



**ALBERT
COSSERY**

**THE COLORS
OF INFAMY**

TRANSLATED BY ALYSON WATERS



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Translated from the French by Alyson Waters

A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

I

The human multitude meandering at the nonchalant pace of summer along the ancient city of Al Qahira's torn-up sidewalks seemed to be dealing serenely, even somewhat cynically, with the steady, irreversible decay of their surroundings. It was as if all these people, stoically strolling beneath the molten sun's incandescent avalanche, were, in their tireless wanderings, benignly colluding with some invisible enemy eating away at the foundations of the erstwhile resplendent capital. Immune to drama and devastation, this crowd swept along a remarkable variety of characters lulled by their idleness: workmen without jobs; intellectuals disillusioned with fame; civil servants forced from their offices for want of chairs; craftsmen without customers; university graduates sagging beneath the weight of their futile knowledge; and finally those inveterate scoffers — philosophers in love with their tranquility and shade, who believed that the city's spectacular deterioration had been expressly created to hone their critical faculties. Hordes of migrants had come from every province with preposterous illusions about that hive of activity, the prosperous capital, and they had latched on to the local population, forming an appallingly picturesque pack of urban nomads. In this riotous atmosphere, cars sped by, heedless of traffic lights, like machines without drivers, transforming any vague notion a pedestrian might harbor of crossing the street into an act of suicide. Along the neglected thoroughfares stood apartment buildings doomed to imminent collapse (the landlords had long banished from their minds any pride of ownership) and from balconies and terraces converted into makeshift lodgings flew the multihued rags of destitution like flags of victory. These dilapidated dwellings brought to mind an image of future tombs and gave the impression, in this country awash with tourist attractions, that all these pending ruins had over time come to be prized as antiques and were therefore not to be touched. In some places water from burst sewer pipes caused pools as wide as rivers to form, wafting the effluvia of

unspeakable stench and pullulating with flies. Naked and unashamed, children entertained themselves by splashing about in this putrid water, sole antidote to the heat. As if it were a day of revolution, the streetcars overflowed with clusters of people and dug out at a snail's pace a pathway along the rails obstructed by the pressing mass of a populace that had long ago gained expertise in survival strategies. Resolutely circumventing every obstacle, every pitfall in their path, the people, discouraged by nothing and with no particular goal in mind, continued their journeys through the twists and turns of a city plagued by decrepitude, amid screeching horns, dust, potholes and waste, without showing the least sign of hostility or protest; the awareness of simply being alive seemed to obliterate any other thought. Every now and then the voices of the muezzins at the mosque entrances could be heard emanating from loudspeakers, like a murmuring from the beyond.

More than anything, Ossama enjoyed contemplating the chaos. As he leaned his elbows on the railing of the elevated walkway on its metallic pillars that encircled Tahrir Square, he was contemplating ideas that flew in the face of all the theories propounded by those certified experts who swore that a country's continued existence was predicated on order. This absurd notion was utterly belied by the spectacle that spread before his eyes. For some time now, he had been treating this structure, dreamed up by humanist engineers to shield the miserable pedestrians from the street's dangers, as a panoramic observation deck to reinforce his profound conviction that the world could go on living in disorder and anarchy indefinitely. And indeed, despite the elaborate free-for-all that dominated the huge square, nothing seemed to alter the population's mood or its spirited gift for sarcasm. Ossama was convinced that there was nothing more chaotic than war; yet wars lasted for years on end and it even happened that generals notorious for their ignorance won battles because shock, by its very nature, is a great producer of miracles. He was thrilled to live among a race of men whose exuberance and loquaciousness could not be spoiled by any iniquitous fate. Rather than

fulminating against the problems they faced because of their city's outrageous decrepitude, they behaved affably and civilly, as if they attached no importance whatsoever to those material inconveniences that could lead to suffering in petty souls. This dignified, noble attitude filled Ossama with wonder, for to him it was a sign of his compatriots' complete inability to fathom tragedy.

Ossama was a young man, about twenty-three years old, who although not strikingly handsome, nonetheless had the face of a charmer; his dark eyes shone with a glimmer of perpetual amusement, as if everything he saw and heard around him were inevitably comic. He wore with incomparable ease a beige linen suit, a raw silk shirt set off by a bright red tie, and brown suede shoes. This outfit, quite ill-suited to the scorching heat, was not the result of personal wealth, nor was it due to a taste for show; it was donned solely to reduce the risks inherent to his profession. Ossama was a thief; not a legitimate thief, such as a minister, banker, wheeler-dealer, speculator, or real estate developer; he was a modest thief with a variable income, but one whose activities — no doubt because their return was limited — have, always and everywhere, been considered an affront to the moral rules by which the affluent live. Possessed of a practical intelligence that owed nothing to university professors, he had quickly come to learn that by dressing with the same elegance as the licensed robbers of the people, he could elude the mistrustful gaze of a police force that found every impoverished-looking individual automatically suspect. Everyone knows that the poor will stop at nothing. Since the beginning of time, this has been the only philosophical principle by which the moneyed classes swear. For Ossama that dubious principle was based on a fallacy because, if the poor really stopped at nothing, they would already be rich like their slanderers. Consequently, if the poor continued to be poor, it was simply because they did not know how to steal. In the days when Ossama had lived his life as an honest citizen, accepting poverty as his inevitable lot, he'd had to put up with the wariness his rags aroused in shopkeepers and the closed-minded members of the police

force. At that time, he had felt so vulnerable that he never dared to go near certain city districts where the privileged set led their glittering lives for fear he would be suspected of evil intentions. It was only later — once he'd at last caught on to the truth about this world — that he'd decided to become a thief and, in order to carry out his trade respectably, had adopted the visible attributes of his superiors in the profession. From then on, suitably attired, he could frequent without difficulty the lavish milieus where his masters in plunder lounged about, and steal from them in turn with elegance and impunity. True, with these petty thefts he recouped a mere fraction of the fantastic sums that these unscrupulous criminals amassed without a thought for the misery of the people. Yet it must be pointed out that Ossama's objective was not to have money in the bank (the most dishonorable thing of all), but merely to survive in a society ruled by crooks, without waiting for the revolution, which was hypothetical and continually put off until tomorrow. Cheerful by nature, he was predisposed to humor and mischief rather than to the demands of some dark and distant revenge.

He thought he'd had enough of admiring his compatriots' performance as they attempted to dig themselves out of the chaos, and he was about to leave his observation deck when — ever on the lookout for an entertaining detail — his eyes were drawn to a scene transpiring on a traffic island that served as a streetcar stop. Several plump, buxom women carrying innumerable packages and straw baskets were conferring with a burly young man who wore a tattered T-shirt and some sort of filthy fabric draped about his hips as if he were a classical statue representing destitution. These monumental nymphs had apparently just climbed off a streetcar and seemed to be engaged in some bizarre dealings with the scantily clad fellow — unfortunately the distance and the ambient cacophony made them inaudible. Ossama was concentrating, trying to make out the nature of the discussion when suddenly it came to an end in an unexpected way. He saw the man take the females, who were terrified by the constant onslaught of cars, under his protection, raising his arm skyward as if to invoke

the name of Allah and escorting them into the traffic until, in a blaze of horns, they reached the haven of a sidewalk. Having arrived safe and sound, the survivors unknotted their handkerchiefs and each gave a coin to her savior who, having caught his breath, was already offering his services to any number of pedestrians hesitating at the edge of the sidewalk, still stunned by his exploit. Ossama keenly felt all the hilarity of this one-of-a-kind scene. Street crosser! This was a new trade, even more daring than that of thief because one risked a violent death; it was a trade he could never have dreamed up even in his wildest theories about the ingenuity of his people. The man who had invented this astounding profession in order to make ends meet deserved his admiration and undying friendship. He would have liked to congratulate him and even write to the government to request that he be decorated as a model for a new generation of workers. This inventor of a job as yet undiscovered by the hardened unemployed of the beleaguered capital was unquestionably entitled to a medal; but Ossama mistrusted all those corrupt government ministers who were hardly in a position to appreciate an initiative that offered no clever way for them to grow richer, and he decided to leave them in ignorance of such a captivating phenomenon.

He cast a parting glance filled with brotherly affection at the man in rags, then wended his way toward the steps that led to Talaat Harb Street; he climbed down them cautiously (they were covered with a thick layer of dust that could damage his shoes), and found himself on the right-hand sidewalk, which was, for the moment, in shade. A voluptuous calm spread through his body on contact with the air — tepid and sticky but how refreshing after the furnace he had just left! His clothes felt lighter and he struck the pose of a prodigal, carefree young man as he set out to mingle with the crowd. He avidly listened in on the discussions of the passersby strolling beside him, catching incredible bits of conversation shot through with irony and invective regarding the ruling hierarchy, illustrating that mixture of insolence and arrogance that poverty bestows upon its chosen ones. And as he listened, it seemed as if each speaker prided himself on being

descended from the Pharaohs. The fact that all these beggars laid claim to some imaginary nobility was pleasantly appealing; Ossama believed the most ostentatious indigence was the irrefutable sign of true grandeur. All along the street, store windows displayed the full panoply of a consumer society, a society still limited in scope, but firmly determined to profit from its offerings. One could see household appliances of all kinds, radios, televisions, VCRs, refrigerators, expensive jewelry, roll upon roll of silk fabric, Persian rugs, fashionable women's clothing, luxurious limousines with gleaming chrome, and, most absurd of all, travel agencies advertising snow-covered landscapes in a kind of reverse exoticism. The crowd on the whole remained indifferent to these primitive enticements imported for the most part to satisfy the voracity of a tribe of vultures. Only a few individuals, either from fatigue or out of infantile curiosity, stopped to contemplate all these objects beyond their comprehension, wondering what unjust fate had caused them to be so poor in a country so rich.

The Cosmopolitan Café, which at one time owed its fame to the social and intellectual standing of its clientele, was now overrun by an assemblage of people without any particular status, and was slowly spiraling down toward marginalization and opprobrium. It had lost its glorious terrace — gradually eroded over the years by the devastating tide of passersby — and no longer kept anything outdoors other than a few tables protected by a dead-end alley too short to tempt strollers. Ossama sat down at a table in that alley spared from the crowd, ordered a lemonade from the waiter, and began to keep an eye on the opposite sidewalk where an old apartment building still retained some vestiges of its opulent architecture, like a courtesan worn out by time in whom one can catch a glimpse, despite her wrinkles, of some meager residue of buried beauty. This deterioration of a building once so opulent-looking had, it must be admitted, nothing compelling to hold Ossama's attention, with the exception of a wrought-iron gate with open double doors flanked by a black marble plaque on which the words "Club of Notables" were inscribed

in golden letters, thereby signifying to the people that it did not recruit its members among the rabble. Several times in the past, this den of the mercenary aristocracy had been a fruitful source of personal gain for the young man. The members of this club were not only “notable” (as the sign proclaimed) because of their ill-gotten gains; it went without saying that they also carried in their wallets a tiny portion of their wealth, and Ossama was kind enough to relieve them of that during an imperceptible brushing of bodies. The operation was amusing and easy, and was coupled with the pleasure of the gambler, for Ossama never knew who his next victim would be or how much he might collect. In truth, he was a tolerably frivolous thief, interested more in the pleasantly risky aspect of the adventure than in any financial gain. His cynical and prankster-like concept of theft shielded him from the gloomy, anxious attitude of the ordinary thief obsessed with the foolish morality of the well-to-do. His heart was gripped with joyous excitement and he watched the entrance to the club as if the lascivious and divinely beautiful woman imagined by idle men in their erotic fantasies were about to emerge.

It was not this sort of ideal woman, but a young girl, barely seventeen, who appeared at his side and said in a timid, almost plaintive tone:

“May I please sit with you?”

Ossama recognized the voice and he turned to look at the girl who was standing in front of him, slender and fragile in her short cotton print dress and her cheap jewelry gleaming in the sun. For a moment he was seized with panic; the girl’s intrusion was going to jeopardize his plans and lead him into a pointless, poignant conversation detrimental to his optimism. But very soon he smiled and said, with the ill humor of a lover annoyed by his lady friend’s willful obtuseness:

“Of course, Safira, you can sit down. Why all the formality? Really, you make me sad.”

“I don’t want to bother you.”

“You never bother me. By Allah, don’t you know that?”

The girl sat down, her eyes suddenly lit by a glimmer of gratitude. It was obvious that coming across Ossama was a joy for her — perhaps her only joy. The pallor that could be seen through her lightly made-up face betrayed how ill-nourished she was and the hardship of her charmless existence. This face expressed the pain of immutable poverty, but, even more so, resignation and shame, and it was not at all attractive to Ossama; still, he was always compassionate and friendly with the girl. Aware that she was hatching some romantic scheme that concerned him personally, he was trying to protect himself by pretending to be corrupt and without a future.

“It’s unbelievable!” Safira suddenly exclaimed, as if she were in raptures over some miracle. “When I went out today, I was sure I was going to run into you. Isn’t that amazing?”

“I’m as delighted as you are,” Ossama answered, suspecting that the girl had traveled the entire city to find him. “Believe me, I bless the good fortune that set me on your path.”

By adopting this exaggeratedly warm tone, Ossama was simply hoping to establish an affectionate mood of honest camaraderie. Unfortunately, this mischievous cordiality, despite its excess, contributed to encouraging Safira’s modest quest for requited love. She lived in the Shoubra district with her mother in a rear basement apartment, in total isolation and poverty. To obtain the few piasters needed daily to sustain them in the chaos, Safira had nothing but the sole means offered to the proletariat living under governments that starve their people: she could continue seeking work that did not exist and die of malnutrition, or she could become a cut-rate prostitute — Safira was still too naïve to appreciate her body’s true worth. Ossama had slept with her on the evening they met, and in exchange she had asked for a sum so modest that this lack of venality in a prostitute had surprised and embarrassed him. Sexual relations that were all but free surely had to be hiding a trap; from then on he had refrained from renewing that episode of distraction, yet without denying the girl his friendship. She seemed to have attached herself to him

like a drowning girl to a wisp of straw — Ossama considered himself in these cases even slighter than a wisp of straw — perhaps because she saw him as an outcast as unhappy as she. The young man had told her he was a thief and therefore, in his way, a pariah living on the fringes of society and this — in her ignorant mind — seemed the essential ingredient of a love affair. The fact that she was so easily resigned irritated Ossama and had a devastating effect on his spirits. So much bitterness, so much criticism had accumulated in her gaze that she stifled any desire he had to laugh. In truth, his compassion for the girl prevented him from viewing her through his usual prism of ridicule and condemned him to seeing a reality whose tragic aspect he normally actively denied. At times she would give herself over to the eagerness and teasing of girls her age; then, suddenly, she would become fierce, almost frantic, as if the crude images of her life suddenly loomed out of her memory in their basest details, casting a cloud over any brief moment of youthful enthusiasm.

