submissive, defeated, crawling in servitude. Not to get angry, not to scream. But it's stronger than she is. With a vibrating voice, she hisses:

“When I go out, as you say, it's to go to work. Ten to twelve hours a day reading through folders, fighting in court or running up and down prisons, that doesn't seem like enough to you?

- Don't get angry!

- I have to run ragged like a servant for you to acknowledge the value of what I earn?

- Not at all, he says, bothered.

- What then? What is it exactly that is so difficult for the others and so easy for me?

- You didn't understand.”

Alice is quiet. She smokes and stares at her father, irritated, but he avoids her look, sitting sideways on his chair he keeps his eyes on the cashier, a fat Tunisian woman covered in rings and necklaces. She sits enthroned, bare arms in a green poplin dress with large red flower print. The neckline is so low that one can see the cleavage separating the flabby flesh of her chest. The people who come and go greet her; some stop to say a few words, as if in front of a queen. Like a queen, she receives their homage, blinks with eyelashes elongated by thick mascara, pats her nose with a kerchief which she keeps in a black satin purse before lowering

her eyes on the checks. She speaks little, and rarely. The regulars call her Madame Simone. It's the mother of the owner, a young thirty-three year old who is rarely there, who made a fortune on textiles in the Sentier district, and rumors now have it that he just launched himself into the film industry.

Anyway, the father had explained, mockingly, it's better if he doesn't come by, this Benchétrit son. Parking his Mercedes wherever, on the sidewalk or double-parked, as if the entire neighborhood, the whole city belonged to him. He would enter the restaurant running, on the go, stuffed into a Dior shirt and a Cerruti suit, a gold watch on his wrist, jingling the Mercedes keys from his fingers. He would look around at all the people in the restaurant with looks reducing them to nothing, blaming a waiter for the mess taking over the dining room, telling another to clean the windows, a third to take back his coffee which they had just served him which he thought was too hot, too cold or not sweet enough, leering at the older gluttonous folks who devoured a steamy chickpea soup, and the women spread out on display on plastic chairs, made up like hookers or marionettes at the theater, he would kiss his mother and get back into his Mercedes behind which a traffic jam had been formed. Arrogant, the father concluded. One who was ashamed to be Oriental and who made everyone feel it.

"Did you enjoy? the server asks while taking away the plates.

- Yes, says the father.

- A coffee, now? Ma'm, a pastry?"

The man, his cheeks darkened by a beard, a white open shirt over a greasy polo, notions toward the shelves filled with honey cakes which the glaring neon light makes shiny. Above the cakes, sticking to the wall, bills from every country.

"Not today, says Alice, with a strained smile.

- Normally, you have an appetite... Too bad. Ok then, two coffees."

He yells the order, moves away flapping his slip-on shoes.

“You didn’t understand me, I assure you..., the father repeats.

- Without a doubt, Alice admits.

- This taxi driver, you should explain to them in court...you should tell them...”

He gets tangled, seems to not be able to find the words.

Around them the atmosphere has changed. The dining room is packed with merchants who, having filled up their trucks, have come to drink a last anisette. It gets louder and louder, part Arabic, part French, thunderous laughter. One customer puts a bunch of roses in front of Madame Simone. She thanks him with a smile, signals to one of the waiters to take the flowers.

Suddenly, the father leans across the table.

“Listen, he says. I’m not as educated as you are. You know how to talk, I don’t.

- Don’t play the poor immigrant, dad.

- Hold on, hold on... That taxi driver, it’s me in a way. He wants to recover his country...his home. And he doesn’t see his wife anymore, nor his daughter, because he works, he works. That’s city-life for you. I felt the same way when I came to Paris. I had five children and I was alone. In the evenings, I wasn’t able to talk with you all. You were growing up like strangers. I didn’t have daughters anymore...but enemies... You wanted things that I did not understand, I demanded things that you refused me. It made me feel like breaking everything...

“But at least you didn’t kill us.

- Who says I didn’t think about it? I thought about opening the gas valve more than once. There were six of us stuffed into one room. In one hour, we would have been gone without pain.”

Not leaving any time for Alice to answer, he adds while shaking his head:

“Enough dark thoughts. Never good to say too much.

- Now you say.

- I'm complaining, but who hasn't had to battle?

- Yes indeed, who?" Alice mutters, with irony.

He scowls.

"Are you upset?

- I should have ordered a cake...Some honey would have been good.

He smiles, without getting the allusion.

"You want some?

- No, thanks.

- Really?

- Really, Alice says, her eyes lowered.

- So let's go then, my dear...I need to shave. I'm playing *boules* in half an hour with my buddies."

He takes out his wallet, gets up to go settle the bill with Madame Simone. Alice, absent-minded for a minute, comes out of her day-dreaming and looks at her father's silhouette standing in front of the counter, feet together, his back straight, perfect in his brown velvet pants and his leather jacket. Dressed this way, he looks like an old pilot. The thought makes her smile. An old pilot indeed, who would have strayed his plane somewhere in the deep South or who would have gone down in full flight. She has to remember to tell him that. He will laugh, tell her she's a child. You will never grow up. She bites her lips, looks at him as he hands the money to Madame Simone with an undefinable charm. The woman takes it, murmurs a few words in exchange. The father smiles, flattens a strand of hair aside. If only it were true. But I did not have a childhood.

Madame Simone's smile broadens. Alice is too far away to hear what they say to each other. She goes over to her father, stops behind him, greets Madame Simone who does not see her, who is looking only at the father, glossy eyed, a childish smile on her round face, puffy from all the fat. Alice goes to the door and steps out onto the street.



A minute later, her father is next to her, he puts his hand on her shoulder.

“Some air, finally, he says. It was warm in there.

- What were you telling Madame Simone? Alice teases him

- Nothing, being polite, that’s all. Shall I walk you to your car?

- You two spoke for a long time.

- She wants some work done. She was explaining to me what the plans are.

- This woman has a weak spot for you!”

He leads her along by her arm.

“You claim the same thing every time. I’ve told you already...I knew her when she was little...Her father was a shoemaker.

- Yeah, yeah..., Alice says, looking at the light which turns red. It’s our turn, come...!

- She was pretty, before...it’s true. So pretty that Benchétrit married her without a dowry.

- And you, were you interested in her?”

He evades the answer, with that embarrassed laugh of his.

“Here comes the sun...Look!”

A ray of light crossing the sky darkened by clouds makes the just hosed-down sidewalks shiny. The last trucks were leaving.

Alice goes around her car, pulls off the parking ticket stuck to the windshield.

- The bastards, she says. They came by just ten minutes ago!

- They swarm on market days.”

Alice laughs.

“Swarm...You have a way with words, dad...Oh no, she adds when she sees him take out his wallet. Don’t start that again!

- But it’s my fault...

She folds up the ticket, stuffs it in her bag.

“I have a friend at the Police Station. He’ll take care of it.”

The father hesitates. Looking sorry, he puts his wallet away.

“Are you sure?”

- Sure,” says Alice. She opens the car door, sits down in the driver’s seat.

- See you Sunday, at Juliette’s?

- Maybe. Bye, dad.

- Are you going to work?”

Alice smiles.

“No.

- It’s three o’clock... You are not going to work?

- No.”

He does not dare ask her more questions. He settles by looking at her intently. Alice smiles. He also smiles.

“Goodbye, my girl,” he repeats.

Alice closes the door, turns on the ignition. The father is still on the edge of the sidewalk, looks at her with a smile that changes, it becomes worried. Suddenly, he decides, bends down, taps on the window. She opens it to hear him.

“Yes, dad?

- I wasn’t so nice to you, earlier... I’m sorry.

- Don’t worry. Everything is fine.

- I’m wrong on all accounts... You are brave. You studied, you helped your sisters... without you, Juliette...”

Alice feels a lump in her throat. She must not cry in front of him, he will never let her leave again.

“Let’s not talk about it anymore, please...”

His eyelashes blink, flustered.

“Are you sure? Because I, I...”

She looks at the creased face framed in the door of the car, the eyes a bit off center from the nose, the hollow cheeks, the thin lips. She tells herself that, as usual, he knows how to breathe hot and cold, her father, punch with one hand and caress with the other. An image comes back to her, that of her cousins who pinch the cheeks of their little ones until they bleed and then stifle them with kisses.

“I swear, everything is fine...

- Ok, then, he says with a sigh. Be careful how you drive.”

He looks at her again, searches for something to say, does not come up with anything and steps back. Alice puts on the blinker. The father, fists buried in the pockets of his jacket, follows the maneuver.

When she comes to the end of the street, Alice takes a look in the rear view mirror. Her father is still there in the same spot, in the middle of the gray sidewalk. Under the foggy light of a sun slipping behind the mass of clouds, he seems tiny and fragile. Like a pilot whom the desert is going to kill.

## Chapter 18

Béatrice and Alice let the crowd pass through the aisles before they leave their seat. Alice did not hear much of *The Magic Flute* even though the tickets had been quite difficult to get hold of.

It had been a bad day. Etienne Chander got ten years. Alice pleaded extenuating circumstances. She spoke about a momentary madness. Chander was drunk. The game had turned tragic. There was no premeditation.

The jury was not convinced. There had been two of them hounding the woman, pushing her into the channel, watching her drown. Kill...let be killed...It was the same thing. The woman had a baby, she was on her way home from work...

“Where are the others?” Beatrice says.

Ten steps ahead, they run into Gabriel, Stéphane and Lise who were hanging out by a prop.

“Did you like the staging?” Gabriel asks.

- I couldn't stand the décor!” Lise asserts.

A discussion follows between her and Gabriel who does not agree.

“Shall we go out for dinner?” Béatrice asks.

Alice peeks at her watch. Another three quarters of an hour to wait. She has a date with Pascal at midnight at Rostand. The day before, on the phone, she had offered him a ticket which he declined. He had an excuse that he had important work to do at the lab. Alice understood that he was not about to meet her friends.

“I prefer to go home, Alice says.

- You're not leaving just like that..., Gabriel protests. Have a drink with us!

- Not tonight, Alice says. I'm sorry.

- It's the verdict putting you in a bad mood?”

