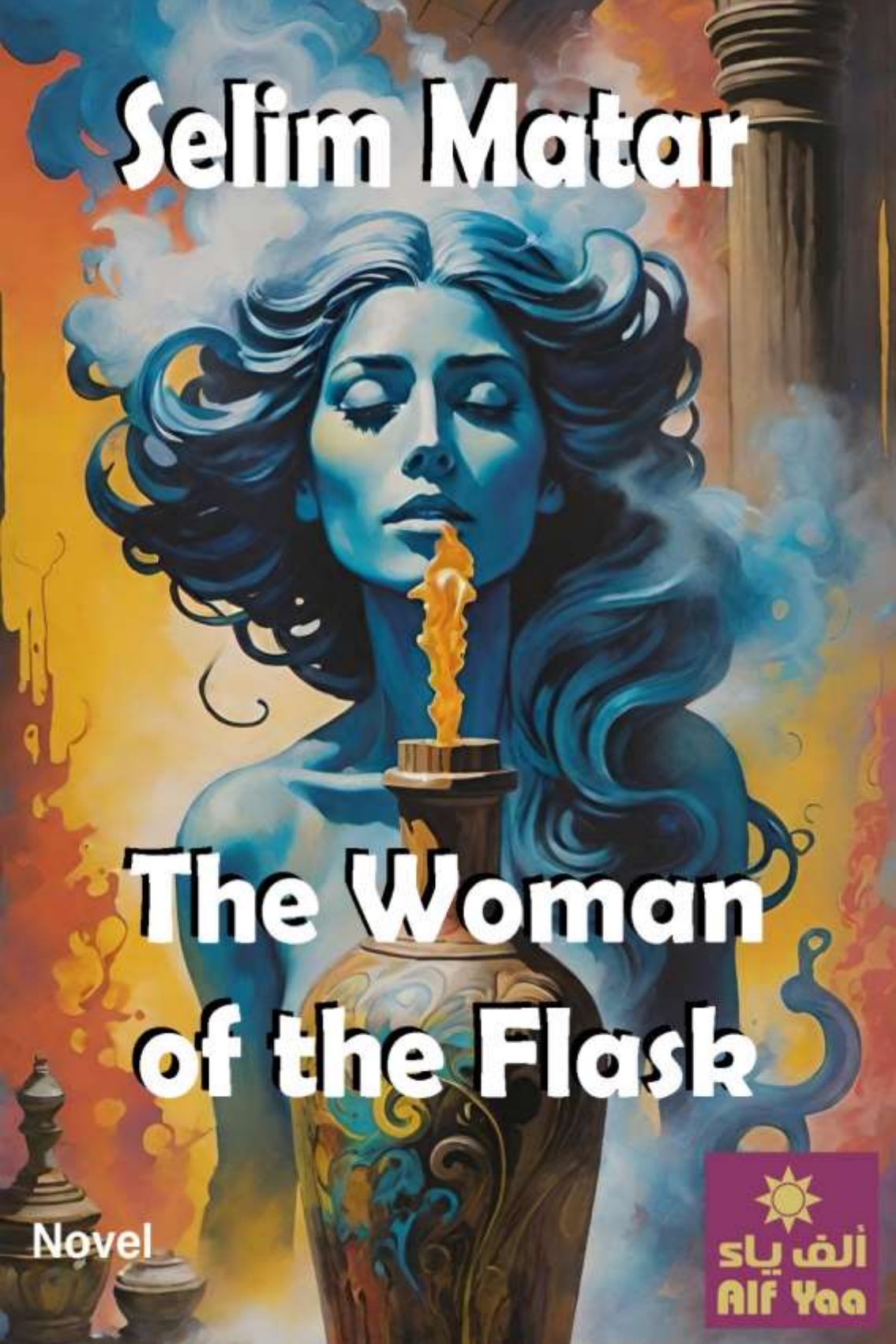




Selim Matar

The Woman of the Flask

Novel

الف ياء
Alf Ya

The Woman of the Flask

منشورات «ألف ياء AlfYaa»

Author: Selim Matar

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Selim Matar

**The Woman
of the Flask**

Novel

Translated by: Peter Clark

منشورات «ألف ياء» AlfYaa

Between Iraq and Switzerland, the extraordinary adventures of a young man named Adam with a young woman of five thousand years old

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Introduction

**In the beginning
there was the Flask**

Before this strange and fantastic story of *The Woman of the Flask* is launched into the world, I have to tell you right at the start that I am not responsible for it and took no part in any of its happenings: it has nothing to do with me. In fact I have published it only from a sense of obligation. When I stumbled upon this tale by chance a few weeks ago, I thought I would either burn it or throw it into the lake. I failed in all my efforts to identify the author. I am publishing it without altering a single word. I have left the manuscript just as it was given to me by the woman in the bar.

Perhaps I should tell you in brief of the circumstances of my acquiring this manuscript so you can judge for yourselves the nature of my connection with it. Then we may be able together to get to know the people involved and to live through the events it relates.

It all happened when I arrived in Geneva a few weeks ago. I say "I arrived," but in actual fact, I found myself there, after years of wandering in times of wars and getting lost in tunnels. I emerged from the bowels of the earth to find myself early one chilly morning in

February 1988 in the middle of the rocks by the shores of Lake Geneva. I came out soaked in search of some warmth. My feet took me, while I was in a daze, through the streets of the city until I reached a bar overlooking the River Rhone. The proprietress offered me a glass of red wine and this manuscript.

To this day I cannot explain the nature of this extraordinary event. Suddenly I found myself transferred from a battlefield among marshes and deserts to a city I had known only by word of mouth or through reading. Quite simply, I had just spent my seventh year as a soldier since the month war broke out in 1981 when they had seized me off the street, shoved me into military uniform, trained me to use a weapon, then put me on a truck with other men like me. They threw us into the marshes and said, "This is the land of your ancestors. Dig your trenches. If you retreat you won't escape. We'll get you back in body bags that we will bury here."

For seven long years I was aware only of the horrors of war. I yearned to run away to Europe, something I had dreamed of since I was a child. Not a day passed without my escaping from the sufferings and terrors of war into a vision of Europe. It was as if an unhappy god might shape from the clay of disasters some sublime creation capable of offering delight to

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its creator. Out of my suppressed desire I sculpted a physical Europe, from failed attempts at love I produced her heart, from my need for peace and security I sketched out her verdant features, from my craving for justice and liberation I designed for her a flowing white garment that fluttered like the wings of a butterfly and embraced me within its folds as a mother draws a child into her black *abaya*. Europe would be my expected savior, my promised land. Hunger, vagrancy, racism, despair—all were more palatable than in my own country.