All the while praising the girl's attire, Ossama never took his eyes off the club's entrance in the hope that his day would not end in emptiness and melancholy. This did not escape Safira, who started to get up, and, in a humble tone colored with suffering, said:

“You seem to be waiting for someone, so I'll be going. Perhaps I'll have the good fortune to see you again.”

“On your mother's life, stay put. I'm not waiting for anyone.”

“Speaking of my mother, I should mention she's very fond of you. Yesterday she told me she was praying to Allah for you to stay safe and never be arrested. Don't you think that's very kind of her?”

“Indeed! You mentioned me to your mother?”

“When she asked me where I had gotten these beautiful shoes” — Safira stretched out her legs and in the shade of the alley a magnificent pair of patent leather shoes with silver-

colored metal buckles sparkled — “I couldn’t help confessing that you’d given them to me. You’re not mad at me, are you?”

“And you confessed that I was a thief, too?”

“Don’t be angry. You know, with the life she’s been leading since my father died, my mother’s gone a bit crazy. She can’t tell one job from another. I could just as well have said you were a banker; it’s all the same to her.”

“May Allah protect us! So why *didn’t* you tell her I was a banker?” Ossama asked in a calm, though slightly irritated voice.

“I don’t know,” Safira moaned, giving the impression she was holding back tears. “Maybe because I’m proud of you. You’re the only thief I know.”

Ossama didn’t bother to ask how many bankers she knew because he was well aware of the girl’s capacity for avoiding the obvious. The poor thing was going to lead him straight to the gallows if he didn’t quickly find a way to counteract his error in having revealed his line of work to her. Once again, compassion lay behind this unfortunate story; he had bought her the shoes the day she showed up in a tattered pair of espadrilles, touching his heart, and he had done so with the perverse idea that a pair of alluring shoes would allow Safira, in exchange for her amorous dealings, to ask for a sum of money equal to her refinement. He now regretted this over-generous act — he had expected some gratitude, not a threat to his career. Soon, thanks to this love-struck scatterbrain, the entire police force of the capital would be in on his act. Dressing elegantly to feign respectability would no longer be of any use to him if he didn’t manage to nip this bad publicity in the bud. Of course these bitter thoughts lasted only the span of a few sighs and in no way altered his conviction that nothing on this earth is tragic for an intelligent man. With his tolerant and joyful ethics, he was hardly predisposed to spite and he had to laugh at himself for thinking that telling the girl he was a thief would turn her away from him. Instead of alienating her, confiding in Safira had only made him more

esteemed in her eyes, convinced as she was — no doubt by the example of the very wealthy characters popularized in the papers — that the profession of thief was synonymous with an elevated social standing. She followed Ossama ceaselessly, accumulating so-called “chance” encounters and giving him slyly languorous glances. Ossama had to admit that, for an expert in feminine ways, he had gone pathetically astray: any imbecile knew that women in love were impervious to all moral considerations. For a moment he silently made fun of himself, an ironic smile playing on his lips.

Safira could only interpret this smile as implicit criticism, and she tried to absolve herself by saying in a faintly trembling voice:

“I may have made a terrible mistake. Forgive me.”

“No, there’s nothing terrible about it. Don’t worry about me. At heart, your mother seems a very sensible person. Please thank her for her prayers. Who knows, I might need them.”

“Do you seriously mean that?”

“A person who makes no distinction between a banker and a thief cannot be classified as crazy. In fact, for evaluating mental health it’s the only criterion. There are no others.”

Ossama failed to divulge to the girl that this criterion was of his own devising. Even though Safira believed everything he told her, evaluating madness according to such a simplistic standard seemed insufficient for judging her mother’s mental state. “Are you sure?” she asked nervously.

“On my honor!” Ossama swore, placing his hand over his heart to prove the sincerity of his diagnosis.

“That makes me happy. I was afraid of seeing her go completely mad. You have warmed my heart.”

He could make out real relief on the girl’s face; a yearning to teach this exemplary neophyte his conception of the world welled up in him. But the impulse did not last long. Popularizing such a subversive concept for the benefit of a

creature as hopeless as Safira seemed like offering pearls to a dying old woman.

“Tell me,” he began again in an amusing, conversational tone, “do you speak with your mother often?”

Ossama wanted primarily to keep the dialogue going and not give his companion the impression that she bored him. To be honest, the girl’s problems fascinated him against his will, as if all the injustices from which she suffered — all that she had inherited from her ancestors since the beginning of time — had their roots in distant lands and not in his immediate surroundings. Since he had ascended to thief heaven, he no longer paid any attention to the plaintive songs or moans of a fatalistic people who continued to believe in a mythic heavenly paradise. As he listened to Safira, he could hear the faded but enduring echo of the past when he, too, had been suffering in a world of triumphant falsehood. Although he couldn’t admit it to himself, he was hoping to hear her complain and lament, thereby opening his heart to the lost paths of his childhood with its trail of misfortune and cruelty — everything that in his new-found wisdom he had relegated to the ranks of insignificance. This vague nostalgic longing, however, did not distract him from his main purpose, which was to keep an eye on the club entrance, which waves of passersby sporadically blocked from his view. Until now he had only caught sight of servants in uniforms coming out one at a time to inhale the sweltering air of the street and cast reproachful glances at the never-ending stream of people strolling lazily beneath the sun, excluded from the club. No doubt the club members — the notables themselves — were in the process of whetting their appetites by swilling their alcohol of preference while fomenting new, shady deals. But lunchtime was drawing near and Ossama knew that none of these bastards would miss a meal; filling their bellies was the only work to which they devoted themselves with competence and honesty.

“Yes, I speak with my mother, but not often. It pains me to see her get all confused when we talk. I wind up feeling

dizzy.”

“What do you talk about?”

Safira hesitated a moment before answering. She looked at Ossama with atypical boldness and said, in an almost sardonic tone of voice:

“Well, just what is it that poor people talk about, in your opinion?”

It was a low blow, a perfidious move on the girl’s part, and Ossama was momentarily mortified by his tactlessness. He was sure that the two women could only talk about money — or more specifically, the lack of money — and he decided to change this thorny subject quickly by making a little joke.

“I know that poor people only talk about money, but talking about money never made anybody any richer.”

And he emitted a pleasant and contagious little laugh to encourage the girl to follow him down the path of cheerfulness.

But Safira stubbornly refused to laugh; on the contrary, Ossama’s unfortunate joke only succeeded in making her more despondent in regard to the young man’s feelings about poverty.

“I don’t care about money,” she said. “What good is money if there’s not a little love in life?”

She lowered her eyes and stayed completely still with an expression of dread on her face, as if she were expecting an earthquake. Ossama didn’t fall for it; he could easily see her message and he had to pretend it wasn’t directed his way. Feminine wiles, even in this girl who had barely reached puberty, always amused him because they were such a fragile weapon, at best good for confusing the gullible or the idiotic. Still, he was touched by this frustrated admission and he grabbed hold of the girl’s hand in a gesture of friendship and consolation. Yet once more the compassion he felt for his companion seemed like a defect that would destroy his freedom.

“Do you speak about love with your mother?”

“Who else can I speak to? She’s the only one in whom I can confide. At least *she* listens to me.”

Ossama admired Safira’s ruse: criticizing him without naming him, all the while knowing he would recognize himself in this allusion to his indifference. Posing as an innocent victim, she was using her female cunning to reach her goal, which was to snare him in the web of a pitiable love affair. But how could he be angry at her for this? It was nothing but idle talk, with no long-term consequences. He was lenient with Safira and her insinuations, because this stubborn, lovelorn girl was so very young, and her wiles so absolutely ineffective. What he would never have tolerated from an adult woman, he easily accepted from this girl who was experimenting, at his expense, with all the folly and uncertainties that eminent psychologists attribute to the feminine mystique. But since Ossama had never discerned the slightest mystery in any woman, poor Safira’s wiles rarely perplexed him; he felt only a vague pity for universal stupidity.

“I listen to you, too,” he objected, out of sheer goodness and so as not to distress the girl by his constant refusal to understand.

“That’s true, you do listen, but only to make fun of me. The other day, for example, when I told you I was looking for a job, you said not to bother because, with my luck, I would probably find one. And then you burst out laughing.”

Having seen him laugh so often when she was describing certain aspects of her miserable life, Safira had formed an idea of the young man in keeping with his cavalier attitude — selfish and frivolous, disdainful of the suffering of others. And sometimes, so as not to thwart this blasphemous exuberance, she, too, would try to laugh about her woes, perhaps with the superstitious idea of warding off ill fortune.

“Sorry to bother you with my stories,” she said with a forced smile. “I’d rather hear about your exploits. They’re bound to be more amusing than my discussions with my

mother. I'd like to become a thief, too. Unfortunately, I don't have your courage. I think I'd get arrested before I even tried."

"Listen, Safira, you're wrong, I don't have any courage," answered Ossama with feigned weariness. "When I told you I was a thief, I was just joking. I'm sorry you believed me. You shouldn't take what I tell you so seriously all the time."

The girl's face contorted horribly, as if she had just learned of some unforgivable treachery. The young man's dishonorable profession had led her to believe that her own dissolution wouldn't be an obstacle to a love affair between two individuals similarly debased by poverty. But if Ossama wasn't a thief as he had claimed, how could he be interested in a romance with an insignificant little prostitute? Her eyes clouded by tears, she looked at the young man as if he were a renegade gone over to the class enemy.

"What's the matter?" asked Ossama with a tinge of remorse in his voice. "Have I offended you?"

The girl remained silent, more from modesty than from the anger that was suffocating her. She could not explain to Ossama that his lie was depriving her of the only free gift ever allotted to the miserable of this earth.

"So it was a joke!" she said at last, bitterly.

"I only told you that to amuse you. I'm sorry, but don't turn it into a tragedy. On the contrary, you should be glad to know I'm not a thief."

"Glad of what? If you're not a thief, how can you go around with" — she did not say love — "a girl like me? After all, I'm just a prostitute."

"I don't care what you are. Have I ever snubbed you? Even if you murdered someone, you'd still be completely respectable to me. In fact, I'd admire you all the more."

"I don't want to murder anyone."

"Well, you should. Plenty of people deserve to be murdered. A few years ago all I dreamed about was doing

away with all those bastards. But now I want them to live long lives, because they make me laugh.”

“Who are all these bastards?”

“Maybe some day you’ll know, maybe you never will. Anyway, believe me. Bastards don’t just exist, they even prosper all over the world.”

Safira seemed upset, even frightened, by these enigmatic statements. Although she was used to his crazy ideas, Ossama’s harangue about complete strangers set her mind awhirl. Her companion — this joyously mocking, distant young man — had suddenly turned into an unknown character with bloodthirsty ideals. First he’d claimed to be a thief, now was he going to metamorphose into an assassin?

“By Allah! I don’t understand you. Everything you say upsets me. Nothing worries you. You laugh at everything. You dress like a prince and yet you walk through the crowds without worrying about getting dirty. Can you explain this mystery to me?”

“If I am dressed, as you say, like a prince, it’s because I inherited my father’s suits when he died,” Ossama replied with all the composure of an inveterate liar. “He was an important civil servant and always had to be impeccably dressed. To honor his memory, I like to go out in decent clothes too, so as not to disappoint him in his grave. It pains me to talk about such things, but I haven’t hesitated to share them with you so that you can learn a little more about me.”

He took on the chagrined look that any man wears at the memory of certain deaths. The girl seemed satisfied with his explanation, yet her face remained resolutely sad; the origin of Ossama’s stylishness did nothing to change the fact that she was a betrayed lover, and it was clear to her that the time for banter and courtship games had passed. Decorum required her to leave the young man so he could muse in solitude over the memory of his father, the important civil servant with his admirably tailored suits who had swept suddenly into their

conversation. That ghost continued to haunt her and with a timid look, she said:

“All right, then, I’ll be going now. I hope we’ll meet again.”

“Of course we will. I’m always happy to see you.”

Ossama had regained his optimism. He was pleased with his apocryphal tale about where his suits had come from, a tale he could use again in other circumstances, plausible even to an obtuse policeman. Allowing the girl to carry on with her leave-taking preparations, he let his eye roam across the still-dense crowd, on the lookout for a breach in that human wall which would permit him to catch a glimpse of the club’s open gate. He had an intuition that — as a kind of reward for this exhausting tête-à-tête with Safira — the day had a magnificent gift in store for him.

She rose slowly, as if she did not wish to wake Ossama from his daydream, and then moved nimbly, passing from the shade of the alley into the sun of the street, her cheap jewelry shimmering one last time before she vanished into the crowd.

Left alone, Ossama let out the sigh of a dying man coming back to life. After each encounter with Safira he had the feeling he’d been drained of his blood and, even worse, that he’d become mindful of prosaic human suffering. He got a hold of himself and attempted to forget this gloomy interlude. Freed from the shackles of chivalry, he stretched his neck and riveted his gaze on the opposite sidewalk. And after a moment, his wish was granted. There, as if in belated response to his vigil, appeared a man: he stood motionless on the threshold of the venerable entrance, blinded by the dazzling light of the street. He was a precious specimen of the brotherhood of notables, a man of about fifty, tall and satisfyingly stout, dressed in a navy blue suit that hugged his plump body, the kind of uniform

avored by his fellow creatures, all graduates of the same school of high crime. He was nervously fingering a string of amber prayer beads as if he were trying to relieve a toothache

or the twinges of a stomach ulcer. His physique was repugnant enough to disgust a nanny goat in heat, yet everything about him oozed opulence — theft on a grand scale. But his face, bloated from the fat of sumptuous foodstuffs, somehow lacked the usual haughtiness and self-assurance of parvenus of his ilk; all the standard arrogance now seemed sorely diminished by a tenacious anxiety linked to some private calamity that Ossama attributed to a loss of money or a mistress's betrayal. Standing on the threshold of the club, the man was fidgeting about in every direction, his gaze searching the tangle of cars beyond the crowd, obviously hoping to attract his driver's attention to his remarkable self.

With the majesty of an aristocrat accustomed to bringing the ruffraff under control, Ossama rose and crossed the street with an authoritarian stride, counting on his distinguished dress to arrest the bellicose drivers in their ardent race toward oblivion. He reached the opposite sidewalk at the precise moment when the man's car stopped directly in front of the club door. The man, who'd been awaiting this arrival with the exasperation of a master abandoned by his servant in the midst of a riot, pushed forcefully through the slow parade of peaceful passersby, who showered him with the most offensive curses and insults. During this short but difficult journey, he bumped against Ossama who, with the dexterity of a magician, relieved him of his wallet. The man must have felt nothing in the crush, for he dived into his car with the fiery spirit of someone trying to escape a lynching.