Alice makes a face. She sees Chander surrounded by two

officers leaving the stand, weak, pathetic.

“He was a bastard... , adds Gabriel. He got what he deserved.

– That’s not what I think”, says Alice with a muted voice.

Despite the lack of sympathy she had felt for Chander, the verdict had blown her away.

Ten years. The trouble she had felt from the firmness of the jury didn’t let up.

“What? He killed, no?” says Lise.

Alice looks at her, silent.

“We’re not going to retry the case, Béatrice says squeezing Alice’s arm. I’m hungry. Let’s go.”

They pass by the pained window, the guys first, the girls behind. They stop at the top of the stairs as if around a fire-pit. The Bastille square sparkles and rumbles. A light drizzle lands on the silhouettes moving between the cafés, the restaurants and the movie theaters. Bums, young wolves from their cities, young bewildered couples rub up against each other and turn away instinctively.

“Damn, it’s raining! says Lise.

- Stay with us,” Béatrice whispers.

Lise goes back to Gabriel, who is chatting with Stéphane.

Béatrice jumps on the opportunity.

“If you leave, I’m coming with you. Lise is too worked up.”

Alice shrugs.

“You love to push the limits.”

Beatrice smiles.

“She talks without rhyme or reason, it drives me nuts.”

Alice puts her arm under her friend’s. They go down the escalator.

“You have a date with Pascal?

- Yes.

- You should have invited him tonight.

- It’s too soon,” Alice lies.

They look at each other.

“I suggested it, Alice finally admits. He didn’t want to.

- You said it...It’s too soon.

- Clearly!”

They approach their friends who are talking about what they think about the staging, the décor and the voices. Lise leans against Gabriel who has given her his jacket. She taps her foot, complains of being cold. Gabriel barely listens to her. He is only talking about Mozart. Ten years earlier, he had loved Beatrice who had preferred Jean over him. Gabriel consoled himself with Lise. But he was still in love with the young woman. He would call her, send her flowers, invite her to lunch. Lise didn’t know anything. She had her suspicions. When she was drunk, she would make ambiguous allusions about their friendship. That created scenes. The next day, Lise phoned Beatrice to say she was sorry. For a week, everyone stayed in his own corner, then Gabriel called Beatrice again, begged her to see him again. Out of cowardice or sadism, Beatrice would give in.

“We’ll keep you, right Stéphane? says Gabriel, who only has eyes for Béatrice.

- Yes, says Stéphane, embarrassed.

- Laura..., Béatrice begins.

- Laura is asleep.

- I’m cold! Lise stamping her foot. Are we going to grow old here?”

Alice leaves them and takes a taxi. The thought hits her that Beatrice basically shows the same symptoms of instability as Edmée. The same incapability of loving those who love them, the same attraction toward those who are indifferent to them.

With a swerve, eight minutes later, the taxi pulls up to the sidewalk. The rain has stopped. The air is wet and cold. It is not yet midnight but Pascal is already there, at Rostand, sitting at the bar, in front of a cognac and a dish of olives. Dressed in black,

jacket, pants, shirt. Seeing her he gets up. They don't kiss. They look at each other. There is a lot of emotion in their look. A lot of contained desire.

"I heard about the verdict on TV..." Pascal says.

Alice perches herself on a stool, puts her bag on her knees. Then she orders a *kir*.

"I called you right away. You had already left..." he whispers, watching her.

She blinks, moved, whispers back:

"It's nice that you thought of me.

- You are disappointed? Appalled?

- It's a real blow. Ten years, imagine that? He was only an accomplice."

All the accumulated anger from the day finally explodes. Gently, Pascal soothes her with his hand. Alice relaxes, manages to smile. This café, with its red benches, its mirrors, its copper bar-handles, it's a different world, far removed from the courthouse, far from the colorful and noisy Bastille, peaceful like Pascal's face.

"Will you appeal it?

- Obviously. But I don't have much hope. It may even make the sentence worse."

She senses that he is listening. She lights a cigarette, looks for an ashtray that she doesn't find.

"The times favor repression and security. People are afraid of lost souls..."

Pascal nods.

"And you, you're not afraid?

- Sure. But packing them off into jails doesn't solve anything. The problem is beyond that...It's in our rotten modernity..."

Here she goes, speaking like her father, she tells herself suddenly. A moment passes. They drink their drinks, look at each other furtively.

"Did you like *The Magic Flute*?

- I think so.” Alice says, distractedly. Pascal bursts out laughing and Alice imitates him.

“It was beautiful, poignant, she sputters. No, it was really good...!”

If he would only pull her close to him. Kiss her. Kiss her like those young kids embracing tenderly, whom she surprised leaving the courthouse. This sadness lurking in her chest since the end of the morning, maybe it’s the teenagers who planted it there, not Chander with his pathetic life, his horrible future.

“At home when I grew up, we only listened to Arabic music. It took me years to understand opera.”

She does not mention that it was Philippe who taught her to appreciate everything she listens to today, jazz, flamenco and classical music; he knows it.

“That’s ok, Pascal murmurs.

- Like my paintings with the golden frames. I have an elaborate taste.”

He laughs.

“I was really too much that day. I’m sorry.

- Why? Alice protests. There’s some truth to that, actually. I’m an exotic...I love the lute and gilded things.”

They are silent again.

“And you? At the lab?

- The usual routine.”

Alice nods.

“You never talk about your work... ”

- The culture of bacteria, it’s not very interesting. A world similar to ours, without the magic. There’s crawling, death, killing. Once the strengths and weaknesses that govern these little creatures have been analyzed, we write a report, hang up our lab-coat and go out to dinner...By the way, did you eat?

- I’m not hungry.

- Do you have eggs at your place?



Alice says yes.

“Let’s go!

- No wait, Alice says. Wait a little longer. I’m just starting to get it together...

- And I’d like it if you’d lose it...It’s annoying.”

At her place, he says he’ll be in charge of everything. He searches the cabinets, takes out a frying pan. He breaks some eggs, awkwardly, carefully.

He turns towards Alice to ask her if she prefers her omelet runny or well done. Their eyes meet. He turns the burner off under the frying pan, leaves the eggs in the bowl, the shells in the sink.

## Chapter 19

One week later, around noon, Edmée stops by Alice's office on a whim. She is wearing a black suit with fishnet stockings. She has lost weight. Her face too has changed. She is wearing heavy makeup but it suits her. She is beautiful, disconcerting, extreme.

She claims that an errand in the neighborhood gave her the idea to stop by. That Alice shouldn't be disturbed, she won't be but a minute.

While speaking, she looks at a maritime picture that she has advised Alice many times to take down, she picks up a leaflet lying on the desk. She flips through it, frowning.

"Give that back, Alice says, who can't stand when people touch her papers.

- What is it?

- As you can see....An appeal in favor of the Kurds."

Edmée stares at the bad photo illustrating the appeal.

"This old man... It's crazy how much he look like dad!

- I don't think so", says Alice, taking back the flier. She asks her what's new with Félix, and Edmée shrugs.

"That pig?" she says.

Alice stops talking, bothered. She finishes signing her mail, makes some phone calls with an occasional preoccupied look at Edmée sitting with her legs crossed, a magazine open on her knees. They haven't seen each other in over five weeks. Not seen or called each other on the phone. Pascal Deslandes has taken up all the space. And now, Alice feels a kind of remorse. She feels guilty about her silence towards Edmée, her indifference towards Juliette.

She suggests to Edmée that they go to the corner restaurant for some grilled meat, and judging from her sister's expression, Alice understands that that is exactly why she came.

Alice chose a table in front of the bay window. Edmée is in the

light, she is pretty in this light which falls on her chest veiled by a blouse in black tulle. Something in her has burst open, which makes all of her movements more beautiful. Edmée does not speak, she does not eat. She seems to be daydreaming, absent from everything. She just nibbles on the piece of lettuce that decorated the meat, with a strange tiredness, a weakness which wanders all the way to her eyes.

Alice, who doesn't dare ask her what's up, tries to find a way to start their conversation. She says that she has spoken to Gérard on the phone the day before. He has been called on a mission to Gaza. He is leaving Saturday night, for one month. Edmée nods. Her eyes remain fixed on the street where a bus lets tourists off on the sidewalk, for the most part older people, each with a camera on a string around the neck. Alice says that she found Gérard very depressed. He confessed that he was considering leaving the country, that he could no longer take the hatred that has set fire to the territories.

“Are you listening?” Alice says.

Edmée refocuses her attention on her sister.

“Sure!” she says smiling, but it's obvious she's thinking about something else.

During dessert Edmée can't take it anymore. She asks Alice if she remembers Michel. Alice lights a cigarette and waits for the continuation. With glowing eyes, Edmée whispers that the student has been her lover for two months, that she meets him every afternoon in a hotel on Christine street.

“I am happy, she repeats. Happy...if you only knew...”

She laughs from the emotion of finally having divulged her secret. But it's not enough to have told about her lover, she also wants to share with Alice the strength of the relationship, the wonder that it brings her. She doesn't wait for Alice to ask her questions, by herself she gives details about the desires of the young man, about her refusals, the first days, because she only had Félix

as a point of comparison and that she was afraid to break certain taboos. She tells how Michel knew how to convince her; with what patience he tamed her exasperation. She talks about her amazement with regard to the physical pleasures they share. Now, she adds with defiance, she is obedient to all his demands, and that even sometimes it's she who pushes him, who suggests certain things to him.

"Like what? Alice ventures, feeling uncomfortable.

- I'm not going to make you a drawing, Edmée says while lighting a cigarette.

- You have started smoking too?

- Oh that, says Edmée laughing. One, from time to time."

Alice shakes her head violently, despite herself.

Edmée orders a bottle of water from the waiter who passes by, Alice orders another coffee. It's already almost 3pm, she has work waiting for her, but she can't make herself leave.

"Who knows about this, aside from me?

- Nobody.

- You haven't said anything to Juliette?

- To Juliette, are you crazy!?! Edmée spurts out, partly shocked, partly amused.

- And Félix, he doesn't have any suspicions?"

Edmée's look is uncertain and Alice feels her heart tighten.