During seven years of warfare I made seven attempts to escape. Six of them ended in failure. The seventh brought me to Geneva. It was not exactly so much an attempt to escape as a meander through an unknown tunnel. If Darne Fortune has ever made a compact with me, it has through-out those seven years enabled me, amazingly, to elude a sentence of death that was meted out to thousands of deserters like me. After execution their bodies were hanged outside their homes as a warning to others. Indeed, families were obliged to pay for the bullets that had been used to kill their sons.

You could say that I lacked courage to defend my country But if in your reckoning courage means self-sacrifice, then I totally disagree with you. You may

measure my courage by the degree to which I was able to defend myself. And, for heaven's sake, tell me this: was it necessary for my spirit to be crushed and my limbs to be shattered in order that worthy statesmen might in the end sit down round the conference table to partition a few square kilometers on a frontier that was stained by the blood of millions of wretched people? And then can you guarantee that those statesmen, after concluding their frontier negotiations, would negotiate with the Good Lord for Him to restore me to a life that had been mangled by tanks and blown to bits by shells?

What disgusted me most and made me rebel and run away was a strange picture that was in my imagination: leaders of both countries screwing each other as we, the masses in the army, were just ancient sperm shot from one side at the other. We were poured forth as sacrifices to their pleasures as they quivered in lust, delivering speeches, curses, and menaces at each other. When they wearied of that and gave up, they lay down on their backs on the negotiating table and wiped their brows and their asses, relieving themselves of responsibility for our corpses. They then embraced each other with affection.

"I will be courageous if I have the chance; if not, I will be a coward." I used to repeat this saying of

Mu'awiyya bin Abu Sufyan during these seven years of war and during my attempts to flee. These started haphazardly, grew into a compulsion, and ended as a miracle without parallel in the laws of time and space. Suddenly I was transported from the wilderness of history, weighed down by the injuries of thousands of my forefathers and relations, to emerge into the light of the present, a light flooding a city of which I knew nothing save its name and the amazing story that I will disclose to you in the coming chapters.

Before the miracle of my transfer to Geneva I had spent the previous seven years at the front. Less than one year earlier and just after my sixth unsuccessful attempt at flight, I was apprehended wandering around near a monastery in Mosul. They returned me to the front in the marshlands. They told me, "You won't fight from here. You eat too much. Ammunition for rifles is no use unless there is ammunition in the form of food that has to fill stomachs." All I wanted from life was peace and quiet and sleep. As the tramp of soldiers' feet echoed in my head, I imagined that I would only wake up after the world had plunged into an everlasting slumber. Our kitchen was a huge area dug deep into the ground with stone walls full of ancient stone carvings depicting kings hunting and killing, receiving law scrolls, declaring war, and produc-

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ing offspring. At the side of a stone washing bowl was the life-size statue of a woman leaning against the wall. She was standing disdainfully, stretching out her right hand that held a small flask the size of a cup. Around her left arm was entwined a serpent, its head between her breasts. I heard soldiers say that it was the hall of some ancient kings. They had come across it as they were digging trenches.

One of them used to tell and retell the story of Mulah Yusuf, the head cook. He used to stroke his beard and pray for deliverance from Satan, and revealed the secret of this hall. Into his southern dialect he would pour heaps of flowery classical Arabic. He said they were the kings of a nation of adulterers, making no distinction between lovers, sisters, and mothers. Allah turned them to stone, and these carvings were a portent to whoever set eyes on them. As for the woman you see before you, she is the queen, the mother, and the lover of them all. Fallen mankind learns from her. Satan fashioned her from the flesh of the serpent he took as disguise to tempt Adam and Eve. She thus became history's first temptress. She succeeded in her temptations from the time of Cain and Abel, through

Abraham and Hagar, Solomon, Lot, Joseph, and Zulaika to the age of the Prophets and the Judges.

The first to put up a resistance was Imam 'Ali who, when she displayed her beauty to him, became angry and beat her with his sword, Zulfiqar, right here, before she fled. Mullah Yusuf, silently, fearfully, pointed to the wound left by the sword, a long scar barely visible, stretching from her neck to her lower abdomen. He would then repeat prayers seeking forgiveness, beseeching refuge from Satan, and glorifying Allah. He would resume the story, telling how Allah brought down punishment on her, transforming her, along with her lovers and forebears, into stone. Now heaven and earth echo with the prayers and complaints of believers, begging Allah to release them from her corruptions. Mullah Yusuf closed his eyes and fingered his prayer beads. His face, scorched by sun and battle, took on the appearance of a ripe acorn. He then gave away an even greater secret: "Even though she was turned to stone, she is still able to influence the hearts of men and to respond to offerings made by romantic lovers."

It is true that many soldiers scoffed at his story, considering it simply pure superstition. They argued that the hall was all that was left of the remains of the kings of Sumeria and Akkadia. But time was working in favor of Mullah Yusuf. Over the course of the years of war, with its effects on the hearts and bodies of the

soldiers—wounds, deformities, nightmares, calamities—there spread among them what seemed to be a reverence for the statue of this woman. It was not just among those who believed and cherished the story. It reached those who upheld scientific principles and modernity. They all, whether they liked it or not, were complicit in the creation of a kind of secret and tacit rite without being aware of exactly who had started it. It was as if they had inherited it from their ancestors. You could see that the statue had, over the course of time, been transformed into a tablet on which the soldiers had written words about their loves, or curses, or wise saws, or had drawn obscene pictures. Artists among them—by nature or by training—used to splash onto it the different color of their creativity. They painted on a diaphanous dress that accentuated all the features of her body, even those that were obscured in her naked state. One day you would see her as a blonde, like a wanton actress with eyes that were blue or green according to the angle from which she was seen. Then a few days later one of them would get up, drunk, and turn her into a brunette with dark eyes and a gypsy's dancing lips. During Ramadan and the days of Ashura the soldiers gave her a degree of modesty. They washed away the makeup and gave her a kind of black transparent veil, making her

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look like a grieving mother. At Easter and New Year, Christian soldiers gave her some lighter color and lit candles on her brow, on her breasts, and in the serpent's mouth. Then twigs of myrtle and olive were strewn around her neck so that she looked like some Assyrian Madonna. During the seven years of war, soldiers decorated her neck, her head, and her arms, even her ankles with various kinds of strips of green cloth and cheap jewelry. Some of it they made themselves from the wire of crushed Iranian tanks.