It was curiosity rather than fear of an unlikely arrest that sent Ossama in search of a taxi. He was eager to examine the fruit of his larceny and to learn his victim's name, a name that he felt must enjoy — he didn't know why — some dreadful notoriety. The man must have committed some grandiose misdeed: that explained his state of doleful despondency leaving the club, which Ossama had witnessed. All the while thinking with jubilation about what he was going to find, Ossama endeavored to get a taxi driver's attention in the maelstrom of traffic. Hailing a taxi amid all those vehicles in

perpetual motion was something of a wartime raid, especially since all those damn drivers now had the habit of only picking up passengers from the Arabian Peninsula, recognizable by their traditional dress and the surplus of women in their harems. These desert potentates were reputed to hand out money like peanuts, making them the designated targets of the entire business class. Ossama cursed these invaders — they reeked of oil and they monopolized all the services in the hotels, casinos, and cabarets by ostentatiously displaying their wealth: even hapless belly dancers saw in them their salvation. The crush of cars speeding by nonstop despite the craters and mounds of dirt left by the endless roadwork — you'd think they were competing on an obstacle course — exhorted Ossama to be cautious. Only when traffic had slowed slightly because a bus had collapsed under the weight of its passengers did he decide to place himself deliberately in the path of a taxi that had been forced by the mishap to temporarily renounce its creed of speed. The taxi driver, shocked by this impolite and suicidal way of calling upon him, hurled abuse in an infuriated voice, as if Ossama had insulted both his most distant ancestors and his descendents yet to be born.

“Curses upon your mother! I almost ran you down. If you want to die, go drown yourself in the river!”

“God provides for everything,” Ossama replied calmly. “Besides, I fear nothing. I'm wearing an amulet.”

The taxi driver had time to note Ossama's stylishness and his face softened at the thought of an excessively expensive fare. For lack of a Saudi prince, this young man would do — yes, he could do justice to his brand-new car. He loathed the lower classes that clamored aboard en masse and dirtied his seats, eating watermelon as if his car were a picnic ground.

“And where would you and your amulet like to go?”

“It's a big city. Take me wherever you'd like.”

“Your wish is my command, your lordship, and may Allah protect us.”

Ossama climbed aboard, closed the door, and settled comfortably on the seat cushions that smelled of new leather. As if to give his noble client a demonstration of his virtuosity, the driver grasped the wheel and shot the car forward at rocket speed. This barbaric conduct did not worry Ossama in the least; it fell within the norms of mass hysteria. Completely at peace with himself, he pulled from his pocket the wallet he had just appropriated and opened it with the daintiness of a lover unsealing a missive from his mistress. Crocodile skin, the wallet had no doubt had cost a fortune; it exuded a strong whiff of corruption. A letter was inside; Ossama took it out and read the name of the addressee on the envelope — previously slit cautiously with a letter opener, it didn't have the slightest nick — sent in care of the Club of Notables. The man's name had been in the news for a week due to a dreadful scandal. This fabulously wealthy real estate developer was being sued for causing the death of some fifty tenants of a low-rent apartment building constructed by his firm; it had collapsed shortly after being unveiled with great pomp by a government delegation. Dumbfounded, Ossama plucked the letter out of its envelope and began to read. The note, written by hand on the letterhead of the Ministry of Public Works, seemed to come from an accomplice who was terrified of the legal consequences of the carnage. He warned the addressee, in a scathing tone (stamped with unintentional humor), not to count on his present or future collaboration now that fifty corpses lay between them — it was not his intention, he said, to increase the prosperity of undertakers. As for the commission he was owed for his most recent intercession with the ministry in question, he would spare the addressee. Under no circumstances could he continue to have the slightest contact with a man obviously better suited to tombs than apartment buildings, even moderately priced ones. In short, it was a break-up letter to a discredited associate from a thief stripped of all good manners by the idea of prison. It was signed by the Minister of Public Works' brother — a worthless man very popular with the capital's shadiest wheeler-dealers.

Although Ossama counted himself among fate's privileged few, this magnificent bounty was the last thing he'd expected. He reread the letter several times with fierce satisfaction until he realized he was holding a bomb in his hands and he did not know how to explode it.

II

The taxi left Ossama on the outskirts of the Sayeda Zenab district. He was born in this poor quarter and had grown up here, and it was neither proper nor decent for him to be seen getting out of a taxi by people who had known him barefoot and dressed in rags. In fact, the young man only came back to this squalid neighborhood to visit his father, a former factory worker blinded when a policeman's club struck him on the head during a riot following the rise in price of certain staples necessary for the survival of almost everyone in the country. That riot had happened before the military revolution and, since then, he had been living like a recluse in a second-floor apartment in a patched-up building, still standing thanks to the constant prayers of its tenants. Never voicing the least complaint or slightest curse against those responsible for his infirmity, old Moaz spent his days in peace, the revolution having strengthened his conviction that his sacrifice had at least served to establish a more just society for its workers. His blindness prevented him from realizing what had become of this revolution — and Ossama, who had eyes to see, refrained from informing him of its results, not wanting him to despair about long-forgotten events.

The crowd was sparser than in the city center's wide thoroughfares, for the neighborhood did not exactly encourage strolls. There were no shop windows to entice passersby with their wares and their air of prosperity; there was nothing to see but small craft stalls, vegetable sellers, falafel stands, and other similar sorry-looking shops. A number of people who had managed to escape the world of work lounged about in the shaded sidewalk cafés, men of leisure oblivious to the hour and the rising prices. The voice of a *chanteuse* wailing love songs emanated from several radios at once, drowning out with a voluptuous melody the commotion of the street. As he walked, Ossama was greeted by several shopkeepers who cried out in admiration of his fancy clothes and how well he looked, and he responded to their compliments with urbane modesty. Everyone in the neighborhood, especially on his

father's street, was aware of his success in business and they congratulated him at every opportunity. Buoyed by these words of praise, he reached the house of uncertain future; it seemed unchanged since his last visit. With the air of a dying man facing his mausoleum, he stopped and inspected the front of the house propped up by beams that seemed just as rickety as the walls they were meant to support. Ossama was reckless — but not to the extent that he'd allow himself to die from a foolish mistake, with all the posthumous shame of having his body, as it was exhumed from the rubble, associated with the corpses of the lowly: that would have been such an insult to his intelligence. On many occasions he had beseeched his father to move to a more solid place, but old Moaz stubbornly refused, claiming that wherever he went it would still be the same dark night. The fact that he was unable to see the warning signs of an impending catastrophe justified his decision to ignore it. Ossama took this to mean that in certain cases blindness was a blessing. He prayed to the heavens to keep the building from falling down while he was in it, then passed through the entrance and cautiously went up the stairs, holding his breath for fear that exhaling would lead to an untimely collapse. Happily there was but one flight to climb and he quickly arrived at his father's lodgings. The door was never locked. Ossama opened it carefully and entered a room arranged to resemble the living quarters of an honorable retired civil servant.

Old Moaz sat in front of the open window in an armchair of gilded wood and red velvet, craning his neck in the direction of the never-ending hum of the street, which seemed to be the only thing that still tied him to mankind. His noble attitude, combined with the splendor of the seat he occupied, brought to mind a fallen monarch who had carried into exile nothing save his throne, a symbol of his lost authority. Ossama's intrusion did not in any way change the expression of pleasure on Moaz's face as he listened to the discordant sounds of the traffic and the street peddlers' colorful calls. Without turning around he asked:

“Is that you, Zakiya?”

“It’s only me, Father.”

The blind man turned his face toward his son, focusing on him with the intensity of a man trying to find his way in the dark, as if he were attempting to make out some signs of joy or sadness. His eyes still looked normal, for only his optic nerve had been damaged by the notorious club. Still, over the years Moaz had acquired the mask of solemnity and profound wisdom that can be observed in blind men with sunken eyes, and that so fascinates and distresses most of the sighted. Ossama often wondered if blindness made men wiser, or if that was nothing but a silly superstition. He had never managed to resolve the question.

“Welcome, my son. I was just thinking about the gains of the revolution. I have the sense that there is more movement, more activity in the neighborhood. I hear people laughing and joking with each other, as if life had become agreeable to them. It comforts me every day to realize that happiness no longer belongs exclusively to the powerful.”

Ossama sat down on a chair near his father and cast a disabused glance out the window. The blind man was right, except that what seemed to him to be a kind of energy resulting from the benefits of the revolution was in fact merely the hum of a population growing uncontrollably. No doubt Moaz had forgotten that his compatriots always kept their sense of humor regardless of ideological considerations. It was as if the blow from the club had not only blinded him but also dimmed his memory. As usual, Ossama avoided any discussion of the merits of a revolution that existed only in his father’s mind. He thought it more reasonable to bring the conversation around to some trivial matter, and he asked about the absence of the maid, that awful Zakiya who did as she pleased during working hours.

“Hasn’t Zakiya come yet?”

“She’ll be here soon. She’s a good woman and she tends to me with great compassion.”

Ossama had to admit that the room was clean, the furniture nicely polished, and his father's robe meticulously washed and pressed. Nonetheless he suspected the "good woman" of having matrimonial designs on the invalid. With all the money Ossama provided for his father's care, she probably thought old Moaz was a banker or a counterfeiter. And on top of all that, she had the repellent face of a woman who had been successively repudiated by all the husbands she'd managed to hoodwink with her magic spells. The idea of having Zakiya for a stepmother was so repulsive that he didn't hesitate to caution his father — by means of an aesthetic opinion — against the schemes of this female all too happy to wed a blind man.

"I only have one thing against her. She's simply too ugly."

"What do I care about her ugliness? Her beauty wouldn't matter to me either. You forget, my son, that I am blind."

This reminder of the obvious plunged Ossama into a bitter reverie. He did have moments of forgetfulness about his father's infirmity, but to have imagined that Moaz could care whether his maid's features were charming or repulsive was cause for alarm. He sought to make up for his blunder by getting to the point of his visit without further delay.

"Forgive me, Father, for not having come sooner. I was swamped with work. Even today I had to talk for hours with a real estate developer, a man of national importance and a very tough negotiator, regarding a large cement order. I managed to close the deal, and so I brought you a little money."

Ossama pulled out the crocodile-skin wallet he had stolen from the developer and removed a few ten-pound notes that he placed on his father's lap with some embarrassment, as if his father could divine their origin. Sometimes Ossama had the feeling that the blind man was not fooled by his social success and for a few seconds he scrutinized his father's face, believing he might glimpse a smile of complicity on it. But the austere face, ennobled by hardship, revealed no sign of connivance. Reassured, and having carried out his filial duty, all that remained for him to do was to convince the old man to

leave this house of certain death before it was too late. This subject of conversation, which he took up again each time he visited, at least had — at the prospect of an impending move — the advantage of alleviating his fears. It was becoming more and more agonizing for him to venture into this trap with its rotted framework and crumbling stones ready to swallow him up at the slightest tremor.

“I need to speak with you, Father.”

“I’m listening, my son. Do you have problems?”

“Yes, big problems. I’m worried about your safety. You must leave this place immediately. It could collapse at any moment merely from an overladen cart passing by or a hag nagging her offspring in a loud voice. I beg you to trust me.”

Old Moaz raised his hand as if to hold up the building and prevent imminent catastrophe.

“We are in the hands of Allah, my son. We can do nothing against his will. If this house must collapse one day, it will do so solely as he decides. As for me, I’ve told you, I don’t want to leave this neighborhood. I will live here until the end. I don’t want to die in foreign lands.”

“Who’s talking about foreign lands? I’m merely offering to move you to a building liable to resist collapse for a few more years. There are still a few, even in this neighborhood. I’ll take care of the whole move. That way I won’t have to worry about you while I’m dealing with important national affairs. Do you want to harm the country with your stubbornness?”

“If I am harming the country, may the country forgive me. But do not trouble yourself with me. I am at the end of my life and I don’t care how I die. In fact, I have a favor to ask you. I’d like you to buy me a few chairs, maybe a dozen. Be kind enough to remember. There is no hurry, but it’s better to take care of it ahead of time. I’m counting on you; you are a good son.”

Ossama remained stunned for a few moments, wondering if his father were simply rambling, or if he were planning on

giving a party to celebrate the anniversary of the revolution. He didn't dare to ask, for fear of hearing him confess to a project of this kind. The building would definitely not last long if it were assailed by a swarm of guests. But what guests? His father was only in contact with Zakiya. Could it be that she had achieved her aim — that the old man was thinking of acquiring lavish furnishings for his wedding?

The idea so alarmed Ossama that he cried out as if in a nightmare:

“Chairs! What do you need a dozen chairs for?”

“I'm thinking of the people who will come to my funeral. They should not have to stand. That would not be proper.”

“What people, Father! Do you know many people?”

“There would be my old friends from the factory. I'm sure they have not forgotten that I received the blow that blinded me when we fought together. And perhaps the revolutionary government will send one of its ministers. He can use this armchair that you gave me; it will be free when I die. He will be able to sit in it without feeling out of place. You see, I've thought of everything — my funeral will take place with decency and dignity.”

Ossama almost burst out laughing as he imagined a member of the government sitting in this red velvet gilded armchair as if he were in his office. At the same time, he was filled with compassion for the blind man's ignorance and he repressed his gaiety. So, after all these years, old Moaz still believed his former factory friends remembered his bravery during the riot and that the government considered him a martyr of the royalist repression. Such belief in man's good nature deserved the deference due to a creature that had gone insane.

“Of course. The government certainly owes you at least a medal for your outstanding attitude under the monarchy. I will speak to one of my high-ranking friends in the administration.

A medal costs them nothing and will finally wash away their shame at having ignored you for so long.”

Ossama resolved to buy his father a medal himself, but the blind man shook his head and his usually calm face became tense as if he found such honors exceedingly abhorrent.

“I don’t want a medal. I thank Allah for having given me a son like you. If I am respected in the neighborhood, it’s because of your success. And if the government were to give a medal to someone, it would be to you, my son. I will die happy knowing that the revolutionary government sets great store by your talents.”

A medal from the government in recognition of Ossama’s talents was a sublime idea — the height of mockery. Granted, all the governments in the world were generous when it came to distributing honorary distinctions to worthy people who supported their power, but it was highly unlikely that they’d ever think of offering one of these trinkets to a modest thief on the fringes of society. In any event, the fact that he was excluded from governmental favors did not prevent Ossama from congratulating himself each time he reduced the ill-gotten gains of one of those vultures, decorated or not, by means of his skill as a pickpocket. He remained quiet for a moment, gloating on the inside, still under the influence of this comical and enjoyable conversation with his father. Moaz attributed Ossama’s silence to the pain his son was feeling because of his refusal to move from a building that unquestionably showed the marks of time (but that was certain to endure thanks to the faith of its inhabitants). Like a wise man trusting in providence, he said:

“This house, my son, was built more than a hundred years ago. Why would it collapse now? Most of the buildings in the neighborhood are even older. And then, there are other tenants who have nowhere else to take shelter. Shall I be the only one to flee the disaster? If the heavens so ordain, I will share the fate of my neighbors.”