With a quick voice, her sister assures her that she is taking her precautions. She does not say which ones, and Alice doesn't ask her.

They stop talking once again.

Then Edmée begins speaking about Michel again. Surly because she senses Alice's reticence, she doesn't say that she loves him, it's the only word she doesn't dare pronounce. She says that, when he touches her, she forgets everything, her children, her name. She says that he thinks she is pretty. She adds that he brings her gifts, a bouquet of flowers, a compact, sometimes a book. That this is different from Félix, who never gives her anything, who even

forgets birthdays.

“And you, do you give him gifts?”

- Sure.

- You pay for the room?

- He’s only eighteen years old! Edmée protests.

- I thought Félix had you on a monthly budget?

- I had some savings.

- I see! Alice says so it slowly that Edmée pales.

- Are you judging me? she stutters.

- I’m only afraid that you are getting lost in all this! Alice

retorts, in a harsh voice.

- Getting lost? Edmée murmurs, distraught. I was losing my life with Félix and my family let me suffer, Juliette, dad and you...!

- Me? Alice screams, shocked. I always encouraged you to get divorced!

- That’s true, sorry...Please, don’t give me any advice. Even if you think I’m crazy...You don’t know the kind of love a young man can give.”

With a sad smile, Alice recognizes that it’s true, she doesn’t know. And her eyes wander towards the street, to avoid Edmée’s look. But Edmée is not looking at her anymore. She has opened up her handbag, found her compact, her rouge brush. She looks at herself in the tiny mirror, puts on lipstick.

“When I don’t have any more money, will you lend me some?” as she was putting her compact back.

Alice looks at her. She answers that she could; a little, not much. Edmée smiles, relieved.

She lets out a sigh when Alice puts her credit card on the tablecloth, to pay for their lunch.

They separate on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, in the shade of the pergola. The sky is blue, there are birds in the trees, it’s Edmée, her nostrils flared, eyes semi-closed, who makes Alice

notice. She smells the air of the city, as one smells an expensive perfume. She said to Alice that life was magnificent, that she felt good about the whole world. As Alice smiled, Edmée added that men look at her in the street, as if they guess that she is an adulterous woman, a woman who is loved. Alice retorted that it was not surprising, considering the way she dressed. Edmée laughed again. None of Alice's arrows seem to penetrate.

“Go, Alice said gently. Hurry, he's waiting for you.

- I have wings of gold”, Edmée exclaims.

As she is leaving, her sister hesitates. She bent forward, brushed Alice's cheek with a kiss.

She walked away, sure of herself, rolling her hips. Alice watched her slip away towards the junction, then her silhouette disappeared between the stream of cars.

It's this image of an Edmée darting off to her date that Alice thinks about while dictating a letter to Suzanne. Never has Alice seen her sister so beautiful. She thinks that perhaps she has finally found her luck, this luck their father talks about.

She finishes her letter, has it read back to her without listening. They have been together for two months, she says to herself, sending Suzanne off by motioning with her head. So Edmée's liaison started at the same time as hers, within a few days.

Let the devils get a good laugh, Alice thinks, without being able to concentrate on her work.

She spends hours caught up in this reverie, comparing their destinies. Alice sees Edmée so pliable in the hands of the father, so malleable.

The father had been unfair with her. He had kept a closer eye on her than his other daughters, because of Sassou, to get back at Sassou's betrayal. Then, in a concealed manner, he had slowly driven her toward marriage by making her desperate. What he didn't dare say to Alice, he threw in Edmée's face, with impatience.

Edmée never knew how to make him stop, to get respect. She never said to him, as Alice had, that my life belongs to me. They would fight until she ended up marrying Félix; the day before the ceremony, they had found another reason for a fight. The father had slammed the door, swearing he would not attend the wedding. He had spent the night out, but he came back the next morning at ten, to clean up and get dressed. Barely home, he was surprised to see Edmée's red eyes. With a short laugh, patting her cheek, he had added that all women were anxious on their wedding day. Faced with such hypocrisy, Edmée had stiffened. She had looked at her sisters for their support. Juliette, one finger on her lips, suggested she be quiet. And Edmée had stopped talking, as usual. She had swallowed her tears and had finally accepted that they prepare her. She was tense. She feared there would be a scene, that the father would refuse to give her his arm in the synagogue, that she would be forced to walk down the aisle toward her fiancé alone; and other absurdities, improbabilities. She hadn't thought once that day that she was getting married. She only obsessed about her father. It was to please him that she had agreed to this union with Félix; in order to win his heart, finally. Because Edmée thought that her father did not love her. She thought that he loved all his children, except her.

And then there was the story of the souk. Edmée was five years old. One day, in the crowd of the market, the father had lost her. Their hands had slipped apart. She had known how to find her way home alone, but the fear of abandonment remained engraved in her memory. Nothing since had ever been able to reassure her.

Edmée had passed from the tyranny of her father, to the yoke of her husband.

## Chapter 20

Sunday, they all got together at Juliette's.

The father is there. He brought doughnuts from Belleville wrapped up in big white paper. Juliette reheated them a few minutes in the oven. She serves them with the coffee. The kids love them. They hover around the platter like bees. Only Patricia refused to taste. She says she wants to go on a diet. Your couscous, she says, your doughnuts, your cakes, it kills a woman in two mouthfuls. Everybody laughs, even the father. He waves his finger, tries to explain that a round figure is beautiful.

Patricia withdraws to the couch. In a sullen voice, she counters, round figures, sure, but not fat ones. Everybody laughs again.

"For a week now, she has only been eating salads!" Juliette clarifies. And with a forced smile, she adds: "I'm not too worried, it's not going to last.

- You'll see! Patricia yells.

- Fine...fine, the mother says with a calming gesture.

- I want to lose three kilos this week!

- Why not? Edmée smiles. You can do it."

The father looks at Edmée. He looks at her secretively, like he hasn't stopped doing since the beginning of the lunch. He then looks at Alice. Edmée and Alice are sitting next to each other. It is easy for the father to take a look at one, then the other, to compare their attitudes, catch their expressions. It's noticeable that he is intrigued by the behavior of his daughters. Never has he seen them this beaming. He lowers his head, takes a sip of coffee. He finally murmurs:

"You are happy today, all of you."

Edmée has a happy laugh.

"Life is beautiful, dad!"

Juliette and the father exchange a surprised glance.

"Oh? Juliette says. Why is that?"



- The sun is shining. Things are good, Edmée says tracing a stream of light on the tablecloth with her index finger.

- And Félix? Juliette asks treacherously.

- He's juggling numbers, as usual."

Edmée laughs again, with a bit of a nervous laugh.

"Us, we are together, as a family...Him, he is alone. Like a dog.

- Don't talk like that about you husband! the father criticizes.

- I know what I'm saying, Edmée insists.

- His children hear you...Be careful when you speak!

- Alright, dad. You are right," Edmée says, conciliatory.

She gets up, goes around the table, nestles up against Patricia on the couch.

"Beauty!" she says.

Patricia giggles, like she was being tickled.

"You are lucky to be sixteen.

- Easy for you to say! Patricia replies.

- You are like rosebud: a mystery to those around you. Nobody, not even your mother who conceived you, knows you. Only the man who meets you in the dark can know what a woman you are.

- What kind of gibberish is this?" Juliette says with a scowl.

Edmée and Patricia, leaning on each other, whisper into one another's ears.

"Has she been drinking? Juliette asks Alice.

- Leave her alone.

- I've never seen her this excited!

- I told you, Edmée says, taking her seat at the table. I am happy!

- She is really strange, Juliette repeats.

- I'll have some coffee," Alice interrupts her, fearing Edmée might end up revealing herself.

Juliette's wraps her hands around the coffeepot.

"It got cold. I'll make some more.

- I just want a drop."

Juliette picks up the coffeepot and serves Alice. The father takes advantage of the breathing space to look at Edmée once again. He is jarred by her sparkling smile and turns away, uncomfortable. His eyes wander towards the window, towards the blue sky. He does what he can in order not to show his surprise. Questions burn on his lips but he avoids asking them. Besides, Edmée began humming.

Hours go by, the afternoon draws to an end. Edmée's happiness has spread to them all. Nobody recognizes this Edmée. Her face is the same yet it is like metamorphosed by the light in her eyes. By contrast, Juliette seems even more tired, creased complexion, hair gathered sloppily in an elastic, an old black dress on her back, showing signs of mending on the sleeves and the collar.

Enthralled by Edmée, the father stops being sulky and become more lively. He begins to talk and addresses only her. When he stops talking, Edmée answers him with humor. Dumbfounded, Juliette says nothing. She folds the napkins, clears the table, takes refuge in the kitchen to finish the dishes. She is pulled away by her father laughing and comes to a stop on the threshold, a wet sponge in her hands.

When Edmée sees that she has won over the father, she gets up and goes toward the buffet. She takes out the bottle of anisette and the colored glasses, she serves the father who starts by refusing, but then surrenders while smiling; she serves Alice and calls Juliette. Then she puts a record on the player. Farid El Atrach. The golden voice. The prince of princes. She approaches the father, sits down next to him, puts her arm in his.

“You used to sing this melody for us, when we were young, she says to him in a caressing way. This is the song of happiness for me.

- It's true. *Ya Hassara*<sup>6</sup>! the father says, whose face wrinkles up in smiles.

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<sup>6</sup> “Alas!” in Arabic.

- Sing!

- I've lost my voice."

Egged on by his daughters, he ends up humming a few sounds between his teeth.

"You're cheating," Alice tells him.

He laughs, munching on a doughnut.

"I don't have any more voice when I'm hungry."

When time comes for everyone to leave, Edmée pulls Alice aside.

"Come tomorrow, to the bistro at the Sorbonne, she whispers. Around 4pm. I want you to see Michel.

- No.

- You will see him from afar.

- I can't, Alice says in a weak voice.

Edmée clings to her arm.

"Don't refuse. You are my sister and my friend.

- And spying on you guys is good for what? Really?

- I want you to know what he looks like, that you see the larger outlines of my story!"

Outlines...! Drawing a single line would have been enough, Alice thinks, turning away.