Fate decided that this woman would be my sole refuge. From her presence at hand I received a delicious warmth that I knew in no other circumstances. I would lay my blanket on the ground near her and place my pillow between her feet. I stretched out every night in awe of her presence. I listened to my heartbeats until I dropped off to sleep. Some nights when I felt acutely alone in terror among the dead and wounded and the bodies of those who had committed suicide, I would ignore the soldiers as they slept, and embrace my idol and whisper to her about my sufferings and the secrets of my attempts to escape. If my commanders had known of them they would have had me sentenced to death—for each attempt. She would subtly flirt with me with her eyes and whisper things to me. I am sure that I was the only one among the sol-

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diers to whom she confided her secrets. She told me that Mullah Yusuf's story contained fragments of the truth. As for the core of the truth, none but I discovered it. What God had turned into a statue was but part of a greater truth: she was a fragment of a comprehensive feminine spirit that remained alive in the desires of men.

She also told me a secret that few before me had discovered: that I was living a world of dreams inside her head. Existence in its entirety is nothing but a fantasy inside the mind of this woman who lives in another world, and that too is a world of fantasy, but in the mind of a supreme being. All this history, over thousands and thousands of years, with tribes and nations, is simply a few minutes in the dream in the mind of a woman who feels her first tremor in the arms of her lover. These two live in a world other than the dream that revolves in the mind of the supreme being. We are a dream of tremors, with violence and savagery, hope and glory, alternating between harmony and alienation. Nations are born, and disappear, wars are waged, civilizations emerge, people practice pleasure and procreate. The tremors of this woman still offer life to the dream of our existence. In her blood and in the folds of her mind dwell all our ancestors. They went to the depths in order to switch the

signs of her pleasure to all parts of her body. Living forever in her depths, in the vast firmaments of her physical body, they pass their immortality in an endless tremor and in uninterrupted propagation and a re-incarnation in the bodies of their descendants.

I wonder, how many moments long was her tremor that, for me, represented the years of war and my six attempts to desert? I can remember nothing in my life except war, and the stages of my life are marked by those attempts to get away. The woman made no answer to my question as to whether I had had a past life. They brought me here without knowing anything about me but my name. I fit into my assumed role of a mindless individual, the laughingstock of soldiers, the idiot, one whose personality and origins were unknown.

I cannot remember anything of my past except those seven years of war, when, like a parcel, I was passed from one trench of death to another, from marsh to desert to mountain. I remember some months after the outbreak of war, we were on the Basra desert road and airplanes attacked our trucks, breaking up the convoy with all the soldiers who had no chance to escape. We scattered like wild animals that had broken out of their cages, into the sand, among rocks and hillocks, getting out of sight of the

stupid pilot who was following the other planes. That plane continued to pursue us with constant fire, as if it had it in for us personally. It so happened that a caravan of Bedu was passing by here, coming from the south on its way to the western frontier. I sought refuge with them when they found me wandering at night. It was my intention to carry on wandering in the desert until I perished, and not go back to the front. I pleaded with their shaykh: "I seek your mercy. Preserve me and Allah will preserve you." Now that I am in Geneva I can swear for sure that this shaykh, in spite of the simplicity of his appearance, had the authority of a monarch and the reverence of prophets. There comes to my mind today a confused image of that shaykh called Abu Yayha by his tribe. He was like a mirror that preserved the traces of places, years, and tribes that had been reflected in it. He was a fairy tale magician, a man of wisdom and piety, an experienced Bedu. When he heard my story he nodded and gazed at the lines in the sand traced by my fingers. He said many things that I only believed after I had lived and experienced them. He told me everything that would happen to me in the next seven years: my attempts to escape, the transfers—he even told me something more important than all that—the story of the woman of the flask whom I would get to know

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seven years later in Geneva. I did not believe him. I was too proud to let him take me to the frontier. I would try to cross the Euphrates and slip into Syria, then to Lebanon, and arrange to get a passport to go to Europe. He said he would try on my behalf. But after three weeks, as he predicted, he was obliged to hand me over to a group of soldiers that had stopped us on the road. The officer in command, a man with a red moustache and blue eyes, discovered that I was a stranger in the tribe. At first the shaykh refused to hand me over. On my account war almost broke out between the two sides, but for the fact that the officer discovered that he was related to these Bedu on his mother's side. I saw the officer go with the shaykh of his mother's tribe behind the ruins of an abandoned temple to settle my fate. When they returned the shaykh persuaded me to give myself up after the officer had promised on his honor to guarantee my life and prevent my being sentenced to death. He would hand me over to the authorities saying that I had got lost in the desert and was no deserter.

Less than one year later I made my second attempt to break loose. One autumn day I put my head over the rim of the trench and saw the setting sun adorning the marshes like a golden cloak, spreading a sense of decay. Facing that lonely silence I felt a clamor deep

inside me, something like a gathering of people quarreling and laughing at each other. I said to myself, if I run off perhaps this din will stop. I scrambled on my belly and got into the reed beds. Wild pigs, water snakes, birds, and buffaloes were still living there, a shock greeting us. We were the grandchildren of their masters and had returned with metallic monsters and modern means of destruction. We had built trenches and played around, cooking a victory meal from the flesh and bones of our victims. The feelings of these wild animals had been under assault. They had lost their hardiness and were in flight from any movement, even if it was caused by some other animal. I said to myself, I will run away and seek refuge with the remote tribes. Perhaps I can find a chance to get abroad. But the Iranian soldiers suddenly burst forth from the reed beds, just as it happens in adventure films. They were shouting Allahu akbar and threw themselves on me. In spite of my surrender one of them wanted to ensure my total submission. He stabbed me in the shoulder with his bayonet. They dragged me behind them, tied up like a dog.

Today, years after this event, when I read through the story of the woman of the flask I can confirm that on the day I fled, I embarked on a life that was extraordinarily similar to the story itself. They led me

through the marshes to their camp. Night fell and my shoulder wound was still bleeding. A phantom-like group emerging from the darkness strutted up to me and threw questions at me. These questions quickly became suspicions, criticisms, and curses. They poked me in my chest. I became overwhelmed with a feeling of depression. This feeling grew and was transformed into a pain that burned my insides, and reached my head and extremities. Suddenly—and I have no idea how—a noise, the like of which I had never heard before, shattered me. The earth beneath me shook, and a light, like lightning, shone through. After that I don't know what happened. I felt absolutely shattered. I wandered around in universes of light and color and shapes. Then things became clear and merged into the green form of a garden with houses as white as snow, in enclosed gardens, with copses and springs pouring into lakes on which floated boats of lovers, and houris who were like saints, and angels who were like children. I was a primitive being laden with wounds and the shame of defeat. I crawled along the bank and wanted to join the people on the boats. But I sank into a whirlpool. I sank and sank and . . . for one instant I was breathing my last. I opened my eyes....