Ossama knew his father was merciful toward his fellow man, but his intention of sacrificing himself with the rest of the tenants went beyond simple pity; it was evidence of a mysterious arrogance, a final provocation in the face of injustice. The young man was as unnerved by this as he would have been by the appearance of a precious, naked woman in a desert. So old Moaz had not lost everything! In his perpetual night, he was holding fast to the sole luxury the poor possess — that same dignity that had led him to fight against oppression. Unfortunately, this pride, buried like a treasure beneath the good-natured features of an old man at the end of his life, would no longer serve any purpose other than to brave a natural disaster inscribed since the dawn of time on the walls of a dilapidated building. All of this was quite touching, but Ossama found nothing appealing in this kind of collective, democratic suicide. Having stayed the time required by decency, he was getting ready to leave when suddenly there were frighteningly loud knocks at the door. They echoed in Ossama's ears like portentous creakings, a prelude to the place's collapse. He jumped from his chair in a fright, wanting to dash down into the street with his father, when Zakiya's entrance stopped him in his tracks. Zakiya, who had not been afraid of demolishing the door to announce her arrival, was in her forties and enormous; her distressing ugliness brought to mind the faces of the damned being consumed by hellfire. The crudeness of her manners and her mania for manhandling objects that had the impudence to get in her way made her the ideal accomplice to the danger hanging over the building. With a single, too-violent gesture she could take down a fort. Needless to say, her presence in the room did not bode well for Ossama's safety and it reinforced his desire to get out as fast as possible of a place that had suddenly become catastrophic.

Zakiya first went to deposit a bag of groceries in the kitchen area, then turned to Ossama and exclaimed in a loud, manly voice:

“Here he is, the handsomest, the most illustrious of princes! May Allah be with you, Excellency.”

She threw herself at Ossama like a bloodthirsty ghoul and grabbed his hand to kiss it. But the young man swiftly pulled it away and drew back, horrified by her abominable touch.

“Well now,” he said. “Since you are here, I’ll be going. I have much to do today. Take good care of my father; otherwise I’ll slit your throat.”

As soon as he stepped into the street, Ossama felt the elation of a man on death row receiving a last-minute pardon. He picked up his pace, eager to get as far as possible from the disaster-stricken house. Freed at last from his fear of undergoing the same fate as the fifty tenants of the building erected by the despicable developer, he recovered his caustic humor on contact with the crowd moving through this working-class neighborhood, open to every miracle. His code of ethics prohibited him from practicing his trade on these poorest of the poor; he was mostly thinking about the letter that, once its contents were divulged, would surely shatter the already severely compromised reputations of its addressee and his even more valiant collaborator — the minister’s brother — whose crimes for the time being were still unknown to the public.

Though filled with wonder at the fact that he held in his hands such evidence against the brother of an eminent member of the government, Ossama despaired about his inability to make use of it. By some divine decree, he had become the repository of a scandal on the ministerial level, and he felt it his duty to disseminate this information throughout the entire country, and even beyond its borders, with the aim of amusing others less well-informed about the villainy of their leaders. But how did one go about getting such an ambitious project off the ground? To offer the letter to a newspaper was a facile solution that would definitely put him at risk. It would be quite naïve to introduce himself with this bomb to some editor-in-chief, by nature terrified of losing his job. Since all newspapers rely on money to survive, the affair would no

doubt be hushed up, and he would be indicted by obedient and corrupt judges who were themselves friends or relations of the grand thieves. Ossama's innate distrust of all the upper classes was forcing him to seek out some new scheme, one that would allow him remain completely anonymous. Having run through all sorts of possibilities, to no avail, he realized he could never manage the business alone and would have to share this secret that, over the hours, had become too heavy to bear on his own. It could not be imparted to just anyone; he had to be someone with no other obligations, neither wife nor child nor job to protect. He knew no one who fit the description other than members of the underworld, a mob who cared little about politics and on principle preferred the dark shadows of a clandestine life to the unsavory suns of fame. Motivated by some foolish hope, he began to stare at everyone around him, trying to flush out of the swarm of people resolutely indifferent to his problem the unrecognized genius who would be able to counsel him. Everywhere he saw nothing save the flunky-like faces of a people subject to the most urgent, concrete needs; one politico-financial scandal more or less had absolutely no chance of altering their vision of the world. Ossama quickly became fed up with his ridiculous endeavor and he hurried on, determined to get out of this sordid neighborhood that could offer him no comfort in his bitter solitude as a carrier of scandal.

Tormented by his inability to entertain his compatriots with such an amusing affair, Ossama was quickly wending his way — to the detriment of his handsome suit — through the ragged crowd when he saw, sitting at a sidewalk café, the incomparable Nimr, his master in the trade. The man's head was shaved and a bushy beard hid half his face, but these little modifications of his appearance meant to dupe a police force all too familiar with him could not fool Ossama, who retained an indelible image of his old master as he had appeared when they first met. He hadn't seen Nimr for several months because the master — despite his proverbial dexterity and precisely because of this reputation — was often in prison. With the joy of a child discovering a toy he thought he'd lost

for good, Ossama approached the man who was cautiously sipping a glass of tea like a penniless soul granting himself a fleeting and rare pleasure.

“Peace be upon you, Nimr! Allah has granted my prayer. I was looking for you, my worthy master.”

Nimr raised his head and stared at Ossama with the gaze of someone who despises false words.

“Son of a dog! You knew I was in prison, so how could you have been looking for me? Aren’t you ashamed of lying to your old master? And, besides, what are you doing in this flea-bitten neighborhood?”

Seeing his former teacher disguised as a member of a religious brotherhood, Ossama felt somehow responsible for this distressing conversion. Nimr’s sudden piety had all the hallmarks of a mental breakdown precipitated by a slowdown in business. He thought it wise to reawaken the consciousness of a man whose unfortunate circumstances had plunged him into mysticism by using words that were entirely untrue: “On my honor, I was looking for you. The papers I read every morning informed me of your release without mentioning where you were now residing. But I knew I’d find you in these parts.”

Despite the enormity of his lie, Ossama had no need to fear being contradicted — the master, being illiterate, was no great fan of newspapers. Nimr seemed to weigh the plausibility of this unverifiable account, and it happened that his vanity got the better of his mistrust. He was several years older than Ossama and he reveled in his incontestable authority in their professional community. He had to his credit the training of an entire generation of pickpockets who pillaged the city while blessing his name. Parsimoniously clothed in rags that bordered on the indecent, he looked with scorn upon his favorite student’s disloyal chic. For a long time this stylishness, incompatible with Nimr’s ethos of an emancipated proletariat, had offended him as if it were some sort of treason. Ever since Ossama had begun to frequent the posh districts in

order to track down his victims among the capital's grand thieves, the young man had distanced himself from Nimr's sphere of activity and Nimr regretted, not without some rancor, the loss of such a promising pupil. Ossama's intelligence in the trade that Nimr had taught him seemed to have extended well beyond his instruction and this was unforgivable to a master who believed himself unsurpassable in his field.

"I've got to admit that you cut a fine figure. But I cannot congratulate you. You have betrayed me, your teacher, with your irreverent methods, and with me, the entire profession."

"How have I betrayed you? I steal from the rich, that is, from thieves. Is that a betrayal?"

"I taught you to steal and now you are wielding your talent in the posh neighborhoods, denying your own milieu and heaping scorn upon your instructor. We are no longer on the same side. All you're missing is a sports car to get around in. Maybe then I will admire you. For the moment, you're nothing but a young peacock proud of his feathers."

"Even before you went to prison I explained to you the reasons for my sartorial disguise. When I work in certain circles dressed as I am, no one dares take me for a thief. And so I've eliminated all risks."

"That's exactly what I hold against you! There's nothing more immoral than stealing without risk. Risk is what sets us apart from bankers and their ilk, who practice legalized theft under the patronage of the government. I did not instill my art in you for you to become a movie-star thief whose only concern is pleasing his public."

Far from being outraged by his former teacher's accusations, Ossama was smiling: he knew the entire diatribe was merely a roundabout way of celebrating their reunion. Nimr was too proud to let any opportunity pass for showing his anger at anything that could possibly undermine the sacred rules of his art.

Ossama had never forgotten his own state of physical and mental exhaustion when he'd met the man who was to become his teacher and supporter during the entire period of his apprenticeship. A few years earlier, wishing to help his disabled father, he had abandoned his studies, assuming that already armed with the ultimate knowledge — how to read and write — it would be possible for him to find a well-paid position. But he was rapidly disillusioned; no one wanted his knowledge. Courier, shoe-shine boy, peanut seller, servant — he got to know the misery of the needy in search of their daily bread. Then came the long period when he had no work, and begging became his only job, his sole source of income. It was a painful ordeal: with his unmaimed, healthy body, begging turned out to be a very unprofitable line of work for Ossama. He was at a disadvantage compared to all the injured — blind or one-armed — who ostentatiously practiced this ideal, tax-exempt trade. In a moment of sheer delirium, he thought about cutting off an arm or a leg in order to appeal to those dutiful donors enticed by open wounds and weakened bodies. Finally, starving and on the verge of suicide (it was so easy to die by throwing yourself beneath the wheels of all those cars eager to mow you down), he'd sat down on the curb, brooding over his sorry fate, and waited for a bus or a truck loaded with watermelons to pass by, a guarantee of a definite demise. Just then a jovial-looking individual with the relaxed appearance of a lord of the underworld, seeing him in this delicate position — the intense traffic made the curb as dangerous as the edge of an erupting volcano — munificently tossed Ossama a twenty-piaster coin. This individual was none other than Nimr, who had just confiscated the purse of an important flour dealer and, as was his custom, was distributing a little of his illicit gains to the poor, thereby lending to his trade some of that social-mindedness generally ascribed to bandits of legend. He was stupefied when Ossama picked up the coin and returned it to him saying in the disabused tones of a dying man that he had no more use for money. Nimr sensed before him a tragic, extremely complex case and sat down next to Ossama with the curiosity of an archeologist coming upon a fake mummy in a

museum. At first the young man didn't respond to his questions; the idea of suicide was still haunting him and this stranger — whom he deemed disreputable as well as powerless to come to his aid — annoyed him with his inquisitiveness. But in the end Nimr's solicitude eased Ossama's pain and a fraternal bond was created between him and the man who would soon teach him how to free himself from destiny. In a monologue punctuated by gasps, Ossama described his long ordeal searching for work and his fruitless experience as a beggar handicapped by the absence of bodily injury. He added that he had made up his mind to commit suicide and that he was sitting on this curb waiting for a vehicle to go by large enough to ensure a swift death. Dazzled by such honesty in distress, Nimr helped Ossama up and immediately took him to a local restaurant for a bowl of beans. While Ossama was eating his fill of this invigorating dish, Nimr told his new protégé about the wonderful life he led, a life of freedom based on the universality of theft. He had been a pickpocket since his innocent (so to speak) childhood days and had become a highly skilled professional capable of teaching his art to even the most feeble-minded of his fellow citizens. From time to time he was arrested, but prison didn't bother him much; on the contrary, he saw it as a sort of rest cure. He would emerge vigorous and full of zeal, ready to take up his trade once again like a civil servant after a period of sick leave. Having flaunted his glorious career, he then told Ossama that he was prepared to instill his mastery in a boy who knew how to read and write — rare talents in a profession made up of illiterate elements with no political opinions. Ever more enchanted by this exceptional recruit, Nimr elaborated for the benefit of the young man his theory that theft was the just recovery of small change by the poor in a world where the grand thieves at the pinnacle of the social scale grew fat with impunity. Dumbfounded at first by what he'd just heard, Ossama was quick to grasp (the dish of beans having produced in his brain the same acumen as a little ball of high-quality hashish) the simplicity of these words that tossed into the void all the deceitful and apocryphal values accepted by the slavish

multitudes. Full of gratitude and comforted by such new, flamboyant ethics, he accepted his savior's proposal without suspecting that one day he'd become more skilled than his future master in a profession as old as humankind. For an entire winter Nimr taught Ossama how to acquire that nimbleness of the fingers that secures the reputation of virtuoso pianist and pickpocket alike. Then he let him loose, happy to have done a good deed — one he hoped would be taken into account on Judgment Day. Ossama proved not unworthy of this crash course, and he often saw his professor during the years when they worked in the same districts of the capital. Nimr, for his part, was extremely pleased at having divined in his young pupil the qualities essential to his stealthy trade that required, in addition to agility, a revolutionary consciousness. But when Ossama got it into his head to dress like Prince Charming in order to penetrate spheres reserved for the grand thieves, their occasions for meeting became rarer. Nimr, who persisted in gleaning his due from the ill-stocked pockets of his equals, could only with great difficulty escape from a tradition-bound police force totally lacking in imagination. A beloved guest of the penitentiary system, he often went months without seeing his brilliant student.

Nimr still had the disgruntled look of a man whose principles had just been violated. He planned on remaining in this ornery mood for a long time, but after a while Ossama's impish grin managed to exhaust his feigned sulkiness. Obviously the young man was not paying any attention to his scoldings and, worse, couldn't care less.

"I forgive you," said Nimr, "because I think of you as my son — a son of a bitch, but my son nonetheless. I hope you have not been neglecting my teachings since you started working among the distinguished set."

"I've always done as you taught me — and the 'distinguished set' can mostly be distinguished by the fatness of their wallets. I steal from them and they respect me. And every policeman whose path I cross greets me with deference."

“I don’t doubt it. Those people are too stupid to read your profession on your face.”

“How could they? I’m wearing all the finery of prosperity. They think I’m rich. In their world, only poor people are thieves. That superstition goes back to antiquity, and it suits my business perfectly.”

“So, this is what learning is for! I see now that an intelligent boy like you could never be content with petty larceny! By Allah, you are the thief of the future! All those years of school served your ambition well.”

“School taught me only to read and write. And that sliver of learning set me on the surest road to starving to death in honesty and ignorance. You were the first to open my eyes to widespread corruption. To have understood that the only forces that drive humanity are thieving and swindling — that’s real intelligence. And you didn’t even go to school. Ever since I met you, I have stolen with a clear conscience and a happy heart. Better yet, I have the feeling that my activity contributes to the country’s prosperity because I spend the money I steal from the rich in a variety of shops that would perish without me and my peers.”