The next day, at 4pm, Alice enters the café. She hesitated quite a bit before coming, then curiosity or an irresistible tenderness won her over.

She sits down at the bar, orders a bottled water. In the mirror covering the entire length of the bistro, she looks for her sister, finds her, sitting all straight, in a blue dress, too dressed up for this kind of place frequented by students. Her hair is made up like a lioness, her lips swollen with blood, looking like a bourgeois woman, facing this snot-faced kid with the smile of a scoundrel.

He is drawn to the room where laughter resounds, envious

looks; smiles light up his face, then fade away, only to reappear. He wants to move about, to go play the flipper game, it's obvious, he would like to...It's just that Edmée is there, clingy, in love, and the little boy that he is obeys her command, he doesn't move, strains to have a conversation.

As if someone had just hit her, Alice lets out a groan. If Edmée had only been stronger...If she could be happy to love for the pleasure alone of loving.

Paralyzed by her emotions, Alice feels her feet freezing. Her heart sinking. Everything about this couple, sitting there facing each other and silent, saddens her. The difference in age, the difference in desire. Don't touch him, Edmée, don't you see that he's afraid of your move in front of the others? she whispers to her internally. Don't humiliate yourself, you are worth more than you think!

Suddenly, Edmée's eyes catch Alice's in the mirror. She assures her of her discretion, with the same movement that they used to exchange when they were children, the thumb placed on the lips, the others fanned out. Alice blinks. She has understood. She turns away.

"How are you...Michel?" a girl asks passing by.

Alice looks back into the mirror. She sees Michel very pale, extending a very shy hand. She notices Edmée's fingers holding onto the cuff of his shirt, as if to say, this one belongs to me, and this move makes the boy furious. He gets up, grabs his bag, throws it over his shoulder. Edmée settles the bill quickly.

They pass Alice on the way out, so close they brush up against her.

Edmée, weighed down with love, Michel, worried about the tips of this brown alligator boots. He crosses the last few meters to the exit, wide elbows, fists in his pockets. He swaggers when he walks. One can tell that he is embarrassed to have a woman following him, embarrassed and proud.

He walks out first. Opens the door, forgets to hold it open for Edmée who lunges forward and squeezes through the opening.

## Chapter 21

Of course it didn't last.

One afternoon in July, Edmée calls the office. She isn't crying, she grinds her teeth, it's unbearable. She says that she is at the hotel on Christine street, that she needs cash right away. Alice says she's on her way.

Twenty minutes later, Alice knocks on door number twelve. Edmée opens up for her; she is unrecognizable. Don't look at me, she says backing away to the other side of the room, don't look at me. She lifts her arms, closes the curtains brusquely.

Michel has left her. Edmée yells it out, in front of the wall, with a dreadful laugh, then she huddles onto the only shabby armchair, covers her knees with a black throw.

"You knew it, right?"

- Somewhat..." Alice says, moving closer.

Edmée holds out her arm; that she especially should not come closer, not come to kiss her, not breathe her pity into her face.

Alice backs up to the wall. The room is stuffy and ugly. Above the bed, a photograph is thumbtacked crooked across the wall. There is no other decoration.

"Is this where you used to meet him? Alice asks in a low voice

- Why? You think the room is ugly?" Edmée hisses.

Alice sits down on the bed without answering. She tells herself she is going to lose her sister, that she has already lost her. This emaciated woman, with a burning and dried-out look, who tightens her hands, seems to have lost her mind. Edmée has never known how to cry. In her pain, her eyes always seemed huge, her body curled up.

With a mechanical voice, Edmée tells that Michel left without a goodbye note, without any explanation, like an eighteen year old would flee.

The first day he was gone she understood, with a meteoric

intuition, that it was finished, that she would not see him again. Nevertheless, for three days, she went back to the hotel, at the same times, determinedly. She would lie down on the bed, all made up, perfumed, and she waited for him. In the evening, at home, she felt like hitting her kids. The pain ravaged her. She would scream at the smallest noise, at every laughter from the children. She couldn't take anything, only wanted to hide in a dark room to dream about her lover.

Little by little, she had understood that she was at an impasse. Félix would not let her leave. Or, let her, but without a dime. Continuing to live with him was not something she could do either.

Her only option was to kill herself. Dying had become an obsession. Two or three times she had screamed it at her children. They had looked at her with big eyes, moaning. Félix had looked at her without a word. Then he began to avoid her from room to room.

The fourth day, mad from suffering, she went to look for Michel, at the Sorbonne Square, in that café where she had met him. She interrogated the waiters, the students, nobody had seen him. They answered her with an ignorant grimace, a mocking smile. The looks they cast her way were like spitting. The entire world was against her, the old hag, intent on pestering an eighteen year old kid.

She had not wanted to admit defeat. Michel owed her a goodbye. She looked his name up in the phonebook. She knew that he still lived with his parents, she didn't know anything else; never, from fear of being rebuffed, had she asked him what neighborhood he lived in, his father's profession, if he had brothers and sisters. In the phonebook she had found forty Bérards. She called them all, without any luck. There was indeed a Michel Bérard in the listings, but the voice was that of an old man, extraordinarily polite, who understood from the beginning of the

conversation the trouble she was in.

She throws her head back, asks for a cigarette. Alice searches in her bag, hands her the pack. Edmée murmurs with a broken voice, light me one, please. Their eyes meet and Alice quivers.

“What should I do?

- Forget Michel, says Alice. Everything is forgettable.”

Edmée lowers her head, her neck bent by a sob.

“It was inevitable, Alice mumbles. Deep inside, you always knew.

- I loved him!

- He too, without a doubt.

- If that were true he would never have left without an explanation, Edmée throws back ferociously.

- Words, you know...”Alice says with sadness.

A moment goes by.

“Friday, Edmée continues, I ran to the Sorbonne. A professor noticed me. He took me for a mother looking for her son. He said...”

- I can't take it. Be quiet!

- He said, Edmée continues stubbornly, that many students flee from the exams, that they hitch-hike heading South, but that they return in the fall.”

Alice doesn't answer.

“Fall is a long way from now, Edmée says weakly.

- Because you are hopeful that you will see him again?

- He gave me back the joy of life.

- You carried it in you, this joy. I know well it's difficult, but you'll make it through this.

- And do what?

Alice shrugs.

“Live!”

Edmée stares at her sister. Suddenly she bursts out laughing.

“Brush my teeth, eat, sleep. I'm fed up with your stupid



words...

- I'm not going to tell you: die.

- That would already be progress...Live! If you think that's consoling...

- Whereas dying...

- I called upon Alice, my little sister...I didn't summon the lawyer defending lost causes...

- Ok then, Alice says, indignant.

- You told yourself: forty-three vs. eighteen...Never a chance. And you have prepared your garbage shovel to gather up my pieces when I fall apart.

- Absolutely!

Honesty has always had absolute power over Edmée. Her anger dissipates.

"I attack you, it's idiotic..."

They stop talking, don't look at one another. Too many ghosts move between them. A noise from the street rises in the silence. Probably the audience coming out from a movie theater. Edmée, stammering, confirms that it's the six o'clock show...I used to leave him at this time...But he would not let me go. He would beg me to give him a night, a whole night...He would bring me back toward the bed...would demand a kiss, and yet another one, with his hands rushing, a fever in his eyes, if you only knew...I would laugh. I would scold him. I was so sure of him. I had forgotten that between him and me...

They stayed together for almost three hours. Alice suggested that Edmée come stay with her, she pleaded with her, begged her; but Edmée wouldn't hear about it. She claimed that the hotel room gave her a silent haven, that she didn't want to disturb her with her despair. Alice tried to explain to her that solitude was no good, especially in a place so full of memories.

"In order to forget Michel, you have to change scenery."

Edmée just stared at her stiffly.

“Do you have the money?” she asks.

- Yes.

- How much?”

Alice takes some crisp, new, five-hundred-franc bills out of her bag. She puts them on the white quilt on the bed.

“Ten thousand francs. Is that good?” Alice says, with the hope that Edmée will smile, but Edmée puts them in her pocket, without even thinking about thanking her.

“Now leave.

- Can I call you?

- I need to be alone.

- And I want to hear your voice.”

Edmée clenches her teeth.

“I’ll call you...”

Alice pretends to believe her. She says, you have to eat, you have to sleep, and take care of yourself.

“Yes, yes”, Edmée mutters, pushing her toward the landing.  
“Yes, yes...”

Suddenly, Edmée rips off her wedding band and engagement ring. She grabs Alice’s wrist, throws the jewelry into her palm.

“Sell them! I don’t want any trace of Félix on me.”

Dumbstruck, Alice stares at the rings.

“Do you remember dad’s ring, at the pier in Tunis?” she mumbles.

Edmée searches her memory. No, she does not remember. What was this story again?

When she gets home, Alice calls Félix. She tells him that Edmée isn’t doing well, that she will not be home tonight, nor any day soon. Her brother-in-law grumbles, furious. The kids are on vacation, he screams, their mother has to take care of them whether she wants to or not. He has to assure the financial security of the

house, he can't play baby-sitter.

Alice explains that Edmée is sick, that she is going through a crisis, a kind of depression; hasn't he noticed anything lately?

Félix answers that Edmée has been hysterical for years; that Alice isn't telling him anything new. He adds, sick or not, her place is with the children.

Alice tries to keep calm. She asks Félix to understand, Edmée is incapable of taking care of the little ones; she herself needs help. There has to be a solution for the children...Félix can send them to summer camp.

Her brother-in-law thanks her drily for her advice. He demands to speak to his wife. Alice answers that Edmée is not available. She has left for Marseille, to a cousin. Félix's anger knows no more limits. He accuses her of ruining his home, of ruining his existence. He says that Juliette, her father and she, Alice, make a family of the worst kind, a family you wouldn't wish on your enemy. He evokes the humiliations he is supposed to have been subjected to during his marriage, how little he has been respected, the hostility he has to endure. And he brutally brings up Sassou's name. He says that Edmée is like her, a bitch. He screams, my wife is with her lover, isn't she? He yells, so much so that his voice becomes hoarse, that he isn't stupid; Edmée would disappear for entire afternoons, she would come back looking tired, exhausted. Once he even noticed a bite-mark on her neck, another one on her right breast. Edmée claimed she had hit herself. Hit herself against whose teeth? He shouts, you, you sisters are always accomplices. I can see it from here, you have invented a depression in order to cover up Edmée's adultery, and you thought you had me...But I'm not an idiot...