I came round to find myself in a truck with a soldier

with a scratched face, ripped clothes, and grim features pouring water onto my face. He took his rifle apart and wiped blood off his bayonet and spoke to me: "Look, we've liberated you from them. Praise be to Allah, the grenade didn't kill you. We've sent them off to hell, all of them, at one blow" When I tried to move, my extremities seized up. I felt as if my flesh was being cut and limbs were falling off and sticking to my clothes.

A few months later I made my third attempt to escape. Before my burns had healed and my wounds had cured they sent me back to the front. After they first put me into new uniform, a fresh desire was born, that desire that slumbered during the period of treatment. I thought of getting a forged Moroccan passport and traveling, but unfortunately they sent me back again to the front. Once again and with greater violence, the idea of flight invaded my mind. In June 1984, the war had been going on for three years and I made contact with some people who knew Egyptian workers. One of them fixed a Moroccan passport for me, and introduced me to a Moroccan who taught me some of the basic points of the Moroccan accent. I spent my time getting used to uttering Arabic words in a Moroccan way. Instead of saying "*al-salam alaykum*," I was saying "*sslam alkum*".

My dream of Europe was transformed, deep inside me, into a cry of revolt that battered against the walls of my soul. It was Thursday evening when I had some leave from the front. At five o'clock I had my rendez-vous with the Egyptian. At seven the passport was in my hand. It had my photograph. At ten I was on the bus to Istanbul. I was not troubled by what I would do there. The main thing was to get out of hell; the destination didn't matter. Throughout the long journey, until we left the lights of Baghdad and I was woken up by the security police at dawn, my eyes had been closed. In my mind there were images of the glittering city in the middle of the lake, a city fed by the waters of the lake that lay amid two mountain ranges. It happened that, they discovered some resemblance between the name I had on the passport and the name of someone wanted by the police. At night, before they could check up on me and discover my real identity, I left the passport with them and escaped through a window. I returned to my military unit without anyone discovering that I had tried to get away.

The fourth time was in 1985. I escaped with a friend into the heart of the marshes and joined up with a band of rebels who were army deserters. This friend loved to masturbate while conjuring up images of the women he hated. He started this practice when he

was a boy, with the image of Golda Meir in his mind, and then he switched to Margaret Thatcher, imagining her screaming in his arms every night. His enthusiasm and yearning for Europe was even stronger than mine. We joined the rebels in the marshes hoping to find some way of escape. We embarked on fighting another war, not for the sake of land, but for the sake of getting something to eat every day. We pretended we were senior army officers, stopped caravans, and took what we wanted on the strength of counterfeit orders. We moved around in small groups, away from the eyes of helicopters that dropped firebombs on the reed beds where we hid. We were like wild animals under threat from all sides with the prospect of slow extinction: the soldiers of our own country on the west, the soldiers of our neighbors to the east, and between the two, agents of the authorities from among our own cousins.

The plagues of nature lay in wait for us: malarial mosquitoes, snake-bites and ferocious wild pigs. Then the skies brought us, from time to time, rockets and shells that had missed their targets to fall on our heads. I fell victim to the mosquitoes, and malaria spread through my blood. I had bouts of fever. I closed my eyes and saw death hesitating before me. Internally I was like the marshes, its waters polluted

with gunpowder, oil, and the bodies of soldiers. My friend, comforting me, died at my side. He was leaning on the bank when a bullet whizzed down and penetrated his neck. Slowly he pitched over onto his back just as if he was getting ready to call up the image of the wife of his killer. His mouth twisted in pain and he muttered apologetically, "This is my fate," and died.

I returned to Baghdad in humiliation after airpower and treachery had broken up most of our groups. The malaria consumed my blood. I returned so as not to die among people and friends who meant nothing to me, and because I had no other choice. But they did not sentence me to death. I don't know whether this was good or bad. They considered me as being included among a general amnesty for deserters and took me to the hospital and treated me until I was better and returned me to the front.

My fifth attempt was one night in the spring of 1986 when I decided to blow off my arm by exploding a hand grenade in the palm of my hand. I put my left hand on the edge of the trench and asked a comrade to take the pin out of the grenade because my other hand had seized up out of fear. I remember that although he agreed and took out the pin, he then threw himself on me and began to weep like a baby to dis-

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suade me from firing the grenade at the last moment. But it exploded, and because it was defective, all it took from me was one finger. They put me into hospital and treated me. Then they returned me to the front after telling me they had suspicions about my explanation for the incident and, if it were not for the testimony of comrades, they would have executed me. I was warned that if I did this again, they would fulfill my wishes themselves by putting me into the barrel of a cannon and firing me toward the positions of the enemy.

My sixth attempt took place in spite of myself. It was a matter of running away from death rather than running away to freedom. They had put me on the Fao front, in muddy terrain where there were secret mass graves. Trickle of blood seeped through to the surface whenever a truck or tank passed over. One day my commanding officer sent me to the next trench. No sooner had I left than there was an air strike on that trench. I ran to another one. The officer followed me and ordered me to come back. As soon as I left a trench it was struck from the air. Four times this happened. I heard people talking about me, saying I must be either a prophet or a spy, so I fled.

I went back to Baghdad. An old friend had been in politics and then became a respected smuggler after

his hidden talents were discovered on the day of his arrest, and he abandoned politics for the sake of a safer life. Through him I managed to cross the mountains to reach some armed groups. They had told me in Baghdad that I would be able to get into Turkey and from there make my way to Europe. In the triangle formed by the borders of Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, in rocky mountain valleys feared by the boldest armies, there were thousands of armed men with a smaller number of women living in caves and under roofs of stone. These men had not been broken up by the most deadly of shells. Thousands of dreamers, Kurds and Arabs, Muslims and Christians, Yazidis and unbelievers, pastoralists and peasants, soldiers and university graduates, were living with harsh nature—snow, disease, air strikes, and secret conspiracies. Before, I had been in regular warfare, between two armies confronting each other. But now I was in a battleground between secret and open armies, tribes and families, educated people, shopkeepers, some wearing the garb of the revolution and some speaking the distinctive language of the cities. They plunged into battles with each other. Some were with one state and against another. Some were against this man and for another. As a result everyone worked with everyone else and against everyone else.