The certificate of civic-mindedness that Ossama was bestowing upon himself seemed to go beyond — well beyond — Nimr’s basic teachings. His student had simply swept away the prejudices tied to his profession and had fashioned a philosophy that ennobled the thief, raising him to the rank of a nationalist activist. Nimr didn’t dare believe it, but on reflection, he had to admit the accuracy of this transcendent view of every kind of thievery. It was true that thieves caused money to circulate, money that without their ingenuity would always remain in the same pockets — a deplorable situation that would cause a country’s economy to suffer greatly. By moving money from one pocket to another, theft, by means of this unilateral transfer, allowed completely depressed markets to revive. Having attained the far reaches of this realistic line of reasoning, Nimr was exhausted and eager to rest his brain, which had been dulled by several months in prison. He began

to study Ossama with the eyes of a tourist scrutinizing the Sphinx in expectation of a final prophecy.

Humility not being his long suit, Ossama pictured himself as a solid gold statue for having dazzled his former teacher with his analysis of theft as patriotic virtue.

“I could become a government minister if I wanted,” he announced with the air of someone hesitating to accept a job in a grocery store.

“On my honor!” Nimr exclaimed. “Your success has driven you crazy! May Allah protect you from such a scheme!”

“I’m not crazy and it could very well happen. Listen, I’m going to let you in on something unbelievable. For hours I’ve been looking for someone to discuss this with. Tell me what you think.”

Ossama cast a glance at the few customers in the café and chased away a young cigarette butt collector lurking around their table with an insult that took in his entire family; then, leaning toward Nimr, with the excitement of a neophyte bomb carrier, he told him the story of the letter found in the real estate developer’s wallet — the man behind the genocide against some fifty tenants.

“So you see that the Minister is implicated in this scandal. What’s to say he isn’t in collusion with his brother? And if he is, then why shouldn’t a thief of my caliber be a candidate for a ministerial post as well? Minister of Finance would, I think, suit me best.”

“You’re right,” Nimr agreed. “But you’ve no gift for lying. Can you lie like a minister every day including holidays?”

“It’s just a question of habit. With your guidance I think I could manage, my dear Master.”

They broke out laughing, and in their exuberance woke an old man sleeping on a bench against the wall of the café who then lectured them about shameless youth who did not respect the sleep of workers. The outburst of this old man resting from

his labors as a former worker only increased their merriment. Nimr waited for the man to go back to sleep before warning Ossama about the dangers of holding on to such a volatile letter.

“That letter spells disaster. What are you going to do with it?”

“I don’t know yet. I need advice. But I don’t know anyone besides you whom I can trust.”

“The only advice I can give you is to burn the letter. The sooner the better. Let all those bastards devour each other. What do we care about one more scandal?”

“Well, I’m not going to burn it, that’s for sure. I hope to at least get some amusement from it.”

“What sort of amusement?” Nimr asked, alarmed.

Ossama did not answer; he was wondering if the same kind fate that had chosen him as the emissary of such a scandal would also suggest an entertaining solution to the problem of disseminating it. As he waited for fate to oblige, he watched condescendingly the sovereign people moving about beneath the sun, indifferent to world affairs in general and to his problem in particular. An argument could be heard at a nearby table between two destitute workers who were probably unemployed. Ossama understood by the invocations to their respective ancestors that one of them had wanted to pay for the other’s drink and that the latter was rebelling by denying that his companion came from a family richer than his own. The dispute finally ended in a friendship pact stipulating that each man would pay for his own drink. Having settled their business, they vanished from the café.

“By Allah!” Nimr cried. “Those idiots with their ridiculous quarrel have made me remember the man who can advise you — he would surely have found the behavior of those two vermin enchanting. He is the most extraordinary man I know — but what’s the point of talking about him. It’s better to see him and hear what he has to say.”

“I’d be curious to know just how you could have met such a man,” Ossama said.

“I met him in prison. It might seem unbelievable to you, but there are lots of cultivated men rotting in prison for their beliefs: revolutionaries who want to change society.”

“I’m suspicious of most revolutionaries. They always end up as tame politicians defending the same society they vilified in the past.”

“Not this man. On the contrary, he’s working toward eliminating all politicians. He’s a well-known author and journalist. In his writings he does nothing but mock all the powers and the grotesque people who assume those powers. In one article he swore that the president of a great foreign nation was an illiterate idiot, which caused a most serious diplomatic incident. For this latest prank he was sentenced to three months in prison and a large fine. Really, he’s an extraordinary man, one of a kind. Even when he was being tortured, he joked with his torturers.”

“Why was he tortured?”

“The police wanted to know who had informed him about the idiocy of the president in question. They were convinced he couldn’t have figured it out by himself.”

“By all-powerful Allah!” Ossama laughed. “Those policemen have a sense of humor!”

“How can you credit those torturers with a sense of humor? They were serious, let me tell you. I could see it from the marks of the blows he’d received. For days, they did everything to try to find out his informant’s name. Just to amuse himself, he gave them the name of a journalist very supportive of the authorities. That calmed them down and they left him alone.”

This story filled Ossama with such enthusiasm that a prison term seemed suddenly necessary to help eliminate the gaps in his vision of the world.

“I envy that man,” he said. “I would have liked to be in his place. To have such close contact with stupidity is prodigiously enriching for the mind.”

Nimr was not sure what these words meant. His former student continued to surprise him with his eloquent language. For a moment he thought that Ossama, to have attained such a high degree of intelligence, must have been smoking hashish.

“What about you?” Ossama went on. “Were you tortured as well?”

“I’m a thief. You don’t torture the ones who keep you alive. Policemen’s salaries depend on people like me. I’ve never dreamed of overthrowing the established powers and I’m happy with any and all governments. No political regime will keep me from stealing. I’m certain I’ll always be able to practice my trade. And this guarantee doesn’t exist in any other profession. Have you ever seen an unemployed thief?”

“Excellent reasoning,” Ossama admitted. “Unless they tortured you to find out who had taught you to steal!”

At this, they were overcome by frenzied laughter broken up by insults directed at all torturers and their evil employers. The irascible old fellow sleeping on his bench opened his eyes, looked sadly at the laughing men, but made no comment, no doubt because he was exhausted. A few people had stopped to gawk in front of the café, admiring this energetic display of hilarity as if it were a puppet show. Ossama told them all to go gape at the belly dancer exhibiting herself in a fashionable cabaret on the road to the Pyramids, which was his sarcastic, disdainful way of chasing them from his sight. Then he turned back to Nimr.

“Where can we find this man? From what you’ve said, I’ve been searching for him my whole life. He’s already my brother. Do you know where he lives?”

“Of course. He lives in the City of the Dead. I went to see him when I got out of prison. He inherited his parents’ mausoleum and that’s where he lives, because he has no

income. The government has ordered publishers and newspapers to turn down everything he writes. He still owes several thousand pounds in fines. They're looking for him to seize his goods. Since the mausoleum is the only property he has left, they'd have to sell the dead buried there. I'm sure he's waiting impatiently for that to happen."

"When can we go see him?"

"Any time — he only goes out in the evening. We can go right now if your business allows."

"I have no intention of working this afternoon. Besides, my clients take their naps at this hour."

They rose as one and took a shortcut through the muddy alleyways cluttered with household trash piled up over the years like witnesses to past lives. Oddly, Ossama hardly seemed disgusted by this environment that was inflicting dreadful damage on his elegant attire. He hopped in puddles of viscous water, and stepped gracefully upon abominable refuse without worrying about splattering the hem of his trousers or his lovely suede shoes. All his thoughts were moving in the direction of this unknown brother, this prophet of derision who lived in a cemetery.

III

It was not because he had a predilection for funerary steles, nor because he wanted to perfect his knowledge of metaphysics by having subtle conversations with the dead that the highly educated Karamallah had chosen to live in a cemetery that had become known throughout the world when some thousands of homeless people had settled there without asking anyone's permission. Indeed, no one had dared take offense at this stampede of the downtrodden, with the possible exception of some of the atrabilious deceased, enemies of humankind. Behind Karamallah's choice of so austere a residence lay the despotism of a government impervious to humor and ferociously hostile to all information having any relationship whatsoever to the truth. He had been sentenced to prison and prohibited from publishing because he had insulted a foreign head of state; on his release, he found himself deprived of all remunerative literary activity and harassed on a daily basis by a pack of uneducated creditors. Although he was convinced that the outcome of every drama was ineluctable, it nonetheless seemed more pleasant to deal his oppressors the fatal blow of disappearing without leaving a forwarding address. In a moment of intense euphoria, he had recalled that he had inherited an inalienable piece of property, one that was safe from bailiffs and other lawful raiders. This inheritance, unfortunately nonproductive, was nothing other than the family mausoleum, erected in that famous cemetery that had recently become an attraction for foreign tourists weary of Pharaonic remains. The day after this realization, Karamallah left his apartment in the city center and, with the help of one of his acquaintances who was a carter, carried a few pieces of furniture to the mausoleum where he took refuge and waited for his problems to be diluted in the vast universal misfortune. One of the tenets of his philosophy was that problems solve themselves if you don't pay them any mind. Far from demoralizing him, the fact of living in a cemetery filled him with joy, like the start of a marvelous adventure. He was happy to abide among a rebellious lot, the living and the dead united

in collective disregard for all authority. In this atmosphere of courteousness and compulsory condolences, he was at least certain to avoid the terrifying imbeciles who hounded him in sidewalk cafés, hoping to discuss their domestic difficulties. In addition, he had the satisfaction of not owing a cent to any crook of a landlord. After years of separation from his parents, Karamallah could again experience the pleasure of being with his relatives, but without the disagreements and altercations that inevitably arise during family reunions among the living.

His mausoleum was not conspicuously lavish and so its occupant was spared any malicious gossip or suspicion. Karamallah would not have wanted to spend his days in too sumptuous an edifice, and he was grateful to the architect who had designed this funerary monument with the limited imagination of a police officer. Standing on the threshold of the room that normally served as a reception hall for grieving families, smoking a cigarette, Karamallah gazed in the distance at Al-Mokattam Mountain, whose foothills, cloaked in mist, seemed to define the farthest horizon his eyes would ever see. He thought he would go live up there in a cabin one day, like a hermit calmly and compassionately watching humanity. This was just an idealistic plan, however; he knew he could never live far from men and their vile acts. He had reflected endlessly on people's cowardice and their capitulation to the effrontery of iniquitous rulers. This easy obedience to tyrants — an obedience that often verged on devotion — always surprised him. He had come to believe that the majority of humans aspired only to slavery. He had long wondered by what ruse this enormous enterprise of mystification orchestrated by the wealthy had been able to spread and prosper on every continent. Karamallah belonged to that category of true aristocrats who had tossed out like old soiled clothes all the values and dogma that these infamous individuals had generated over centuries in order to perpetuate their supremacy. And so his joy in being alive was in no way altered by these stinking dogs' enduring power on the planet. On the contrary, he found their stupid and criminal acts to be an inexhaustible source of entertainment — so much so that

there were times when he had to admit he would miss these dogs were they to disappear; he feared the aura of boredom that would envelop humankind once purged of its vermin.

The cemetery was stagnating in a precarious calm: it was the sacred siesta hour. Even the children, dazed by their mothers' imprecations, had stopped their noisy games and ceased shouting their obscene, insolent remarks. Occasional bursts of lamentations from the hired mourners, those zealous mercenaries given over to exaggeration, could be heard in the overheated air, like the echo of unspeakable suffering. Kite birds circled in the azure sky above the graves, miserable raptors reduced to seeking their sustenance in the trash cans of the destitute. An old man with a white beard dragging a rachitic donkey at the end of a rope passed in front of the mausoleum and greeted Karamallah with a slight nod befitting an exiled monarch. He was no doubt an unemployed carter strolling with his donkey to show the world his courage in the face of adversity. What disturbed Karamallah, however, was the donkey's gaze; it was both dejected and accusatory, as if Karamallah were at the root of its downfall.

He tossed away his cigarette and went back into the room to join his visitor. The girl, sitting in front of her teacher's desk, was studiously recopying the notes she had taken during their afternoon discussion. Her name was Nahed, and she was nineteen. She was planning on writing a thesis on Karamallah's philosophy of derision, and on his numerous troubles with the incurably ignorant authorities. And Karamallah, who despised everything that even resembled a diploma — a sure road to slavery — had, because he was polite, allowed the girl to visit as she pleased: she was not beautiful and he felt incapable of denying anything to someone so unattractive, even something as outrageous as a thesis on his work. For almost a month she had been coming every afternoon to dig deep into his ideas with the fevered frenzy of a patient questioning her doctor. She always wanted to know more, as if she were about to die. Karamallah responded to these febrile interrogations with kindness and amusement. To

him, the girl's attempt to officially promote a philosophy that advocated a reality so different from the one imposed by those who handed out diplomas was a rather risky gambit for her future. Everything he was teaching her about his concept of the world was utterly contrary to what was being taught in the schools. He was sure that this strange work to which the girl was devoting herself, if ever it were to emerge from underground, would at the very least cause the police to open a file on her as a subversive element to be kept under close surveillance. Nonetheless, and despite his total skepticism, he hoped she would succeed in her mad endeavor and so he was gambling on the off chance that she would have to deal with examiners who were uneducated, or simply blind. He understood her ambition to free herself from her mediocre milieu by obtaining a prestigious degree. The diploma symbolized a sort of sacred relic for all those without access to legalized crime, even if it was good for nothing save being placed in your coffin after you'd starved to death.