Alice remains impassive. Until now she had felt sorry for Félix, but he dared to bring up Sassou, smear her...Bitch! The word booms in her ears. It's enough to make this man, whom she never liked, become detestable. Standing next to the window, she looks

at the foliage. She doesn't hear his screams anymore, she adds randomly here and there, at most, a word. Her thoughts are with Sassou. Alice is now sure her sister is dead, that she will never see her again.

Félix finally stops talking. Silence is between them, definitive.

When he begins to talk again, his voice is glacial. He says that it would be in Edmée's best interest to come home before nightfall. In this country there are laws, he reminds her. The abandonment of the marital home isn't forgiven. He will ask for a divorce and custody of the children.

Alice remains silent. She looks at the trees, the sky.

## Chapter 22

For two days, Edmée has been calling Alice. She claims she is doing better. Alice makes her repeat herself, incredulous. Edmée gets into a big laugh. She says that nobody dies from a broken heart anymore, I won't die from this break-up, you can be sure of that. When Alice asks her what she has done with her day, Edmée answers that she has slept, only slept, that she will go back to sleep within half an hour.

“Are you taking sleeping pills?”

- No!

- Why do you sleep so much then?

- To recharge my batteries. I'm wiped.

- But do you eat, at least?

- Are you done? Edmée says, abruptly.

Alice doesn't dare push the interrogation any further. But before hanging up, she adds that she would like to see her. Edmée answers no, not yet. She is too tired to talk. Maybe in a few days.

The second day, strangely enough, Edmée finishes the conversation about the ten thousand francs. She says that she has not touched the money, that all the bills are there, in the drawer of the night table. That money, Alice retorts, I gave it to you; spend it as you wish. Then Edmée murmurs that she loves her, that she has always been her dear little sister.

Alice is quiet, in despair.

The third day is a Thursday. The sky is wild. Rain is falling in fine streams, persistently. The weather channel announces bad weather in all of France through the week-end.

Edmée does not call. Alice waits in vain for a sign. At seven pm, so that her sister can reach her, she cancels a date with some friends and goes home. She makes herself an egg, quarters

a tomato. She feels like having something else, but she doesn't know what. She eats standing up in her kitchen, rinses her plate, washes the frying pan, walks in circles, her arms limp. She still feels starved. In her cabinets, there is nothing but canned goods, sardines and tuna, chickpeas and white beans. Alice finally digs out a bag of peanuts and sits down in front of the TV. The programs are mediocre on all the channels. In the street, life is buzzing. Noise from steps, laughs, the roaring of a car. At ten pm, Edmée has still not called. Her eyes fixated on the card from the hotel, Alice postpones from hour to hour the need to call her sister. It is almost midnight. Her anxiety has not stopped growing. But it's soon too late. She ends up going to bed, with this idea lost in the haze of her fatigue: "And what if she has killed herself?"

She wakes up from the sound of the alarm clock. Her first thought as she opens her eyes, is about Edmée in that room darkened by the pulled curtains. Her sister, a subdued woman, had been devastated and lost by pleasure. It was stupid to have left her alone. Stupid and egoistic. Alice moves an arm. Little Edmée, she prays. Suddenly, she has an idea. She jumps out of bed, searches the pockets of her jacket. The wedding band and engagement ring are there, light, a bit cold in the hollow of the hand, spoils from a failed marriage. Félix had not known how to love her or protect her. Just live with. He had had her body for nothing, for nothing her life. Yet he had squashed her under his gross obese paw, ridiculing her fear.

Alice closes her fist. Right away, she will go to a jeweler, like she promised.

Outside, it is still raining and the light is weak. Alice gets into her car. She refuses to give in to the instinct that directs her toward Christine street, and heads in the direction of her office. Twenty-four hours of silence, she says to herself, is not worth all

this anxiety: Edmée must have slept a lot; she must have forgotten to call.

Despite herself, the waiting continues. On her watch, the big hand quivers before jumping forward, the small hand feigns to follow, but remains behind like it stopped. Time is not passing. The windows are streaked with water. Suzanne can't stop yawning. A shitty day.

At noon, Pascal calls. He says that he wants to see her. The wall facing Alice begins to recede. She answers, when? He says, tomorrow, you can? She, with her heart pounding, whispers that she is free, always, for him. He laughs. He says, so you do think about me sometimes? He says it to play, by habit of being the seducer. It matters little to her that he is lying right now. One word was enough, this date he asked her for.

They speak for a few more minutes. The office seems flooded with light. A last utterance whispered, see you tomorrow, bye.

Alice's smile is erased by the wound that opens again.

At three pm, Alice cancels her appointments and calls a taxi. She asks the driver to drop her off at the Saint-Michel Square, then, despite the rain, she finishes the rest of the journey to the hotel by foot.

Bare feet, dressed in a black slip, very short, her hair in shambles, Edmée cracks the door open.

"It's you?"

The welcome is reluctant, almost hostile.

"Can I come in?" Alice says with a smile. Without waiting, she pushes against the panel of the door. Edmée lets go of the door handle and backs into the room. Alice enters and closes the door. The room smells of cigarettes and dirty sheets. The waste basket is full of ashes, of cigarette butts and tissues. An empty container of yogurt lies on the table. Clothes are scattered on the floor. On the unmade bed, a deck of tarot cards.

“Why are you here? I told you...

- You aren't happy to see me?”

A vague gesture from Edmée who goes to lie down on the bed.

“I have sold your jewelry. I'm bringing you money.

- There was no rush.”

Alice sits down in the shabby armchair. If she has to stay all night to convince her sister to leave this hotel, she will stay all night.

“How much did you get for them? Edmée asks after a while.

- Fifteen thousand. Not more, I am afraid. I tried to haggle, the jeweler was tough. A real rat!

- Fifteen...? Edmée begins, and suddenly, she cracks up laughing. You didn't sell the jewelry...!?

- Sure I did...

- I had estimates. They offered me three thousand. I went to several jewelers.

Imagine, I was really being ripped off. I got the same response everywhere. If you really sold the rings, you must have happened upon an idiot...or you must have...paid for them out of your own pocket...

- I...

- Give me the money!” Edmée says. And with a flash of mischief in her eyes, she adds:

“There you are tied to Félix. His wedding band, his engagement ring. My congratulations, my dear!”

Alice ignores the sarcasm and opens her bag. She takes out an envelope made of craft paper, hands it to Edmée who takes it and puts it on the bed.

“Did you call Félix?

- Yes.

- The children?

- They are fine.

- Dad, Juliette?



- They don't know.

- Just as well.

They are quiet.

"Have you decided? Alice continues.

- Regarding what?

- Your life!

- I'm staying here. It gives me a break from the house. What a mess....I wanted children. I could have had them with anybody. The poor fool that I was. What have I gained, tell me?

Edmée crosses her hands behind her head. Under the slip, the bra is too tight and makes bulges under the armpits, her skin white and flabby.

"Don't you want to get some sun?"

- And when I return I will fall to my knees in front of Félix; I will lick his toes, kiss his ass, I'll say, oh, you're the best man ever, oh, take me back. And he, full of kindness, will squeeze me against his horrible gut. We will make a horrible family again. We will hate each other. We...

- Calm down. He has filed for divorce.

- Thank god. He accepts the situation.

- He wants the children.

- He should keep them.

- Don't tell me you'll give up your children!

- Sure. I give up. I give up everything.

- Ok then.

- Are you disappointed?

- No.

- Sure, I can tell. You are disappointed.

- I would like it if you could get a hold of yourself.

- When I accept divorce, that's because I'm doing better, no?

- Go abroad. Go to a spa. If you need money, I'll make up the difference. But change your scenery. Walk, meander, meet people. Don't stay confined between these walls.

- If I get on a train, I don't know if I'll come back.
- Like Sassou...uh? Alice can't stop herself from saying.
- Don't talk to me about her, Edmée says in an irritated tone.

She ruined the whole family. Everything we have become is because of her.

- It's Juliette's fault.
- Juliette? Edmée wonders. Why Juliette?
- If she hadn't pushed dad to throw Sassou out of the house, our life would have been different."

Edmée's eyes open wide.

Dad threw Sassou out? What are you talking about? I don't understand anything!"

Alice sputters. Has Edmée forgotten that night? She stops talking.

"What is this all about? Edmée starts up again. Tell me!"

Alice makes a face,

"Don't you remember the day Sassou left?

- Sure I do!

- You don't remember that Juliette put the belt in dad's hands?

That she was screaming beat her, she's a *kahba*? That Sassou left crying?"

Edmée lets out a whistle.

"Pinch me. What an imagination you have!

- And all that, because her guy wasn't Jewish?

- But it's not true. Dad never threw her out. It was Sassou who didn't want to stay any more,

Sassou left us.

- Stop!

- It's the truth!

- I'd like to know your version.

- My version? Edmée says, ironic. My version, you say...? You and your precious words...! She nervously lights up a cigarette. She pulls in two drags, coughs. She stumps out the cigarette, gets up

and starts to pace around the room.

After a moment, she returns to sit back down on the bed.

“We should have talked about this before, she says in a calm voice. But I never dared to. You had been too sick. Juliette told me that mom’s death and Sassou’s departure had left you traumatized, that I should never, never talk to you about it. Under no circumstances. And since you never asked any questions, once you got better; since dad later became sick and we had to take care of him, the years passed, almost twenty-five years...

- What was wrong with me?

- A fever, for two weeks. We thought we were losing you!

- I don’t remember..., Alice says, crushed. Now, tell me about Sassou.

- It was a Sunday...In April 1968...

- It was in April 68, yes; but not a Sunday...It was a Saturday night, Sassou was going dancing...

- Are you going to let me speak, yes or no?

- Don’t get angry.