One dawn I was descending into a wadi with a group of partisans, wearing peasant garb, the sun's copper-colored rays lightening up the place. Then something strange filled up our range of vision: a strange pale light warned us of some disaster. You could see it etched on the face of the mountains, foreboding and menacing. These apprehensions dug into me when I spotted a flock of black crows circling above us among the oak trees. I do not know what strange power made me drag my feet. I stopped for a pee behind a rock. Suddenly the hiss of bullets was heard in the woodlands. They cut through the branches and became mingled with the cry of the crows and the shrieking of wounded men. As I ran, a wounded comrade fell on me. I fell down and he fell on top of me. His face was above mine, and his eyes bulged out at mine. Blood poured out of a wound on his forehead. Despite trying to avoid it drops of his blood fell into my mouth, and it mingled, warm and bitter, with my saliva. At that moment I felt a repugnance as if a thousand snakes had got right inside me. I was crying out, thinking only of how to get my comrade's blood out of my stomach. I was drinking his blood as he died.

I was no longer aware of anything. The whizz of the bullets and din of the explosion of the shells died

away. I started to run and run, spitting all the time. I spat until I was spitting out my own blood.

I wandered among the mountains and forests for days on end. I fed on grass and wild fruit. I avoided people. My clothes were in tatters and I took on the color of earth. I kept absolutely quiet in order to listen intently to any loud conversations that might be conducted among the spirits inside me. In spite of their great numbers, I would see them gathering, facing each other in conversations that were a mix of argument and mutual understanding. They were like two camps, one of wise men, the other made up of idiots. Events had intoxicated and exhausted them all.

One spring day a monk stumbled upon me. I was flat out in a stream, the water up to my neck. My eyes were closed as I was listening to the noise of my wise men and fools mingled with the babbling of the water. I opened my eyes to see the source of the human sound that was breaking into my consciousness. Across the sparkling water I could see a face lit up against the background of the sky. I did not move, but was in a state of numbness, without a care in the world. I felt myself cut off from reality. I was like some unseen bird that observed from above my wise men who took on the forms of crows, but were in fact fools who were taking on the business of managing my terrestrial body.

The monk took me to the monastery. He gave me a place to stay and fed me. Until the day we parted he was puzzled as to why I sobbed whenever I heard the chanting of the monks. The truth is, I couldn't explain it either. When the soldiers seized me near the monastery, the monk could not save me. He had no documents in his possession that established my identity. They put me in chains and did not speak to me after they realized I was dumb and had lost my wits.

They shifted me from one place to another, one army camp to another. They fed me without question. After some days, an officer came with a rasping infantile voice and a face made up of a thick black moustache and a few pockmarks less visible than the stars of his rank shining on his shoulder. He touched my beard with a stick and nodded his head toward the sergeant. I realized that he was indicating that I join the troop. That day they took me back to the front after they had thrown me into a bath, shaved me, and dressed me in a striped military uniform and put me on a truck among the food supplies.

One day I was cautiously observing the belly of the woman statue as it opened up. Under my guise of being deaf and dumb and half-witted, I would examine the eyes of the soldiers in order to read what they might reveal about their doubts about the woman as

the belly opened up. Perhaps they were avoiding scandal because they were all, like me, involved. I don't know what they would have done when it would be impossible to conceal the business. Who knows what creation would be brought out of the wounded belly with the help of a sword?

Then in February 1988, nine months after I had been there, I was staring at the glowing full moon through an opening in the wall behind the woman's head. I was complaining to her about my confusion over my unknown fate after all six of my previous attempts to escape had failed. I was alone among the ruins of the adulterers' ancestors, deaf, dumb, and without memory. I was whispering and imploring her to help me to escape from my world here. Let her rescue me if she was really the mistress of my world and the fashioner of my life according to the shattering dream I had dreamt. How could I spend my days when all I had were memories of seven years of warfare, wandering among the marshlands, papyrus, and mountains, simply to flee the current hell to a unknown higher world? The throng of wise men and fools was pressing my body toward the statue, compelling me to embrace the woman. It was almost as if I had merged into her and was right inside her. Suddenly the hall shook with a number of explosions ac-

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companying the sound of planes and shouting from soldiers. When the roof collapsed, from one side of the hall there rose the cries of comrades among which I was able to distinguish the voice of Mullah Yusuf. In the time it took for the stones above me to collapse, I cuddled up in the bosom of the woman. I gradually slunk into the space formed by her embrace. The stones of her belly collapsed around the gash that extended from the neck to the lowest part of her abdomen. An extraordinary tunnel was disclosed that led from her trunk deep into the ground and through the walls.

To this day I do not know how much time passed as I crawled through the maze of the tunnels that took me into worlds in which I lived for thousands and thousands of years. It was as if I had been transformed into a power of light. I wandered among ages, peoples, and tribes. I was born again hundreds of times. I lived and died through hundreds of personas. I passed eons of history and lived through them all. She was the creator of my lives and protector of my offspring. She ensured that my reincarnations persisted in the folds of her dreams. This went on until I found myself emerging among the rocks of the shores of Lake Geneva. It was not simply the miracle of my transition there that surprised me. According to the

evidence of the barkeeper, I was the owner of the manuscript of this story, which I left with her accidentally a few days ago. She identified me from among the patrons who had been frequenting the bar for seven years, that I was bit of a card, that I ... that I ... I couldn't understand a single word she said, because quite simply I never came here and I only got to know this city a few days ago. I had spent the seven previous years on military fronts and in flight. As proof of this I have said all I can remember because that is the only life I lived.

But I must spare you the tedium and length of my complaints. I hereby present you with the story, just as I found it in manuscript. You can judge for yourself.

ONE

Emergence of the woman of the Flask

منشورات «ألف ياء AlfYaa»

The story of Adam and that remarkable woman, the 'woman of the flask,' started years ago. To you the story may appear absurd, indeed outside the realms of reason, but yet it happened. I don't know whether it was pure chance that brought me into contact with the central characters of this story or whether it was fate clothed in the mantle of innocent chance.

More than nine years before he met her—to be precise, in the winter of 1978—Adam had decided to leave his country, Iraq, and his city, Baghdad. He was just over twenty-two years of age. As with most of his generation, life was tough because of the violent and unpredictable political situation. He had also failed in his ambitions and had met only frustration in his dealings with women. He had only been able to achieve his dreams of freedom and glory outside his own country.

On the day he left Adam was very nervous in case anything he did might lead to him being arrested and so unable to travel. He packed his things in a plastic bag, and stole a final glance at his mother and brothers. He gave his sister a big kiss in private: she was

the only one who knew his plans.