Karamallah now knew the girl well enough to imagine that her fate would not be an ordinary one. Each time she came to visit, she would bring him humble gifts, objects of indeterminate value for which he had absolutely no use. Because she was from a very poor family, he suspected her of having stolen them in various shops in the city. He was more and more worried by these innocent, impractical offerings because of the risks the girl was taking. He had nothing against theft, an activity that enjoyed international approval in proportion to the amount stolen. But to get caught and to risk going to prison for such paltry spoils was a fool's game. He himself would surely have chosen to become a thief had he not been blessed at an early age with the insight that he could fight hypocrisy by means more intellectually satisfying than the classic homemade bomb. In any case, he had to put a stop to this profusion of plunder: his parents' mausoleum was turning into a pawn shop. It was a delicate matter. How could he speak to the girl without revealing his fears about the provenance of all the small gifts she was showering upon him? He drew near and placed his hand forcefully on her shoulder as though to

wake her from an irrational dream. Nahed stopped writing and turned to smile at him. Her smile held some of the original affliction shared by all the destitute. It seemed to Karamallah that at times her face took on a kind of fleeting loveliness, the result of some alchemy as complex as the mystery of the Creation. Was it laziness or negligence that had made him incapable of divining this girl's hidden beauty? True, during their first meeting he had barely looked at the poor student for fear she'd detect the uneasiness he always felt in the presence of ugly women. Now he wondered with comic trepidation if he should attribute this unbelievable change in her to the mausoleum's air or, more specifically, to his heretical words. It was outrageous and unacceptable to his intellect to imagine that Nahed had blossomed on contact with his writings. But she had told him an apparently truthful story that deserved serious consideration: one day when she was sick and disgusted with everything and had decided to let herself die, a girlfriend had brought her one of his books. In order to please the friend who had suggested she read it, she took it and began to leaf through it unenthusiastically. Yet later, once she had finished, she felt an extraordinary well-being suffuse her entire body. She was no longer sick and had no desire to die. She got out of bed motivated by a burning desire to live and, putting on her prettiest dress, went out in the street to proclaim her deliverance and her joy. She thought she had learned something of exceptional gravity, but didn't know quite what — yet she was sure of one thing: her vision of the world had changed for good. Then, after a moment, she added: it was like the day after a revolution, when the tyrant has died and people smile at you without knowing you because they are happy. Karamallah knew, however, that the death of a tyrant does not mean the end of tyranny; nevertheless, so as not to dishearten the girl, he decided not to disparage her naïve idea of revolution.

“I'm going to leave now,” said Nahed. “I've imposed long enough on you and your valuable time.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m not one of those people who believe they are taking part in some obligatory ritual by devoting themselves to work that is by and large pointless. The only valuable time, my dear Nahed, is the time that we use for reflection. This is one of those inconvenient truths that slave dealers despise.”

“It’s just amazing that the truth isn’t obvious to everyone!”

“You’re quite mistaken. Everyone knows the truth, but something that everyone knows has no market value. Can you imagine the bastards who control information selling truths? In the best of cases, they would be made a laughingstock. For one simple reason. The truth has no future, whereas lies carry great hope.”

Nahed began to laugh. She often laughed in his company, as if to show him that she had absorbed his teachings and that henceforth she would look at life as an instigator rather than a docile tool. Again Karamallah was surprised by a fleeting spark that lit up the girl’s face. He looked at her, his eyes suddenly filled with gratitude toward the invisible author of this moving transfiguration.

“Every time I come here you lift a weight from my shoulders. I always feel lighter when I leave this cemetery — it’s become a magic place — everything seems so easy here.”

Karamallah took a few steps toward the door, looked at the alley deserted under the sun, then returned to the girl. In a jocular tone, he said:

“Do you know that a while ago a skinny donkey that was being led to the slaughterhouse by its owner cast a reproachful glance at me?”

“You’re making fun of me, Master! How do you know it was reproachful?”

“Because all I need is to see an old woman struggling to walk, a man struck with a horrible infirmity, or simply a child crying, to feel guilty about what is happening to them. I think it’s because I personally have no use for unhappiness, so the

unhappiness of other people seems to denounce continually my own lack of seriousness. But let's leave the donkey to its fate. Let's talk about you a little. For some time now I've been meaning to tell you that you shouldn't feel obliged to bring all these gifts each time you come to see me. I don't know what to do with these treasures. They are turning my mausoleum into a museum."

"But you are rich, Master. All the gold on earth couldn't make you richer. What you call my 'gifts' are only small tokens of friendship, to keep you from forgetting me. I know you're going to laugh at me again, but with all due respect, I confess I'm afraid of vanishing from your memory as soon as I've finished my work."

"Why would I forget you? You will always be welcome in my home, here or elsewhere. So, tell me, where did you get this idiotic idea?"

Nahed was slow to answer; her features tensed, and her face became unsightly again, as though to underscore her painful confession. "Well," she said, avoiding Karamallah's gaze. "I know you only like women who are very young and very pretty. And I am old and ugly. That's why I thought you wouldn't want to see me again."

She stopped speaking and then looked Karamallah in the eye, awaiting his verdict.

Without the slightest warning, Karamallah was first stupefied and then beset by remorse, like a slowly spreading ache — remorse for his thoughtless cruelty. Had he wounded the girl by being aloof and perhaps even betraying his displeasure without realizing it? She had risked prison in order to leave him mementos of her, and Karamallah could not erase this fact through mockery of any kind.

"Forgive me if I've never complimented you on your looks," he said, with the air of an actor not quite sure of his lines. "Such fawning methods for charming a woman have always repulsed me. But since you bring up the subject, I must tell you that you are more than beautiful — there is something

enigmatic and at times unsettling about your seemingly ordinary face, something that none of the pretty girls whom you suspect me of loving will ever possess. Are you satisfied now? And do you believe me?”

“I believe everything you tell me, Master. Even when you seem to be joking ...”

Karamallah silently congratulated himself. He had just avoided one of those ruses that only women can invent, the mechanisms of which no philosophy — ancient or modern — has ever managed to lay bare. Having extricated himself so brilliantly, he was encouraged to settle a question of decorum that had long been up in the air. Nahed particularly annoyed him by behaving like a submissive, respectful disciple, and Karamallah scorned the praise of a society that only respects scoundrels. He experienced any and all admiration for him as an insult in disguise. In essence, he didn't think anyone deserved the slightest veneration. In this cemetery invaded and degraded by the misery of the living, only the dead — discreet and silent — had the right to his respect.

“Nahed, my child! You don't owe me any respect. All people think they are, or aim to be, respectable. Do me the honor of not confusing me with that mob of morons.”

Ever since Karamallah had pointed out the ambiguous charm of her face, Nahed had had a faraway look in her eyes, as if observing herself in an imaginary mirror. Karamallah's request forced her out of this sublime contemplation.

“I never confuse you with anyone else. But it would be insolent not to respect you.”

“That's exactly what I want you to be. Insolent. It would enliven our conversation a bit; your respect bores me and puts me to sleep.”

Nahed stood, collected her notebooks, and placed them in her imitation-leather schoolbag, then bowed ceremoniously to Karamallah, entering her phase of youthful insolence with this parody. She was wearing a sleeveless black cotton dress,

emblematic vestments for venturing into a cemetery. Karamallah wanted to tell her that she did not need to dress in mourning to gain access to his mausoleum, but then he realized that this might be the girl's only frock and so he refrained from saying anything. He followed her to the door and watched her move off in the distance, a dark and fragile silhouette in the sun's brutal brightness, swinging her schoolbag like a weapon against the injustices of fate.

Karamallah was about to go back inside his mausoleum when he saw two men arriving in the dusty alleyway. He recognized one of them — despite an attempted metamorphosis — as Nimr, the famous pickpocket, an amusing acquaintance from his prison days. He was accompanied by a young man dressed in the latest fashion who appeared to be asleep, and was walking like a somnambulist eager to return to his bed. Quite obviously these two characters had come to see him, because no funeral procession preceded them. And so he waited for them, assured of spending an afternoon full of surprises and agreeable discussions.

Karamallah had found Nimr vastly entertaining when they were cellmates. Even though he was illiterate, Nimr was a true wise man who spoke with authority about his eventful career as unlucky thief and outstanding educator of juvenile delinquents. But who was the eccentric-looking young man and for what obscure reason would Nimr, who was in hiding, expose himself with an individual capable of drawing out the local populace with his flamboyant attire? Faced with this enigma, Karamallah had no doubt that their visit held delights in store.

The two men were now in front of him and Nimr bowed as if he were placing his shaved head before the master as an offering. For Nimr, Karamallah was the incarnation of the supreme truth, a truth that all nations of the world combat as if it were a contagious virus. He kept his bow for a moment, then raised his head and said in the mournful voice of a man whom destiny had mistreated:

“Forgive me for disturbing you, Master! But we are dealing with an exceptional matter. Allow me first to introduce one of my former pupils who has been stunningly successful in an unjustly disparaged profession.”

“So I see,” Karamallah stated ironically. “You’d have to be blind not to notice this success. How fortunate I am to welcome triumphant youth into my home!”

“What are you waiting for to greet the master, you son of a dog!” exclaimed Nimr, who had decided to demonstrate his authority over his former pupils, even those at the pinnacle of their art.

Ossama approached Karamallah and shook his hand with the anguish of someone come to consult an oracle.

“You never disturb me, my dear Nimr. You know that,” said Karamallah. “In fact, I was waiting for a visit such as yours. At the moment, current affairs are dreadfully dull — no financial scandals, no civil wars, no political assassinations. Nothing! It’s as if all the bastards had died or gone on vacation. But come in, come in. You and your glorious pupil are most welcome.”

Karamallah stepped back to let his visitors pass. Ossama hesitated a moment, then quickly crossed the threshold of the mausoleum; he had the distinct impression that he was penetrating another world. He was highly impressed by the courtesy and ease with which Karamallah invited them to enter a tomb. He was like a prince receiving a delegation come to his palace to bring the latest news about his kingdom. Nimr, who did not seem at all disoriented in this makeshift lodging, had not been wrong in describing Karamallah as an exceptional individual. The young man saw at once not only that Karamallah was a remarkable character but also that he moved in a world marvelously suited to him. Ossama had never imagined that one day he would find himself in such a place under the sardonic gaze of a stranger to whom he nonetheless felt remarkably close. Why had he so readily agreed to follow Nimr on this expedition? Was it not, rather,

that *he* had been the leader and his former teacher, the follower? He convinced himself that strange, unknown forces had led him here for a meeting of the utmost importance. The idea filled him with unsettling bliss.

Karamallah invited them to be seated, pointing to a couch that he also used as a bed, while he went to his desk chair.

Ossama was breathing cautiously. He dreaded the odor of the corpses buried nearby and especially feared being contaminated

by the germs that were in all probability lurking in the room. It took him some time to get used to the situation. The few pieces of furniture that he could see and the many books piled on the desk were reassuring in their banality. On balance, the room looked like any other you might find in an apartment in the city. He forgot the cemetery and the presence of the dead as he studied their host with the eyes of an orphan choosing among several potential adoptive fathers. The man he saw had to be about fifty years old, despite his mischievous, childlike smile and his clean-shaven face that displayed constant delight, as if a divine decree had bestowed eternal happiness upon him to the exclusion of everyone else. He was dressed simply in a robe of yellow silk, his bare feet slid into red leather *babouches*. Ossama had to admit that their host, in his sartorial simplicity, had the more noble presence, despite his own panoply of expensive suits purchased from the capital's finest tailors. Once he realized this, he began to feel vaguely miserable.

“So. What is this exceptional business?” Karamallah asked, staring at his visitors with the joyous attitude of someone awaiting the announcement of an inheritance.

“It concerns my brilliant pupil here,” answered Nimr professorially, forgetting that he was not speaking to a young thief-in-training. “And when he told me about his uncertainty and his anxiety, I naturally thought you were the only person to advise him. This business requires an enlightened mind because it involves many dangers... . In a word, it's a bomb!”

“I’m listening with every fiber of my being,” said Karamallah, who was sincerely dazzled by this opening.

Ossama had recovered quickly from admitting Karamallah’s esthetic superiority, but he remained perplexed. He couldn’t understand why Karamallah seemed so delighted with a story about which he still knew absolutely nothing. Their host had greeted them upon arrival as if he’d long been awaiting them in order to begin some bizarre festivities.

“Come, tell your story to the master,” Nimr ordered his former pupil. “And be humble. Don’t brag too much about your contacts in high society. Tell him only what you told me.”

The time had come for Ossama to recount his story for the benefit of the master, and he did so in a detached, precise way — not, however, without voicing a few details about the immorality of his victim, a certain Suleyman, real estate developer, who had masterminded the catastrophe.

“Show me the letter,” said Karamallah, ever more captivated. He had not been mistaken — the afternoon was indeed turning out to be prodigiously entertaining.

The young man hastily pulled the letter from his pocket and held it out to Karamallah with all the trust his intelligence inspired. Karamallah grabbed it and began to read. And as he proceeded, his face expressed intense contentment, giving the impression he was reading a passionate epistle from a prepubescent mistress of noble birth. This went on for quite some time and it seemed to his visitors that the master couldn’t get enough of the pleasure the letter was giving him.

“What a delectable letter!” Karamallah said at last, guffawing. “Obviously it doesn’t tell me anything new about that developer of ruins — his name is a byword for scum. However, I didn’t know that his accomplice — the minister’s corrupt brother, so renowned in the circles of legalized fraud — could write such a masterpiece of black humor. There’s enough in here to keep me happy for days.”

Nimr remained in suspense for a moment more; then his face fell — he was as disappointed as a thief who, having stolen some jewels reputed to be of great value, suddenly realizes that they are paste. There was nothing grandiose in Karamallah's conclusions about so serious a matter, nothing likely to increase Nimr's prestige in the eyes of his former student. He'd really wanted to show Ossama what educated people he frequented, wise men able to solve the most difficult of problems. But this letter — even with its explosive contents — had only managed to amuse the master. Despite this letdown, Nimr did not lose hope and he made a face to indicate to Ossama, who was likewise dazed with incomprehension, to be patient.

“We were hoping, Master, that you would tell us what to do with this letter,” Nimr ventured. “Shall we bury it in this cemetery or should we drop it like a bomb on the city? Don't you think that newspapers would pay a pretty price for a copy? There's a first-class scandal in it.”

“Nimr, my brother, though you are at the peak of your profession, permit me to inform you that this letter will not provoke a scandal of any consequence, because crime in the highest echelons of society is tolerated in every country in the world. The people are accustomed to this kind of exploit; they even applaud it. In my opinion we need to find something else. Something original, and above all agreeable. There's no point in giving such a gift to imbeciles. Let's keep it for ourselves.”

“What do you suggest we do?”

“I don't know yet. The whole thing is so grotesque that it should lead us to come up with some grandiose solution. And one that is as hilarious as possible.”

These last words heartened Ossama, who had been fretting because of Karamallah's lack of gravity about his discovery. But finally the master had committed himself — in his own way, it's true — to finding a solution to the problem this letter posed; that it looked to be a bizarre solution should have shocked Ossama but that prospect, oddly, seemed even more

appealing to him, and not lacking in destructive ferocity. So, after having traipsed through muddy alleyways, his visit to this remote cemetery had not ended in failure. He was beginning to fall prey to the ineffable charm of his host, this inexplicable charisma — part haughtiness and part inner joy — of a man who lived in a mausoleum. Rather than indifference, how did such a macabre environment produce this tremendous vitality in the service of scorn? It was a sign of a mind that moved in a space freed from all the useless prejudices that darkened the lives of men. Suddenly Ossama again became aware of his own foolishness at not having been able to detect the laughable side of the sufferings that had weighed on him in his youth. Karamallah was most certainly the prophet of a great eccentric battle against the official agents of deceit.