- Sassou went out the whole afternoon. She came home around eight pm, with...with this man, a good-for-nothing. We were having dinner, dad, Juliette, Robert and you...You were small... Just thirteen? Sassou told dad that she was moving out. Juliette got up, she said to Sassou, think about it, and Sassou answered that she had been thinking about it for months, that she had made her decision. She had had enough of the family, enough of our poverty. He, and she pointed his way with her chin, he could give her everything, an easy life and love. Dad looked at her quietly. He looked at her with an immense pain in his eyes. Then he muttered: “I am cursed. I knew this was going to happen one day.”

- This man, Alice says stunned, came to us in Clichy? Describe him to me.”

Edmée looks at her secretly but obeys.

“A tall blond, with a mustache...A French guy...Stupid

looking, you know. Cocky. Like an asshole who has just saved a woman in ten centimeters of water. About eighty kilos of shit contained in a jacket, a pair of pants and a raincoat! A scumbag who barges into a family all loud-mouthed, I'm French, and you, you're a bunch of immigrants! Shall I continue?

- Fine, fine. And then?

- Juliette started to yell. She rushed toward Sassou. She said to her, you are leaving with him even when he beats you, what's become of you, a whore? She lifted up her dress in a swoop, she showed the bruises, Sassou had them on her thighs, on her belly, long ones, like finger marks, I will never forget. Sassou pushed her away violently, Juliette threw herself again on Sassou, caught her by the waist, the dress ripped, it was a very old dress, worn out everywhere. So, the man, who was nervous, slapped Juliette. She fell to the floor with a cry. Robert wanted to fight, but father intervened; he said, that's enough, help your wife up and go sit down; I don't want any more of this business in this house. And to Sassou, the father said, pack your bags and leave. Sassou laughed, she took two or three things, I think a chain, a picture of mom, maybe one more object. She left with the man. There, that is the true story. I have no idea how you came up with the other one, why you accuse Juliette and dad; but I swear, this is what happened..."

As if she was waking up from a dream, Alice says slowly:

"I can't believe you!

- Too bad.

- If it's true, why is dad angry at Juliette?

- For months, Juliette had protected Sassou. She knew everything about the guy. That he was violent, that he beat her. But she did not warn dad. She let Sassou live out her adventure. She thought that this passion would pass, that with time Sassou would end it.

- Juliette didn't spy on Sassou?

- You're cracked, I swear!"

The bell of a bicycle sounds in the street. Edmée gets up, runs to the window. She lifts the curtain, looks outside.

"I thought it was Michel. He had a bike, too", she says sadly. Annoyed, Alice shrugs.

Edmée does not notice her gesture. She comes back to the bed, throws herself on the pillow.

"Edmée!

- What do you want now?

- You didn't answer my question.

- You know nothing about nothing, and for twenty-five years you have judged. I am dumbstruck. And me, how do you see me?

- Don't make everything be about you. Answer!

- You want to know? Juliette was Sassou's confidante. She would feed off her stories.

She, she couldn't handle things, she thought she was ugly, she didn't know how to dress, men didn't look at her. Whereas Sassou, already at twelve or thirteen years, she was hot like fire, pretty, intelligent, alive, and dad adored her! Juliette admired her. Juliette would have done anything for Sassou!

- They didn't bicker?

- They were very close.

- But I see them fighting. I hear Sassou's laughter, I hear Juliette's screams..."

Edmée's face becomes flushed. She is choking with anger.

"Sassou was lazy. Juliette did all the work. Sometimes, she'd complain. That didn't affect Sassou one way or another. She laughed, you are right. Juliette would put up with it and finished the work. Or she'd call me. You, nobody let you do anything. Dad had ordered that you were fragile, that we had to spare you!"

Alice closes her eyes. Her head is empty. Is it a farce, is it a tragedy?

"When Sassou left, Juliette confessed everything to dad. She

told him, crying, that she could make her come back. She knew the name of the hotel. She had waited in the street for her two or three times, in order to come home together, to cover up for Sassou. But the father said, what good is it, she is ashamed of us, with that one, or another one....she'll escape...He was right.”

Edmée gets up and moves toward the dresser. From one of the drawers, she takes out a tiny radio.

“Sassou despised us,” Edmée finished, putting her ear against the radio.

## Chapter 23

Alice leaves the hotel into the crowd that is slowly gathering in line at the entrance of the movie theater. It is almost ten pm. A late spring haze has arisen, pink and chilly. Without knowing how, she arrives at the Malaquais dock. The dim lights from the street lamps on the bridges seem to float and get lost, between the sky and the water.

Where to go?

The portrait that Edmée had painted of Sassou was nothing like her memories. Juliette? The father? Who will confirm this?

“You were sick!” Edmée said.

She doesn't remember.

She finds herself on Saint-André-des-Arts Street, wanders between Christine Street and Dauphine Street, her mind agitated by contradictory thoughts. “You were sick!” She doesn't know anymore where she has parked her car. People strolling everywhere. They walk slowly. Walking too fast, she realizes it, and suddenly stops. A Japanese man approaches, a Paris map in hand. “If you please?” She gives him a hunted look, then eventually smiles. He wants to go to the Latin Quarter. She explains to him that he is in the Latin Quarter. He is stubborn, no, no, the Latin Quarter. Two words that seem to make him dream. Alice pushes the map aside with a tired gesture. “Destroyed”, she says, overwhelmed by unhappiness.

“Oh yes?”

She leaves him there. She has to see her father, has to speak with him. She decides to hail a taxi. There is a lot of traffic. In Belleville, the boulevard is backed up. She pays her fare, gets out. The smell of spices, sausages, grilled livers. Around tables, on terraces, sit whole families. Restaurant dining rooms are deserted. One or two men at the bar.

The hallway is poorly lit. There's a familiar smell, the one from

the studio in Clichy, of poverty, from her childhood. Strangely, this smell feels good to her, like coming back to a familiar place.

The door is the one at the end. She fumbles her way there. There's a murmur coming from the other side of the door. She knocks. The murmuring stops. She is about to leave when her father opens up. His bony face is full of a happiness that she does not recognize in him. He sees Alice and his expression changes. He is alarmed, forgets to let her in.

“Bad news?”

She notices the open collar of his shirt, jeans held up by a leather belt. On the father face, in addition to the agitation, a mix of embarrassment and fear is visible.

“I wanted to see you, dad...”

He does not believe her. For her to come all the way to him, this late, there has to be a serious reason that has made her do that.

“You are hiding the truth from me.

- No, says Alice. No.”

She leans forward to kiss him when suddenly he moves aside to let her in. Under the iridescent light of the molten glass lamp that she had given him for one of his birthdays, Alice notices the woman sitting on the rocking chair; a rather small and corpulent woman, hair colored by henna, hazel eyes still beautiful, dressed in a yellow Chinese crêpe dress, a pearl necklace around her neck. It's too late to turn back.

Seeing Alice, the woman places her feet on the floor, feet dressed in white slippers, gets up from her perch and, chest forward, extends a chubby hand.

“My neighbor, Mrs. Manès, the father sputters. My daughter, Alice.

- He has talked a lot about you, the woman grins affectionately.

- Ah, says Alice, bewildered.

- You are the lawyer?

- Yes.



- What hair...! What eyes...! If all of Pierrot's daughters are as beautiful, well then..."

The room is too small for three. The father remains glued against the wall, arms crossed. Mrs. Manès does most of the talking. She notices this brings her hand to her chest with a slightly theatrical gesture.

"Pierrot, it's late..."

It's obvious she wishes someone will stop her. But the father picks up a black shawl, puts it around her shoulders and, holding her close to him, pushes her toward the doorstep.

"Good night!"

The woman turns toward Alice with a charming smile on her lips.

"I am very happy to have met you..." Then, with a caressing suggestive look: "Good night Pierrot.

- Good night! he hastily repeats.

- Oh, she says, escaping the hold of the father. I have some cakes...I'll bring you some?

- No, thanks.

- A small plate...?

- Really, no.

- I'm not tired...If you need anything, knock, don't hesitate."

Once the door is closed, the father bows his head in front of Alice.

"She is alone. She is bored.

- I'm sorry I disturbed you.

- Her husband died last year...I got to know them when they moved into the building...

- She seems kind.

- She's dying to be helpful", he says with a deep voice.

Alice smiles and sits down in the rocking chair.

"She's a good cook, the father adds. She's Greek.

- She cooks for you?"

His cheeks glow.

“Sometimes. Manès, that’s her husband’s name. They met during the war.

- I see.”

He opens a box of mints, hands it to Alice.

“I only have this...take a green one, they are the best.”

To please him, Alice takes a green one.

On the table, a box of chocolates, some gold ribbon, ripped paper. In the heat of the moment, the father forgot about them.

“You have made some improvements, Alice says looking around.

- I repainted a month ago. Do you like it?

- A lot. It’s been years since I’ve been here.

- It’s so small.”

And as if he was afraid to have sounded reproachful about the unexpected visit, moving toward the table he hurries to add: “Do you want some tea?” He notices the chocolates, blushes again, like a little boy.

“If you take some, I’d like some too.”

He strikes a match, lights the burner. He pulls aside a blue cretonne curtain. A tiny sink appears. On shelves, a few dishes, mismatched glasses, also, a coffee pot, another pot for tea, and a sugar dish. On the left, on another board, shaving utensils and a piece of mirrored glass.

He fills a pot with water. His hand is shaking as he returns to the table.

“There, he says, examining the pot.

- Dad, come sit down.

- I’m coming, I’m coming.

- Closer, on this chair.”

Suddenly he understands everything. He awkwardly takes Alice’s hand.

“Did they hurt you today?

- It's over...It's passed.

- Tell me?

Their faces are very close. Her father's cheeks are like silk, soft despite the wrinkles.

"Dad...Does it happen that you forget events from your life...? I mean, important things?"

He thinks it over.

"I don't believe so.

- Not from your adult life...from your childhood.

- No."

She makes a superhuman effort to avoid mentioning Sassou's name. The anxiety becomes stronger and stronger, it floods everything.

"I would like to be able to remember mom."

He blinks, moved.

"Your mother?"