Just as he started toward the door, some unknown magical force summoned him to turn back. Trance-like, he went to the big bedroom and pulled out an old wooden trunk from under his father's bed that contained papers and items belonging to his father who had died the year before. A mass of dusty papers summed up the life of a man who had left the southern marshlands as a young man early in the century after a disappointment in love. He came to Baghdad, became a soldier, and took part in the wars against the rebellious tribes of his own country. Age finally sapped him and he died on a bed surrounded by his sons and daughters. The way they looked at him reminded him of the leaders of the tribes against whom he had fought.

Adam was confused, and did not know what he was looking for. There were faded pictures, a curved Yemeni dagger, an English pistol, a bayonet stained with rust and blood, currency dating back to previous regimes, seashells, amulets with religious messages, and a lifelike portrait of Imam Ali guarded by two lions. There were keys, pens, and ancient statuettes that went back to different civilizations. His eye then fell on a flask, a beautiful flask, carved out of red iron, in the flowing form of a female body. Without thinking he took the flask, tucked it in his bag, and set off.

I won't bore you with all the details, but before he arrived in Geneva, Adam spent years wandering around the cities of the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Preoccupations blotted out the memory of the flask, hidden away in the depths of an old suitcase, left in the room of some cheap hotel, in a military training camp, on a train, in a forest, or a deserted castle. After three years of wanderings and setbacks, our hero finally settled down in the city of Geneva, between the Alps and the lake glinting with silvery tints of blue and green.

I have omitted to tell you that I have known Adam ever since we were kids starting out on life's path. I believe there is nothing in the world more complex than our relationship. You'll perhaps realize this in the course of this story. Our lives are in parallel, but between us lies a great and timeless chasm, threatening conflict, sometimes on the verge of violence. But fate also imposed affection and mutual support. We have traveled together. We have embarked on the experiences of exile and the search for dreams together. We are like positive and negative elements: in combination, we produce electricity.

It so happened that I was instrumental in the saving of the flask. We were in a bus going from Baghdad to Istanbul. As soon as Adam saw the security guards at

the border, he panicked. He wanted to throw the flask away, imagining that they may find in it something incriminating that would lead to him being taken away like a lamb to the slaughter. He took the flask out of his bag and was about to throw it into some ruins. I don't know what made me regard it as being as valuable as my party membership card. I grabbed his hesitating hand and, without uttering a word, snatched the flask and put it in my own bag. We crossed the border without any problem to speak of. Adam took the flask, kissed it, embraced me, and, like a child, his eyes filled with tears.

We reached Geneva in the summer of 1981, just after the start of the war with Iran. Three turbulent years had passed before we reached this civilized place. Three years of traveling between countless cities. We differed much and argued a great deal. It may be true that it was all a matter of thinking, logic, fear, and introspection. I represented soul and desire, impulse and spontaneity. Fleeing from internal exile we had opted for exile abroad. Life had become like an express train, and you had to get to know new people and new traffic in new cities. You had to learn new languages and come to terms with names, ideas, dreams, upheavals, setbacks. You are driven forward without any possible turning back. We learned the

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language of weapons, we planned for revolutions that were bound to fail, we wandered around, we went hungry, stole, and went to prison. We spent nights in trains and in abandoned houses. We would dream of a clean prison that might save us from being frozen to death in one of Europe's parks. We then decided to settle here.

Before the woman of the flask appeared and beguiled us with her charms, Adam had been living quietly in a small flat with his wife Marilyn, a modest young woman from this city. I was the only Iraqi who saw him, and that only every now and then. The gulf between us was widening. His introspection and detachment from anything that related to his own country increased. I, on the other hand, was more impetuous, and had more and more appetite for all that was forbidden in my previous life and in the lives of my ancestors. I was always the frivolous, noisy, lusty adolescent snatching from the present what had been denied me in the past. I threw myself wholly into the world of women, wine, drugs, and all-night dancing. I tried everything that was forbidden. My principle was to do anything I wanted to so long as it didn't harm anyone else. As for Adam, his spirit weakened more and more. He was like a reasonable old man who gave up dreaming of being a prophet and of success-

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ful revolution. He found in the world of computers a substitute for theories and philosophies of change. In the bosom of his wife he found something that made up for the warmth of political commitment. I sometimes enjoyed joking with him by describing our situation as being like two red fish that time had swept into a river where the water and the fish were both yellow. I tried to survive as a red fish, but he tried to turn himself into a yellow fish. Reality forced us to take on an orange hue as a result of blending red and yellow. As they say in Russia, we'd left the countryside but hadn't arrived in the city. I reckoned Adam had become like most conservative moral philosophers: he can dispense with something and avoid it, not because he hates it or rejects it, but because he despairs of ever owning or being in control of it.

One day—I think it was in the winter of 1988—he dashed down to the cellar to get some skis. He and his wife were going off skiing, something his wife adored. As he was digging them out from the pile of their possessions, he spotted the flask in a corner, covered with mold and spiders' webs. It was leaning against the wall as if it was taking a rest during a long wait. Even though he was in a hurry and his wife was waiting, he had a feeling of remorse: a spark of nostalgia for the past stirred in his heart. He recalled his

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father's death, his father's concerns. He had a vision of his mother alone in the house. Her children had been removed by marriage, death, exile, or war. Nine years had passed since he had parted from her. Images of his family merged with images of a war that he had shut out of his mind. Seven years of warfare had obscured and clouded memories of his homeland. All he had inherited from his country was a sense of fear. Or rather, he had learned in his life a sense of fear. In his infancy he had passed sleepless nights fearing death. When he was fast asleep he used to fear hell after his father had described the varieties of torment that could make "the hair of a bald man grow and fall out." He would long for an early death, because they used to say that Allah pardoned the sins of a child up to the age of six. A place in heaven would be guaranteed.

Since then we had gotten to know each other as if we were twins from the same womb. He loved the idea of death so as to forget about the miseries of this world and in the hope of paradise. But my attitude was to forget about death and to create for myself the delights of paradise in these moments on Earth. We were the children of those suburbs of Baghdad, with dried mud houses that spread like a plague all over the city. We spent our days killing birds or dogs, or

cats, or pelting stones at each other. One of us might take a dip in the swamps or in the Tigris nearby. We would steal and then romp around in the mud. We would play the devil, our bodies full of scratches and bruises. We learned terrible new curses as we practiced our 'innocent' pursuits such as burning ants. As night fell we would rush home to be greeted by our mothers with slaps and cuffs from plastic shoes, with curses and arguments from neighbors. We would seek help in the authority of Allah, the All-Powerful Father. At night we would doze in the open air, the sky lit up by the moon, the stars twinkling like the eyes of the beasts we had killed. We dozed, and my mind still burns bright with the memories of those days and of our mothers' stories of she-devils, monsters, transformations, and of the djinn who live deep down underground. They would emerge disguised in the forms of cats and as the ghosts of human beings. Many a night we would lie, holding our breath under the bedsheets in fear, of the angel of death and of hellfire. In the morning we would wake up in a sweat, full of shame and in fear of imminent punishment.