Karamallah was smiling with glee at the thought of resolving a crisis of national import. He had always trusted in chance. Welcoming his visitors earlier, he was sure they'd been about to bring from the boisterous capital some new and unique versions of human stupidity likely to amuse him. But he hadn't been prepared for such a feast as this.

"I'd like to meet this Suleyman," he said. "A conversation with this man would be especially delightful. A real treat for the mind."

"What do you mean?" Nimr asked worriedly.

"Don't you think that a man who is capable of annihilating fifty people by skimping on construction materials, all for the sake of accumulating more money, must be good company?"

"Master, kill me if you must, but by Allah, explain yourself!"

"Listen. This man represents all the infamy in the world. Until now, my only knowledge of him was from what I read in the papers. With this providential letter, I might have the chance to see him up close. One always learns something from rubbing shoulders with infamy!"

"What can you learn from this man without honor?"

“My dear Nimr, that is yet another prejudice that should be tossed in the trash. Honor is an abstract notion, invented like everything else by the dominant caste so that the poorest of the poor can boast about having a phantom good that costs no one anything.”

“But wait!” cried Nimr. “You have just stripped me of the only marketable thing I still possess. I am now poorer than when I got here.”

“I confess I don’t see the relation between my concept of honor and your sudden poverty.”

“It’s like this,” answered Nimr: “I’ve often heard people say that their honor was not for sale. I thought that sooner or later someone would offer to buy mine. You’ve just deprived me of the most profitable transaction of my life.”

“Don’t worry. You can always sell your honor. Not everyone knows what I just told you; only a few of us do. You can relax.”

“I agree,” said Ossama, coming out of his shell. “I’ve learned so many things in such a short time that I will leave here much richer, even though I’ll leave without honor. But what does honor matter if I got to meet a man like you?”

Karamallah looked at Ossama as if he were seeing him for the first time. He had been so fixated on the letter that had been opportunely submitted to his wisdom that he had forgotten who its industrious supplier was. This young thief, Nimr’s ill-fated pupil, had managed to escape his teacher’s miserabilism with a sartorial strategy that allowed him to steal from the rich. He had instinctively grasped the flaw of a society based on appearance. This was worthy of Karamallah’s esteem.

“I know I can count on you,” he said to his young visitor with a surge of that fraternal feeling he reserved for those of his kind. “To begin with, we can use this letter to pressure Suleyman to accept meeting us in public, at a café in town. It

is always worthwhile to converse with an individual of this sort. This is how one learns that infamy has no bounds.”

“I am at your service,” said Ossama. “What should I do?”

“Come see me tomorrow. Together we’ll form a joyous battle plan to fight this evil developer of debris.”

“I would love such a battle,” Ossama assured him.

Nimr raised his arms to the ceiling, as if asking a favor of the heavens, but it was only a natural gesture in the face of the insufferable. He was incensed by the shameless and inexplicable complicity between Karamallah and his former pupil.

IV

Atef Suleyman, the developer famous for modern urban genocides, did not wear the sign of infamy on his forehead, but this oversight of nature did not prevent the numerous inhabitants of the apartment buildings constructed by his real estate company from cursing him day and night; nor did it keep certain extremists from calling for his immediate death. Unfortunately, these invectives — from an acrimonious populace deprived of an education in economics that would have allowed them to appreciate the beauty of capitalism — never managed to reach the person at whom they were directed. Suleyman lived in splendor in the residential district of Zamalek, several kilometers from those planned communities that had sprung up in the desert where he practiced his lucrative business. Frustrated by the resilience of the Pharaonic monuments, he saw himself as a developer for the era of ephemeral buildings — symbols of modernity — that would leave to posterity nothing but rubble and dust; in other words, disposable homes. His most recent product had proved to be of a particularly tawdry modernism, for among the rubble and dust of its premature collapse lay the corpses of fifty or so human beings who had reached the end of their mediocre existences without the slightest advance notice. Although he was not especially superstitious, Suleyman never forgot as he drew up his unbeatable estimates that fate could intervene. Yet the suddenness of a catastrophe that did not bode well for his reputation puzzled him. What sort of fate was it, then, that behaved so hastily, without concern for the havoc wreaked by its untimely clumsiness? Couldn't it have waited a suitable amount of time before perfidiously attacking a building whose paint was still wet, christened only three months earlier by a government minister? For Suleyman, this sort of fate was suspect; in fact, he suspected it of being linked to a conspiracy of enemies gravely offended by his success. He had always believed the popular adage that holds that wealth, like honey, attracts flies. In this instance, the flies were venomous, and

they had already exuded their venom numerous times on the front pages of a newspaper that was independent and — worldwide rarity — incorruptible. Accused of embezzlement and fraud of every sort, Suleyman — like all his peers — would use his honor as his unassailable alibi, asserting that at the time the criminal acts had occurred, he was in the company of his honor. His bad faith went so far beyond the accepted norms of his profession that he aroused the admiration and jealousy of his more moderate competitors.

His obsessive search for the troublemaker who had ruined a real estate deal guaranteed to bring him fame and fortune did not in any way decrease Suleyman's wrath against his accomplice, the minister's brother — that cowardly and stupid individual who had dared send him a break-up letter filled with serious allegations, a missive that had now fallen into the hands of a stranger. And at this very moment that son of a louse Abdelrazak was holed up with his mistress, a wizened old belly dancer whom he kept royally with the money Suleyman paid him in exchange for more or less licit services. In truth, the transformation of one of his most beautiful creations into war rubble and those fifty supposedly innocent victims were nothing but minor incidents, no doubt unpleasant, but not to such an extent that his business would be harmed. Sooner or later every bloodbath is followed by another, even more spectacular one. Nothing could prevent a misfortune brought about by destiny, thought Suleyman, suddenly struck by wisdom. He was entitled to hope that this same destiny would soon cause a train to derail or a stadium to burn. (He preferred this latter option because of the throng of degenerates who frequented places of that sort.) And as a result, the human dregs burned to a crisp would number in the thousands, thereby making his own count of fifty dead ridiculously low by comparison.

Setting aside his shameless speculations about improbable, world-class fatal accidents, Suleyman came back to his major problem, the one and only quandary of the famous letter. However it were to occur, the dissemination of this letter with

its ministerial letterhead would mark the end of a very lucrative collaboration with certain eminent civil servants whom Abdelrazak, using his kinship with a minister, had managed to lead off the straight and narrow path, down devious roads paved with precious stones. Suleyman swore to himself that once he had recovered the letter he would go fetch that pathetic son of a cross-eyed mother at his mistress's home, pamper him, and perhaps even take him to a newly opened brothel where the oldest girl was no more than sixteen. That would be a change from his dancer with her sagging belly and would surely make him easier to manipulate. Suleyman had no choice, and he was prepared to stoop to anything to make Abdelrazak go back on his decision to end their collusion — even to tell him that he would make him his heir, which would be a dreadful lie: the fountain of his hatred for this scoundrel was nowhere near drying up. Suleyman was not one to forget that this individual had written him an impertinent, vulgar letter in a style worthy of a cabby, with the intention of dishonoring him. In his distress, however, he had to acknowledge that Abdelrazak was an essential cog in those corrupt networks without which business, for Suleyman in any case, was unimaginable. If he were to consent to work in real estate like an honest businessman, his company's profits would fall to the level of those of a clay jug factory.

The stranger, in this case a young man who claimed to be a student — without specifying of what — had called to set up a meeting in a well-known café in the working-class El Huseini district. The café owed its reputation to its customers — a mix of intellectuals, philosopher-beggars, and simple actors in life with no apparent specialization. Suleyman had sat on its esteemed terrace for entire nights when he was still preparing his future exploits in the domain of preplanned, legal theft. The young man claimed to have found a letter addressed to Suleyman on the sidewalk of Rifaat Harb Street, and to have picked it up with the altruistic aim of returning it to its owner. He was referring to the letter that had been lost at the same time as Suleyman's wallet — but no mention was made of this latter object — and promised to return it to him when they

met. Obviously he was hoping to extract some money in exchange, and Suleyman was prepared to give it to him without argument. Still, there was something suspicious about this rendezvous; its bizarre and restrictive clauses would have caused the greatest mistrust even in a newborn. First of all, it was to take place at night, as if it were a meeting among conspirators; then there was this working-class district, a fertile ground for shady schemes; finally — and much more alarming — there was the presence of an additional person who, the so-called student claimed, was very eager to talk to him in a solely social way. Talk to him about what? One more witness in this matter and soon the entire city — which was waiting for just such an event to snicker and rejoice — would know absolutely everything about the miracle of his wealth. For what diabolical reason had the young man confided in this person? The question continued to plague Suleyman, like those riddles that remain unsolved for centuries.

Just as an ugly woman grows no uglier with age, the El Huseini district had not undergone further degradation over the years. Having parked his car far from where his meeting was to take place, Suleyman walked through a night illuminated by the lights of cafés and stalls and the torchères of peddlers more than by the municipal streetlamps lost at the ends of muddy alleyways. He felt as if he had left the neighborhood only yesterday, so clearly did he remember certain hovels with their cracked walls, and certain crevices that adorned the sidewalks, especially one in particular — still in operation — that had almost maimed him a very long time ago. Still, what he found surprising, new, and incomprehensible was the atmosphere of rejoicing that he sensed around him, a rejoicing that seemed to defy the ordinarily quaint and somber face of poverty. Yet it was not a holiday. All these people noisily calling to one another, jeering and laughing loudly as if simply being alive were enough to make them happy, deeply irritated him. He quickened his pace, not wanting to get mixed up in this orgy of shouts and joyous discussions — this booming cheerfulness was an offense to the delicate joys of the rich. A man in a barbershop, his bare feet

slipped into sandals, was getting a shave from a young apprentice in swimming trunks. The sight of a poor wretch indulging in the luxurious pleasure of freshening up his face at this hour increased Suleyman's irritation and inspired a variety of hypotheses about the fellow's motivations. The man was getting a shave before going to meet a birdbrain of a mistress (she was obviously a birdbrain) in some local dive. Or, another conjecture, this one a bit on the macabre side: the man had been warned of his death the previous night and wanted to arrive attractive and clean at the gates of heaven. The absurd behavior of this esthete of the slums continued to nettle Suleyman until he was approached by a boy of about ten dressed in a brand-new saffron-colored robe who seemed very impatient to know the time.

Suleyman looked at the child with visible disgust, and his words came out of his mouth like spittle.

"Why do you want to know the time? Do you have a date?"

"No, I don't have a date," the child answered.

"So what good will the time do you?"

"I just wanted to chat. I'm looking for my father."

"I don't understand. What's the relationship between my watch and your father?"

"Well, you see, my father left my mother and me when I was very small, so I don't know him. My mother said that one day he'll come back and that he's very rich. So every time I see a person like you, dressed like a rich man, I think that maybe he's my father."

"And what did your father do?"

"He was a thief," the child said with pride.

"You little devil! Get away! I'm not your father."

"Too bad. You're his spit and image."

Suleyman attempted to give the child a kick, but he fled, vanishing into the crowd.

This nighttime stroll through nauseating streets long ago banished from Suleyman's memory — he only wished to dwell on the sumptuous décors of grand hotels and on liqueurs imbibed around luxurious swimming pools — was becoming unbearable. Again he thought of Abdelrazak, who was responsible for his distress, and he made a wish: that Abdelrazak would see his own mother prostitute herself in a brothel for lepers when she was ninety. (And that was really a quite charming wish compared to what Suleyman held in store for him in the near future.) Suddenly he stopped to listen to a voice that had come out of nowhere, but that he had known since childhood. A radio was playing the much-loved songs of the mythical chanteuse whose voice would accompany men in their daydreams and unappeased desires for a long time to come.

The Mirror Café had lost the better part of its original footprint and its terrace now occupied merely a small parcel of sidewalk. A few moldy mirrors with gilded frames — survivors of the disaster — were still hanging on the walls, as if to provide the café with proof of its identity. Suleyman was not put off by its decline; he had expected it. He was contriving to look affable and good-natured for his meeting with the young stranger who had telephoned, and who had assured him that he'd easily recognize Suleyman because, being an avid newspaper reader, he had often admired his picture on the front page when the topic was some financial scandal or an indictment for premeditated murder. This information, despite its anecdotal and slightly insolent character, had reassured Suleyman as to the young man's social milieu and level of education. If the young man knew how to read, he would know how to act in a respectful, honest way toward an elder. Suleyman was a great believer in education, despite not having received any. In fact, he could already imagine this admiring and obedient stranger entirely devoted to him. He walked onto the café's terrace with his

head held high and an authoritative pout on his face, as if he were posing for a newspaper real estate ad.

Ossama caught sight of him and was about to wave to him, but Karamallah held him back by the arm. The master wanted to study the infamous man in action from afar and, if only for a moment, to observe his bearing among a public particularly steeped in disrespect for wealth. He was in for an astonishing sight. Suleyman was inspecting the terrace with the eye of a boss who had come to hire day laborers and who suddenly realizes that he has before him a gang of fainéants who have nothing better to do than smoke hookahs, play backgammon, or rant against the government with huge bursts of laughter. All these men sprawling about in languorous lethargy had a knack for exasperating him. Suleyman looked like a man who had fallen to the bottom of a pit and was awaiting the advent of improbable saviors.

At last Ossama stood up and invited him to sit at their table. The sight of the young man reinforced Suleyman's favorable opinion of his education and his family's social standing. The alleged student was dressed very stylishly, and the older man sitting next to him seemed to be his equal in the sartorial arts. A sour note in this display aroused Suleyman's suspicion, however: the two elegant men who had met with his approval were accompanied by a third with a shaved head and a black beard that hid half his face. This character was wearing a raw silk robe open at his thick neck and glasses with tinted lenses that made him look like a hit man in a comedy. It was to be feared that this unexpected guest would disrupt the idyllic interview Suleyman had imagined, and it was imperative to know for what reason the presence of this intruder — a blot on the gathering — had been deemed indispensable. If it were as a neutral observer, a better choice could have been made. With this thorn in his side, Suleyman moved toward the table where the fearsome leaders of an uproarious game awaited him.

“Welcome!” exclaimed Karamallah. “What an honor. Sit down. Today is a day of honey! Allow me to introduce myself, Excellency. My name is Karamallah, and here are Professor

Nimr and our young friend Ossama, to whom we owe the immense pleasure of meeting you. A celebrity of your repute has no need to introduce himself. You are known the world over. I'm not mistaken, am I?"

"You are very kind; I don't deserve such praise," answered Suleyman, not taking his eyes off Nimr. "May I ask what Professor Nimr teaches? If I'm not prying ..."

"Not at all. I'm pleased to inform you that Professor Nimr teaches sociology. Right now, however, he is taking a leave of absence because of a broken heart."