- It's stupid of me to come here, at eleven at night, to talk to you about her. But I've forgotten her face, I've forgotten her eyes... It's like I have a hole in my memory. I have to..."

He is shaken. He gets up, goes toward the burner. No, the water is not yet boiling. Alice is crying there, behind him. He doesn't know what to do, takes the box of chocolates, hands it to her. "Mrs. Manès's chocolates." She shakes her head no, but he insists, does the sales pitch: "They are filled with almond paste. I hate almond paste. But I don't know how to tell her...She gives me some every week..."

Alice began to laugh, despite her tears. He, in his distress, still has not noticed anything, and he continues to wave the box in front of his daughter, he doesn't stop talking, it's stronger than him.

"They are delicious...Taste one...just one!"

He finally stops because Alice has broken into a crazy laughing fit.

A sigh sounds from his mouth. He relaxes. He puts the

chocolates on the table. He's also laughing now.

“Thank you, Mrs. Manès! Alice says calming down.

- She has her good side, the father retorts with such an innocence that Alice's laughter starts up again, even stronger.

“What is it?

- Nervousness, she says wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

- Oh, he says, embarrassed.

- Does she want to live with you?

- She wants to. People can wish for many things...

- Why not?

- At my age!

- Well, sure!”

Silence.

Alice observes her father then lowers her eyes in front of his calm and firm look. He doesn't say, worry about your own business, my daughter, but it's as if he had said it.

“It would be best if I left, it's late, Alice says, bothered.

- The water is boiling. Wait.”

He prepares the tea pot, measures the tea in his palm, throws in some sugar, washes the mint which was soaking in a glass on the window sill. A delicate smell spreads through the room as the father pours the boiling water. Alice settles into the rocking chair. She looks at the strange play of shadows scattered on the wall by the lamp, the father's silhouette suddenly imposing, almost hunchback, the spout of the tea pot that he has to turn in order to mix the water with the tea and the sugar. It looks as if, like a witch, he stirs a magical potion, and, with a sudden burst, Alice hopes that the brew that he's preparing will save her forever and ever from guilt and from death, that he will reconcile her with God's benevolence. Nevertheless, she knows it, something this night has definitely collapsed and ended. The structure of a life, Sassou. Her soul will forever remain enclosed in the sad hotel on rue Christine.

Behind the partition, they hear coughing. The father listens.

“My neighbor. He has bronchitis”, he points out.

Alice lights a cigarette.

“Old?”

- My age.

- He lives alone?

- Like all the people on this floor.”

They smile at one another.

“Be careful, it’s boiling”, her father warns when handing her a glass of tea.

He comes back and sits down next to her.

“Now, explain yourself...I’m listening.”

Alice stays silent.

“I’m listening, he repeats.

- It was nothing, really, dad...I felt a bit down.”

She knows that he is unable to answer the one question that haunts her. To her big surprise, it’s he who speaks.

“You didn’t come here to talk to me about yourself...Two years ago, when you broke up with...with...” He takes a breath, a weak one: “Philippe...you suffered a lot, and you did not speak. If you are here, it’s for one of your sisters.”

And since she remains silent:

“Juliette?”

- I have talked to Edmée about Sassou.”

He becomes pale.

“Sassou, he says in a hoarse voice.

- Help me, dad, to understand...

- What is there to say after such a long time?

- Why did she leave?

- Your questions are hurting me, my child...”

Before, Alice would have been quiet. The father’s voice, his face, his eyes would have imposed silence on her. Now, no. My life is on the line, she thinks, mine and Edmée’s.

“I’m sure, but, please, answer!”

The father is quiet for a long while.

“What do you want to know? he finally says.

- Did you throw her out because she was in love with a *goy*?

- One evening, she came home with him. She told me she could no longer deal with living in a cave, the five of us, like animals. He, he was rich. He, he was French. With him, she was going to live like a princess... We, we were nothing... Arabs... And I should definitely not tell the police, I should not try to see her again. She was leaving of her own free will, of legal age...

- She really said that?

- She was laughing... Why this meanness, why the laugh? It’s been twenty-five years that I’ve asked myself that question...

- And you, you didn’t suspect anything?

- I felt confident. Juliette and Edmée, I used to keep an eye on them. Not her. She was too much like your mother. I looked at her, I went crazy. I hadn’t been paying enough attention to the signs. Because there were signs. But I only understood them later.

- You saw her again?

He hesitates.

“Once.”

He turns the glass between his fingers.

“I went to see her in her hotel. I was ready to forgive. She saw me as defenseless. She still laughed...”

- Was she alone?

- I had waited outside for hours, several days, to see her. When I saw the man leave, only then did I go in. I thought I could make her understand that I loved her. I did not want a definitive, total rupture. I wanted her to know that I would always love her, that she could count on me, no matter what happened. But she did not want to hear even that.”

He is quiet, moved. He closes his eyes and Alice sees his dark eyelids, marked by blue veins, quivering, folding, swelling with

tears.

“The four of you, you haven’t had any luck. Juliette with Robert. Edmée with Félix. You, you are alone, without children. I’m sorry...I’m not blaming you. Your life, it’s your life. But still, I would have wanted for you to know that happiness, a child against you, who smiles at you and calls out for you. A child who would have been your link of love with a man. I have thought a lot about your stories, I’ve looked for a reason. Your mother’s death, maybe. The departure from Tunisia. Me, I worked like an animal. I was often furious over nothing. I remember being sad and furious, sure...”

He is crying as he talks. He wipes his cheeks, but the tears flow and he is not able to stop them. He says that he had predicted it, the mere name Sassou, it was like a shard in his eyes. He says that, for him, it’s a terrible pain, worse than if he had held her dead in his arms. Because, if dead, then the hope of being able to speak with her again would have been lost forever. He says that he can’t stand it anymore thinking she is so close by, somewhere in the city, without him being able ever to kiss her. He says he can’t stop hoping day after day that he will see her again, that he would like to leave this world with a word from her, a look, a message.

## Chapter 24

The next day, at five past eight in the morning, Alice calls the hotel. The receptionist tells her that her sister has paid her bill.

A gap opens where fear surges. Edmée has left, but where to?

“When? Alice stammers, in a changed voice. I left her last night, around ten o’clock.”

The woman says she will check.

After being on hold for while, a man presents himself on the phone. He says, Mrs. Habib left around six thirty in the morning. He knew his guest well, a regular. He is so kind as to describe her, a woman with her hair colored red, right, a bit more than forty-something, always dressed in fitted dark outfits and transparent blouses?

Alice confirms the description. She left us, the man repeats in a detached and clear voice. Around six thirty, this morning.

Where is Edmée?

Alice is sure that her sister has not returned home. In order to clear her conscience, and despite her distaste, she calls Félix at his office. From his voice she understands that he hasn’t seen her again. Her brother in law is uncontrollable. He says that he has consulted a lawyer and that the divorce procedure is underway. He says, even if Edmée came and begged on her knees, I would still divorce her. He says more nasty words, ugly words that are just like him.

Alice’s lips move without making a sound. For a long time after Félix has hung up, Alice keeps the receiver against her ear. Then she dials Juliette’s number.

The tired voice of the older sister sounds. She also only blames Alice. She points out that she has left her about ten messages over the last three weeks. Why this silence?

“Life, Alice mumbles, troubled. I’m sorry.”

Juliette grunts. For the first time in a long time, Alice doesn’t



feel she hears any exasperation or grudge, there's almost a certain respect. Alice has been thinking about her, all night long. Edmée knows her well. The portrait she painted of Juliette as a young girl must be right. Nevertheless, Juliette remains a stranger, as if the truth had come too late. The only accomplice, in the end, is Edmée, the somewhat crazy Edmée, who is too romantic, Edmée with her feverish eyes, such an impatient heart. Her flashy outfits, her high heels. Juliette, on the other hand, makes her feel, even more cruelly, her absence. Alice forces herself to ask her about her children, if she has any news from the father. Juliette answers slowly, with her gloomy voice chewing on the words, stifling them and killing them. Alice needs to summon all her attention to understand her. Juliette brings up her favorite subject, the father's health. She says that he falls asleep in front of the television, that it's a bad sign.

"Dad never loved sleeping in the afternoon."

- You worry over nothing, Alice says, impatient. I saw him last night. He's doing great."

Silence.

"You saw dad, last night? Juliette lets out.

- Yes.

- You're lucky."

If Juliette only talks about their father, it's because she doesn't know about Edmée's problems. The fear, which now dominates Alice, is wrecking her.

"You sound funny! Juliette continues.

- Me?

- You're not trying to dismiss me today..."

Alice makes an effort to laugh.

"What are you talking about, silly?

- Sure thing..., Juliette insists in a muted voice. I know what I'm saying... You are too good to me... It's rare and it scares the living daylight out of me.

- I...

- Nothing has happened, has it?"

Fragments of a daily anguish, abusive, ordinary, these words, always the same ones.

"Do you hear what you're saying? Alice yells, in spite herself. No, you don't hear yourself, if you did you wouldn't be saying this!

- Don't be angry... What did I say?

- Stop! Stop already, thinking about bad luck...!"

Quick breathing in the receiver.

"I'm sorry," Juliette mumbles, her voice dead, resigned.

Alice's anger settles.

"I've got to hang up, I have to work.

- I understand."

In silence, each one of them feels the tension within, not knowing how to say goodbye without hurting each other again.

"Love you! Alice finally mutters.

- Love you too" Juliette says softly, like coming out of a dream.

The throbbing sound of a broken heart. Juliette's voice which resonates in the whole room holds her captive with an iron fist. Alice feels stifled. She goes to the window, opens it. The humidity that day hits her in the face. She holds on to the windowsill so as not to fall. Not to collapse under the weight of these false secrets. Blot it all out. Forget the water running on her face. She wipes her cheeks with a frantic hand. It's only rain. Rain that infiltrates everything, that spatters on the windowpanes, that already streams over the wood floor of the living room. When she was a little girl, she would soak herself in fog and melancholy. Alice closes the window with an unsteady hand.

The clock on the fireplace sounds quarter to ten.

Where is Edmée? How to find her? Look for her. Look for her everywhere. Bring her back, comfort her.