Adam's hand reached out for the flask. His fingers caressed it and wiped away the dust. Where had his father gotten it, he wondered. Had he inherited it? Had he bought it? Or was it some war trophy? Who

knows? He reflected on the impulse that had made him cart it around over the years to all those cities. His hand hesitated as he held it. He was worried that it may be a pretext for others to interrogate him about Iraq. Fearful of the past, he felt like a prisoner on the run, dodging his captors. But I know perfectly well that Adam is like me: not a week passes without him contemplating with terror the nightmare of return. He would dream that he had gone back home. He did not know how it had happened. He was without proper documentation and everyone would be pursuing him until even his family was shunning him, afraid of the ruin he would bring on them. Seconds of this nightmare were equivalent in pain and horror to hours of wakefulness. Blood, panic, popping eyes, military checkpoints, loss. And one question crying out at him: How did I come back and how do I get out again? It was the nightmare of everyone outside. We have succeeded in escaping from the prison of the past but have not succeeded in banishing that prison from ourselves. It cries out to us when we are awake, and captures and imprisons us when we are asleep.

In spite of myself, I find it hard to define the difference between Adam and myself. It was not just our mutual incompatibility, because in each one of us there are elements of incompatibility that can bring us

together or drive us apart at the same time, like a defeated army that has lost its glory and is in disarray. I sometimes attribute qualities to him that I don't know whether I myself possess. It's hard to describe even ordinary differences between us. He was accustomed to fight against his prison by forgetting everything about it whenever he was reminded about it, especially by Iraqis. I would dodge my prison by embracing it and playing with the past, by jeering at it and by jeering at anybody who reminded me of it.

As soon as we had arrived in Geneva he got married and settled down, and gave up partying. He devoted all his efforts to the future. He perfected his French, learned about computer management, and worked hard. He sometimes used to mutter to me over and over again, "My past is as obscure as a thick forest. As soon as I uproot something, it springs up again in the garden of my present life, in spite of myself." I don't know whether he considered me as part of that forest.

Anyway, here he was in the cellar with the flask, observing his fingers rubbing the rim of the lid that seemed detachable. It had not occurred to him that the flask had a lid and an inside. He twisted it until it was loose and came off. He was possessed with a strange sense of apprehension as if he was about to

meet a loved one for whom he had been waiting for years. He was filled with a basic anxiety about what he would find inside. He thought of turning the flask into a vase for a couple of roses: one white like milk, the other red like passion.

Suddenly and with determination he removed the lid. There was first a familiar whiff of humanity, a blend of sweat and scent. Then—pshsh . . . shsh . . . shsh. . . . The flask shook. Something misty came out with a faint sad whistle. His sense of vision disappeared and then returned. He stumbled and fell into a cardboard box that collapsed under him, burying him under its contents. Before things became clear to him, he heard a human voice like a whisper in a dream. He shuddered and was unable to get up again.

"Master . . . have no fear," came a woman's whisper, full of coquetry and desire. "I am yours. I am here for your sake. My body is for your body. My spirit is for your spirit. Pleasures of centuries past I lay before you. . . ."

Gradually there poured forth a dream-like vision; before him appeared a naked body, female in form, with flowing hair, towering over him like a palm-tree in the desert. Her glistening tresses, the color of lilac, cascading over her breasts and tender nipples. He

was tongue-tied in his amazement and quite unable to think. But he did not lose his capacity to appreciate beauty. Her waist and hips were like a crystal flagon of red wine. Her thighs were long and smooth, slightly flushed with mischievous playfulness. In spite of the dark, Adam saw quite clearly two moist lips that were like thin slices of watermelon. Her eyes were cast down beneath thick black eyelashes. Above them were eyebrows like miniature curved swords.

Anyone who saw Adam at that moment would soon realize that there was something strange about his face: fear and desire at the same time, like a wolf toying with its prey, his eyes on the lookout for a huntsman. Adam was afraid, not of death, but of sin. He was paralyzed by distress. His soul became a battlefield for a ferocious conflict between that fear and that desire: the fear that this fabulous woman would turn into a snake that would coil itself around him, inject his blood with its poison and destroy him, and the mounting desire to devour this beauty that was tempting beyond his wildest dreams.

He was more at ease when he saw her moving like a human being. She was like one of those beautiful nude nymphs in a Renaissance painting. She opened her eyes and gave a child-like smile. She then inclined her head flirtatiously, lowered one hand be-

tween her thighs and with the other arm covered up her breasts. She was saint-like when she coyly lowered her eyelashes. But when she opened her eyes to take in the scene around her she was the embodiment of sexuality. She reminded Adam of the picture of a nymph he had drawn in his imagination, derived from the stories of his infancy. His father had told him about a paradise that was as wide as the earth and the heavens. There were rivers of honey, wine, and milk. For each believer there was a palace with forty chambers. In each chamber there were forty couches, and on each couch were forty nymphs of the utmost beauty, their skin so transparent that you could see water coursing down their throats. All his life he had fantasized about such a nymph who could offer him every sensual delight.

Adam stared at the vision, and at the things around him, to make sure that it was all real and that he was not hallucinating. He opened his mouth and listened to his voice. It came out like a suppressed cry in some ghastly nightmare.

"Who are you?" he asked.

His voice sounded strange. It was as if he was listening to himself on the radio, quite unlike anything that was normal. He did not expect a reply, but sud-

denly was anxious: perhaps his voice would make her vanish. His uncertainty increased at the reality of what was in front of him. He saw her gazing at him with her wine-colored eyes and opening her lips to speak in a voice full of sweet modulations—like the chuckling of a child, but firm like the swish of a sword.

"My lord, I am pledged to you and to your descendants. All your forebears have spent some of their lives with me. I was their secret lover, their companion in their pleasures and their triumphs, in their plots and their reverses, and at their hour of death. The last man I had was your father. He inherited me from his father and his ancestors. For centuries beyond number I have spent my whole life in this flask. I have been an heirloom, from father to son. Whoever possesses the flask possesses the secrets of my spirit and my body."