"Sociology you say? I've heard of it. What exactly is this science?"

"Sociology is the science of survival in society," Karamallah answered. "Professor Nimr teaches young boys how to get by in life."

"May Allah protect him! He is a decent man. Ah, to have met someone like him in my youth. I did not have such good fortune."

"On the contrary, I find that you have had a great deal of good fortune," Karamallah said sententiously.

"Why do you say that?" asked Suleyman, taken aback by this slightly after-the-fact prediction.

"Because none of *his* students made a fortune. That's why I think that *you* have been fortunate."

"That's quite sad. There must certainly be a reason for this collective failure."

Suleyman was being drawn in more than he would have liked, but the circumstances offered no way out. His interlocutor was leading things and it would have been impolite not to follow him in his rather hasty conclusions. The discussion was just beginning and he had to appear friendly, understanding, and even capable of generosity. To this effect he had brought with him a judiciously calculated sum of money that he intended to place on the table at an opportune

moment to set the transaction in motion. In his mind, nothing had changed; just business as usual — only the partners were different.

“I trust that my friend Nimr will forgive me, but it has always seemed to me that his teachings lacked virulence,” resumed Karamallah. “For his students’ participation in the world’s future he preaches virtue, disdain for money, and modesty. Can you tell me, Excellency, you who know all the pitfalls and difficulties of business — is it possible to be virtuous and become rich? I wanted to see you to ask you this fundamental question that harks back to ancient times.”

Suleyman looked at his three companions one after the other, hoping for a sign, a clue that would set him on the road to a suitable response. Instead, they seemed amused by his hesitation.

“Well, it’s more complicated than that,” he said at last, as if he were excusing himself.

“A sublime response!” cried Karamallah. “Thank you for providing me with it. Of course, I didn’t expect any less from you, Excellency.”

Karamallah’s wonder was not feigned; he was truly amazed by the persistence and extent of such an inept ideology; he’d never thought it could flourish in sun-drenched lands. So, the old idea dreamed up by illustrious thinkers from cold climes — according to which the world was complicated and absurd — had crossed oceans and borders to come lodge itself in the brain of this abominable crook on the banks of the Nile. This vileness, which consisted in denying the Edenic simplicity of the world, served the interests of the powerful because it justified all the hardships endured by the ignorant masses. Karamallah rebelled against this pernicious disinformation with all the might of his great love of life.

“Could His Excellency tell us about his personal success?” Ossama asked. “I must confess that, for me, there is something magical about it.”

“There is no magic at all,” Suleyman assured him. “It is the determination I bring to my work that lies at the heart of my success.”

“And what a success it is!” declared Karamallah. “Unfortunately it’s been spoiled by that horrid catastrophe. I am so sorry for you. Unless I’m very much mistaken, it was nothing but bad luck. Or is there some other explanation?”

“I am also extremely sorry, believe me. But nothing can be done to prevent natural disasters. They’re a curse that spares no one. And so I don’t complain.”

“Natural disasters?” asked Karamallah, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“May Allah keep you from ever finding yourself in such a situation. Who in the world could have expected an earthquake on such a quiet summer night? Well, the earth quaked, creating an unfathomable mystery around Nasr City. We will never know how or why I was made the victim of nature’s whim.”

“An earthquake? Where?” asked Nimr worriedly, taking off his glasses in order to perceive the event more clearly.

“Don’t be alarmed,” Karamallah advised. “We escaped this earthquake — it didn’t do us the honor of coming through our neighborhood. I find that it lacked tact in respect to us.”

Karamallah’s pleasant little speech seemed full of innuendo to Suleyman, like a clever refutation of the lovely tale he had just told.

“What? You didn’t know about it?” he asked, as if he were completely stunned by his companions’ amazing ignorance of such a terrifying bit of news. “True, Nasr City is far enough away that one doesn’t always know what goes on there. And then, the government asked the newspapers not to reveal the incident so the people wouldn’t find out about it. But I thought men of your education must have heard about the disaster in one of those cynical intellectual circles always on the lookout for scandal.”

“No,” said Karamallah. “As you can see, even people with our education were not aware of it. Yet you have warmed our hearts. My friends and I are happy to learn that the true cause of the building’s collapse was a natural disaster and had nothing to do with faulty construction materials. The martyrs sacrificed beneath the ruins have only cantankerous nature to blame.”

“On my honor, it’s the plain truth,” Suleyman assured them. “In fact it was confirmed by two experts I brought in from abroad to rule out any accusation of fraud. They examined every piece of rubble, analyzed the air around the site, and concluded that it had indeed been an earthquake. Those scientists cost enough for me to set great store by their conclusion.”

“I’ve noticed,” said Ossama, “that earthquakes always occur in the poorest regions of the world. One has to wonder if nature doesn’t despise the poor.”

“It only proves that nature behaves as basely toward the poor as men do,” said Karamallah. “But these frivolous ideas won’t interest our eminent guest in the least.”

It would be an understatement to say that Karamallah was overjoyed with this meeting he had arranged in the hope of learning something new about ignominy in all its glory. He was choking with admiration for the inventive cynicism of the man with his persecuted apartment building. The stroke of inspiration — a selective earthquake that had targeted his building! — deserved to be noted as crucial progress in the long history of human abjection. Karamallah only feared not being able to control his sarcastic remarks, thereby irritating Suleyman, who would then put an end to this feast for the mind.

As always when he appealed to his honor, Suleyman thought he had fooled Karamallah and his friends, and he looked at them with the smugness of someone proven innocent by foreign experts. Was it scorn or his complete ignorance of people’s ability to see through his lies that guaranteed his

perfect serenity? No one had mentioned the letter, and he did not understand the silence that surrounded the subject as if it were some shady business. He didn't know that Ossama — following the instructions of the master — was to broach the matter as late as possible so as to make the pleasure last. The young man was feeling a pressing need to get the conversation going again when Suleyman beat him to it, suddenly having decided it was time to deal with this scandalous missive, the work of a notorious imbecile, by speaking directly to Ossama, the presumed keeper of the thing.

“Must I remind you that I am here to discuss a certain affair? I am ready to accept any proposal from you to get back this letter.”

“What proposal?” asked Ossama. “I have nothing to propose to you.”

“I'm afraid you're missing the point. I repeat: I am ready to pay any reasonable amount. You need only name your sum. Don't be intimidated. I am very understanding.”

“How can you think our young friend would stoop so low as to accept money from you!” said Karamallah indignantly. “You may be forgiven, for you know nothing of his origins. Ossama is a prince; he was raised in silk and fed on honey. But he is too modest to call attention to his title. He prefers to be a simple citizen.”

“I beg your pardon,” murmured Suleyman, deeply affected by his blunder, “I could not have guessed.”

“His father, Prince Moshen, was forced into exile after the revolution,” continued Karamallah, who seemed infinitely amused by Ossama's new biography. The story became heartrending, however, when one learned of the prince's suicide. Incapable of living far from his country, he had killed himself.

A victim of his own mythomania, Suleyman was prepared to believe anything. He therefore spoke to Ossama with all the

deference due to a descendant of a royal family, albeit a fallen one.

“But if this isn’t about money, I’d like to know what it is about.”

“Why, nothing at all,” replied Ossama, who, crowned a prince with Karamallah’s blessing, was trying to live up to his new role. “To tell the truth, as an architecture student I mostly wanted the chance to talk to a famous developer, whose marvelous buildings are the glory of our nation, about a very modern problem that is dividing the university. Should we construct apartment buildings that will last an indefinite amount of time or, rather, ones that will last only a few years? And how many years? It’s a disconcerting question, isn’t it? Ten, twenty years? No one can agree on this point. I had hoped that, with your experience, you could clarify this and perhaps give me some advice with which I can impress my fellow students.”

“We are not in the time of the Pharaohs,” said Suleyman, flattered to be acknowledged as an architecture expert. “My opinion, if you’re interested, is that one must construct buildings that last for a limited amount of time; otherwise it would be a disaster and the end of real estate.”

“And why is that?” asked Ossama with great interest, pricking up his ears as if to glean every word from this lecture.

“There’s nothing more logical. If you erect buildings that are to last eternally, sooner or later there will be no land on which to build others. Look at the pyramids. No one in this country would think of building pyramids — they’ve stood their ground for four thousand years — and yet they are being built abroad. They’re the height of fashion in modern architecture!”

It was not only self-satisfaction, but all the pride of a hardened criminal that animated Suleyman after this lesson in modernity he’d passionately put forward for a future architect. He was beginning to feel at ease despite the obscurity that continued to surround the fate of his letter. Prince or not, he

found Ossama charming enough to be the son he could not have. This led him to think of his family, of his wife who had become as fat as an opera singer from eating sweets, and of his daughter Anissa who called him a thief and who refused to accept his money on the pretext that he took it from the pockets of the poor. Exactly where did she expect him to get it? She said she was studying law in order to take people like him to court and send them to prison. All those years spent amassing a fortune by skimping on concrete only to hear such nonsense from the mouth of his sole heir — it was enough to mortify even an assassin. But this short visit to his family that he made in his imagination left no trace of bitterness in him; the words of a woman will remain empty of meaning for all eternity. He returned to his initial motive for appearing at this café, and this time he tried a new approach — one that pleased his vanity. He had come to believe that the slowness and ambiguities guiding this meeting had nothing malevolent about them, but that they simply corresponded to his companions' ardent desire to prolong the discussion for the sheer pleasure of hearing him speak — a pleasure he shared. Without a moment's hesitation he continued his account of the advantages of ephemeral constructions, demonstrating thereby that he had nothing against an educational conversation.

“As I was saying, some buildings must disappear in order to leave room for new ones.”

“Disappear how? With their occupants?” asked Karamallah perfidiously.

“Of course not. We are not brutes.”

“Can His Excellency tell me, then, how he makes provisions for this disappearance?”

“It's a matter of proportion. One needs to calculate the minimum depth of the foundations and the thickness of the walls, and to be especially careful not to squander concrete as if it were nothing but watermelon seeds.”

“You are an extraordinary man,” said Karamallah. “How could I have lived until now without knowing you? Well, that

gap in my life has just been filled.”

“I am but a simple servant of the nation.”

“The nation will be grateful to you,” Karamallah predicted. “That is, if the earthquakes can prove their efficacy far from your buildings.”

“That is my daily prayer,” declared Suleyman.

All around them the discussions grew louder and the general euphoria increased as the night progressed and the air filled with the fragrant smoke of hashish and tobacco wafting from the hookahs. Ossama had neither Karamallah’s rigor nor his self-control and it was difficult for him to contain his delight. He had the impression, as in a frightening dream, that he would not be able to stifle a burst of laughter much longer. He was responsible for a mission that was to end in a blazing grand finale for the man of precarious buildings, and it behooved him to maintain an attitude in keeping with his role as a student with newly attributed princely obligations. Until the moment he was to reveal to Suleyman the fate that had befallen his letter, he was forbidden to give himself over to the joys of irony. His impassioned youth was urging him not to delay the moment any longer; he wondered if Karamallah had learned enough from this dignitary of a villainous order, or if he wanted to feast on *all* the colors of infamy.

Suleyman noticed Ossama’s weariness and his desire to get on with it, so he spoke directly to the young man.

“So then, Prince, shall we discuss the letter?” he said in a friendly but determined tone of voice. “I assume you have it on you.”

“Indeed, yes,” answered Ossama, “one could say I have it on me. And in a way that you will never guess.”

“Well, show it to me,” said Suleyman somewhat nervously. He seemed to realize that something out of the ordinary was being plotted against him and that this thing was about to destroy forever his serenity as an untouchable citizen.

“It’s not that simple,” said Ossama evasively, as if he were speaking to a child pestering him with questions. “What’s the hurry? Aren’t you enjoying our company?”

Suleyman made an effort to control himself and seemed to reflect. The conversation with the prince had become more and more opaque, and he felt his mental abilities faltering in the face of so many evasions and recurring enigmas.

“We must agree on something in the end. I’m not going to stay here all night, despite the pleasure I find in your company. I am a businessman and my time is precious. Kindly tell me what it is you require to return the letter to me.”

“I’ve already told you; I don’t want a thing. I have this letter on me and it will never leave me. It is my amulet. Since I found it, I no longer fear anything. I’ll let you be the judge: the very day I picked it up on the sidewalk, a taxi that was driving by as usual with the hope of doing away with a few pedestrians almost mowed me down. I realized then that I had been saved from a horrible death by the magic radiating from this letter.”

“The nerve! I forbid you to fool around with my letter!”

Ossama opened his shirt and exhibited a leather case hanging around his neck on a thin silver chain.

“Your letter is here. I’m still too young for my honor to be credible. So I am counting on you and your honor, which has been legitimated and recognized by all the authorities, to serve as my alibi should anything go wrong.”

Suleyman was overcome with anger; his face became swollen and took on a greenish cast. He looked like a balloon inflated with the breath of hell. He leaned over the table and, in a voice that threatened Ossama and, beyond him, all the rebels of the planet, said:

“Tell me, Prince. Are you not a thief?”

Ossama stood up, bowed ceremoniously, and answered in a humble voice filled with contrition:

“A very small thief compared to you, Excellency!”

Nimr burst out laughing, and his laughter was like no other — a revolutionary laughter, the laughter of someone who has just discovered the ignoble and grotesque face of the powerful of this world.

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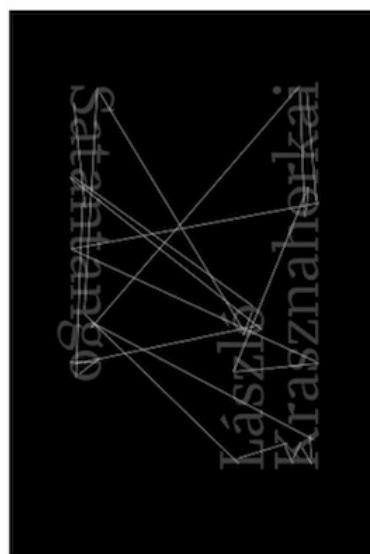
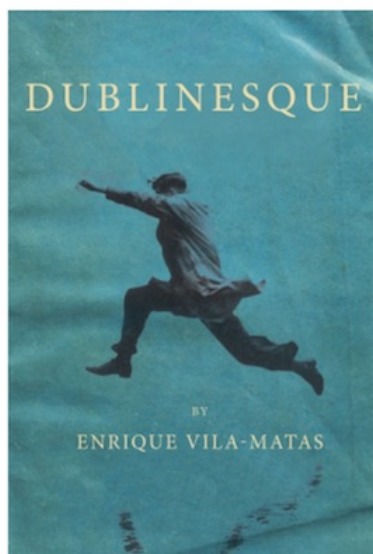
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