That very night, Pascal comes to her place, enters in his big

spirited way. He kisses her, pushes her by the hips toward the bed, rolls his head between her breasts.

The taste of salt on the tongue, on the genitals. A profound heat rises from everywhere like a storm. Pascal's lips roll across his teeth in a victorious smile. The moon slides into the room. The windows shine. Pascal calls out in a voice that does not resemble his smile, a thin voice, fragile like glass. Alice! My god...She has never known such happiness. Her memory blurs, it is pulverized.

She stretches out on the bed, mollified, exhausted. He follows her with his eyes when she looks for a cigarette, a light and an ashtray.

“What's up with you?”

He has a strong smell, a smell that she brings with her everywhere. She tells him, to gain some time, in order not to speak to him about Edmée. He laughs. Then, his voice suddenly serious, he says that he thinks she doesn't look well. Now she's the one laughing. Then, she closes her eyes, like the face of a dead person she is covered by a sheet.

The wind blows for two days and two nights. The rain doesn't stop, torrential and frozen. It's cold for July. The entire city suffers from this greyness. People groan with yearning for a sun that has disappeared. They talk about their upcoming vacation, about their friends who are already by the sea.

Alice decides to make one last attempt with the father. Very quickly, here again, she understands her error. Edmée would never have taken refuge in the studio in Belleville. She would have stumbled onto the silence of the old man who would have dismissed her, with his burning eyes, to Félix and her children. Not that he is very fond of Félix, the father, but there's the children, and the children, that's sacred; they go before the unhappiness of a woman. For them, everything is sacrificed: time, money, life.

The father would have stood up against Edmée, and she would have surely obeyed. She would have gone back to Félix. Because

the father is the only person in the world who holds Edmée's soul tightly in his fist.

## Chapter 25

The days pass without bringing news about Edmée. It's been three months already since she disappeared without a trace. The searches undertaken to find her have remained unsuccessful. Alice alerted the police, she used all her connections. The police found the taxi driver whom Edmée had used when she left the hotel. The man remembered her because she was dressed in black, like a woman in mourning. But it was above all the black gloves she had on in the middle of July that he had noticed.

He had left her off on the Montparnasse Boulevard, in front of the Kanter brewery. At the brewery, none of the waiters remember having seen her enter. The trail ended there, despite all the inspected cafés, restaurants, stores, hotels. Only the train station remained, but there too the search brought nothing. The controllers on the platforms did not remember Edmée. The crowd of vacationers was too dense, no face would be remembered, really not one.

Had Edmée hidden outside of Paris? Had she left France?

Alice hoped that her sister would have found refuge in Israel, with Gérard. But she had not shown up over there either.

The father insisted on seeing Félix. Alice doesn't know what the two men said to each other, but the father came back sick from the meeting. He owes his life to Mrs. Manès, who called an ambulance before alerting Alice. The doctors explained that the father had suffered a heart attack. He was hospitalized for one week at the Tenon hospital, when he got out, since he was still too weak, he went to stay with Juliette. He lives with her now. A shadow has covered the father's eyes, more than in his movements and his words, it is his eyes, whose color has changed. The pupils have become opaque like those of blind people and his look seems to have turned inward. He sits in an armchair, sometimes he lets out sighs that sound like sobs.

Alice goes to see him every day.

“Take him outside! Juliette whispers, as soon as she enters. I can’t take care of him, I have to make dinner. I just got home with the groceries...”

Alice quickly looks over at the stuffed plastic bags scattered on the floor, filled with chicken, fish, vegetables. All this food is for the father, whereas what he prefers is a few words and some attention. But Juliette never has the time to speak with him. She lives in her kitchen, preparing food.

Alice goes over to the father, gives him a kiss on the cheek.

“How are you today, dad?”

He shrugs.

“You’ve got some of your color back. Should we go outside?”

He shakes his head. No, he says, no.

Alice says to him that the fall is beautiful, warm and fragrant. Juliette comes to the rescue, she ties a scarf around his emaciated neck, she lifts the father up holding him by the armpits.

He looks at Alice with an unhappy look and stands up. Alice wants to yell at Juliette, leave him alone, don’t touch him, but she stays quiet. Juliette pushes them towards the door, and the voice which rings in the father’s ears is that of a mother talking to a stubborn child.

Alice and the father go down the stairs. He holds on to the banister, she, two steps ahead of him, watches him and waits. He says, your sister is treating me badly. He says, she gets on my nerves. She is always after me. He also says, I want to go back home, sleep in my own bed, make my own coffee. He says that Juliette is driving him crazy.

Finally, they get to the bottom of the stairs. They make their way on the gray path between the concrete towers. Dry leaves crunch under their feet. Hard rock escapes from an open window. Looking at the graffiti, the father says that in Belleville there are colors, people with colors, it’s beautiful. Here, there’s only towers,

narrow windows like tombs. He says he wants to eat corn on the cob that an African woman grills on a box of crackers, squatting, on Ramponneau street. He walks on in silence. Alice promises to bring him there. He smiles. Thank you, my daughter, he says, touched. Alice takes him by the elbow.

“We’ll go by the playground? You’ll see children...”

His face lights up. He sticks his hand in his pocket and pulls out a handful of candy. Alice smiles while adjusting her stride to his.

The father never speaks of Edmée, like he never wanted to speak of Sassou. But one day, during their walk, he suddenly turns toward Alice. He makes a surprising statement, he says, the love I had for your mother cost me two daughters. He shakes his head slowly for a long time. He does not explain himself further.

Another day, the father says to Alice, your mother was very beautiful. His voice trembles all of a sudden. He stops walking, closes his eyes. He is like a block of marble, stiff, petrified. His silhouette has a halo from the sun, from his head to his feet. His hands fumble for Alice’s hand, close around her wrist. He takes a long time to get his breath back.

When he finally speaks, his voice is hoarse, as if coming out from unsuspected depths. He says, your mother had black hair, big lips and blue eyes. She was the most beautiful of women. It was me that she loved, even though I was a nothing, a small bicycle renter. Her brothers despised me. They despised my poverty and my family, humble people, the tinsmiths in the neighborhood. But Chachïa and I forced open the gates of destiny. God was with us. One afternoon, your mother managed to escape her brothers’ surveillance, I took a bike, I brought her to the dunes. She was sixteen. When she became pregnant with Juliette, her brothers gave her to me. They gave her to me and cursed us...They said to me, you have eaten the unripe grape, and the teeth of your children will be set on edge...That’s what they said...And my whole life, I was

afraid...My whole life, anxiety has hounded me...

The father stops talking, looking off into the distance. He had never talked this much.

I have to warn the children, Alice thinks, talk to them about the past of their parents. One day, before the boat, before the exile, a man and a woman loved each other, despite the interdiction that weighed on them. If Chachia had been alive, she would have protected her girls. Alice is sure of it now that she would have told Sassou, go with that man, go. His religion doesn't matter, his money, his pride, go, but don't leave us. She would have prevented Juliette, who knew nothing about love, from becoming Robert's slave. She would have prevented Edmée's marriage to Félix, who was already fifteen years older than her. She would have put the courage into Alice's heart, her youngest one, the one most affected by the drama of Sassou, the necessary courage to love and be loved.

But above all, above all, she would have followed her man on the path of life. By giving him her arms, every night, she would have comforted him from the exhaustion and the loss of his country.

The days go by. Maybe Edmée will come back in the winter. She will come back, Alice is sure of it. She will come back healed, her heart scarred. She will come back liberated and free. She will say to Alice that she has matured, that she has understood that the future was ahead of her, that she can hope for anything. She will ask her sister to take care of her divorce. She will take her children back from Félix. She will work in order to raise them.

She will come back in the winter. Maybe in the spring.

Félix found a Filipino to take care of the children. The young girl doesn't have papers. She accepted all of Félix's conditions. He gives her room and board. In exchange, she works without respite;



from night until morning, she works. He has forbidden her to open the door to the in-law family. But the young girl disobeys him. Once a week, on Wednesdays, she brings the children to the Luxembourg garden. At four o'clock precisely, she is by the fountain. Juliette or Alice waits for her there. She gives them the two little ones for one hour. She, two lanes over, meets up with her boyfriend, a Filipino without papers, the man with whom she had escaped from her country.

Evening after evening, since Edmée's disappearance, Pascal meets Alice in her apartment by the Luxembourg. She never knows when he will get there, not even if he will come. But, for him, she has changed her habits. She turns down invitations from her friends and goes home.

On the way home, she does her shopping. She wants to have bread and meat for Pascal. She hopes that he will end up living with her.

When he comes, she spoils him like a king. It's her man. The only one she has really loved. The only one for whom she manages to control her madness, that gives her the courage to hide her anxieties. The only one who, little by little, soothes the despair that claws at her, who represses the voice of the father, of Juliette, of Edmée and of Sassou.

Some evenings, tied to him in bed, she whispers, I know you are afraid of words, but tell me that you love me. He answers by kissing her. Or he caresses her breast. In the darkness, it seems to Alice that his lips move, at the edge of confidence. But he is quiet. And quickly, he falls asleep.

One evening, he said that the present was enough for him. And when she stiffened and moved away from him, he added, taking her back into his arms, we are still together, yet another night. Enjoy this night. Do you understand?

Afterwards, for days on end, she feels a sense of suffocation.

She knows she only has two years left to have a baby. After that, her chances at becoming a mother are reduced to zero.

*For the Love of the Father* is about the effect of exile on a Jewish family from Tunisia as they immigrate to Paris, France. It is a gripping novel that tells a story at once intimate and universal. It is universal in that it narrates the traumatic experience of displacement and of the challenges of resettlement in a new country, shared historically by many people, especially in postcolonial times.

In Boukhobza's novel, the Saada clan represents but one family of the nearly 500,000 Jews who were uprooted from their native countries of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco in the 1950's and 60's; many of these families had roots there going back to before the Arab conquest in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. As many as 235,000 settled in France during this period; and, with their identities and stories deeply anchored in their North African and Judeo-Arabic cultural heritage, a unique character and flavor was added to the multicultural immigrant narratives to flourish in France in the late 1900's.

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