Adam was amazed. His tongue lolled out of his mouth. He could have thought of anything but this. An eternally beautiful and youthful woman at his beck and call, ready to satisfy his every desire. He might now be seeing with his own eyes the dream-nymph of his infancy Adam, paradoxically, had a longing for death that was tied up with the pleasures of eternity with its absolute beauty. As for me, my fear of death made me sink into the lusts of the flesh and the de-

lights of this world. Many a time had I pulled him back from a suicide that would liberate his transient body and release his spirit to aspire to the most sublime of existences, away from the banalities and baseness of this world. And many a time had Adam pulled me back from committing some crime against those I held responsible for my distress. Perhaps he had now found in Marilyn the woman who possessed in her personality that great potential for divine perfection. With her modesty, her delicacy, and the purity of her soul she had for him something of the tenderness and compassion of a mother. In her childlike features and her baffling green eyes he saw the image of a past thwarted love that still lay deep in his heart. In her brightness, her thirst for knowledge, he found her a superb companion to share with him the endless game of finding answers to questions. These qualities of his wife made him love her and be faithful to her. But he continued to feel the flames of passion for one woman who twenty years earlier had possessed his whole being. She was still somehow trapped in his mind. Since she had left him to be buried alive, she had obscurely troubled his sleep, caused him distress, and a certain coolness in his relationships with women.

"Take things easy, keep calm," the woman contin-

ued after he had been silent. "Here, touch me, make sure of me. Every part of me is yours, so don't be frightened. Let me come to you so I can wipe the dust of ages from you with stories of your ancestors. They were my past and you are now my present. Your descendants will be my future and ensure the secret of my immortality and. . . ."

She was interrupted by Marilyn's voice. She was coming down into the cellar, calling Adam to hurry up. They had a train to catch. He was totally confused and was about to shout back, inviting his wife to share in this miracle. But the woman quickly threw herself at him, whispering to him and imploring him not to give her away. Her life was for him alone. Exposure to others was death to her. She said she would return to her flask at once. Whenever he wanted to see her again all he had to do was take the lid off the bottle. She then closed her eyes, and curled herself up around the flask like a snake. Suddenly her body wriggled, shuddered, stretched itself out and shrank. It then disappeared into the bottle like a dust devil swallowed up by the desert.

Of course, you are wondering what our hero could do next. He and his wife set off and stayed in the village of Haute Nendaz, lying amid the snow-capped Alpine peaks. After midnight he slipped out, leaving

Marilyn fast asleep in their room in the mountain chalet. He took a small bag in which he had concealed the flask. He slipped a kitchen knife under his arm as a precaution against any unwanted surprises. He went outside the village and traipsed through the partly melted snow to a high open space by a television transmission station. It was clean here, and secure, and was bathed in an intermittent red light that flashed from the top of the transmitter.

He took out the flask and placed it on the low cement wall overlooking the valley below. He had chosen this spot to make it easy in the event of danger to push the woman off the edge into the abyss below. He grasped the knife as he struggled to remove the lid. His heart was beating with pleasure at the thought of seeing her again. He was also fearful lest some powerful spirit emerge, snatch him by the hair, and hurl him like a stone into outer space.

The lid came off, and with it came the familiar scent of the woman. There was a stifled din. Adam stepped back from the wall and his hand gripped the knife. Then, there she was, in her naked glory, standing before him once again. It was as if some practiced divine hand that was hewing out the ice and the darkness had stretched out to create this wonderful woman. Her form and her voice radiated calm. For the first

time in his life his eyes filled with tears not of distress or joy, but from a sense of being overwhelmed.

"C-c . . . ov . . . er me up. The snow is torture to me."

As soon as he realized that her anxious plea was in earnest his feelings were torn between the nobility of the brave and the fear of being made a fool. Trembling, the woman tiptoed barefoot over to him, making the smooth stones sound like the hissing of some reptile. She threw her arms gently round his shoulders, stepping onto his shoes until she was glued to him. Only then did Adam yield to his nobler nature and take off his leather jacket and wrap it round her. He felt her nakedness when he stretched out a hand and unintentionally touched her bare backside. He was filled with a tremor not of pleasure but of anticipation and wonderment, like an inventor inspecting what he has just created. He listened to her uneven breathing and wondered whether it was from cold or from desire. He savored the aroma of her hennaed hair and different kinds of scent that had been popular among the womenfolk of the countryside back home. In his heart he cursed the women of his homeland. He was torn between resentment and camaraderie. He was always like this when he met a woman from Iraq or from any other Arab country.

Perhaps I can let you in on a secret. Until he left Iraq, Adam was never able to make it with a woman. Never. Nothing to do with his sexual capacity. There was some obscure reason—I really don't know what. It's hard to work out. In fact, the only time he tried to do it was just before we left the country. During the summer I persuaded him to come with me to Basra. There I took him to the suburbs, where the gypsies' mud houses stretch out in the area called al-Tarab. A few minutes after he'd been with one girl he came back to me, spitting and cursing. He could stand the sight of the whore naked, but just couldn't get it up. He repeated to me his views about a pure body and holy love, and how sex should not be linked to the evil of money or to the laws of the marketplace, and how his soul in this situation found it all disgusting and shrank from doing it. It made him frigid, lacking desire or capacity. As a result the visit came to nothing. I was disappointed in him, and I too lost any desire. We returned to Baghdad and left Iraq for good. He made numerous other unsuccessful attempts to build up normal relations with women. Many a time I urged him to talk to some girl at work or a colleague in the Organization, but he refused. In spite of his ideas of freedom he continued to be a prophetic soul pursuing a virginal chastity as a principle in life. He was on his

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guard against doing anything that might harm the reputation of the cause, even as simple as a dalliance with a comrade. *He remained a virgin until he reached Europe.*

The three years we spent wandering around were years of somber self-denial that turned him into a revolutionary ascetic who slept only with the theories of guerrilla warfare and the class struggle and constructing the ideal community. In Europe, before he met his wife, he embarked on several hasty affairs with women from various countries but never with an Iraqi girl. He despaired of really enjoying the body of any one of them. With all he met in spite of their devotion to him and their enjoyment of his company, he stopped short of bedding them. It was not just some idea of chastity that held him back. Many of them had no such restraint with others either before or after, but with him there was some psychological block, which the women themselves found strange.

"Tell me, where are we? When your father said goodbye, there was a sun setting and winter was knocking at the door. But I haven't seen snow like this for centuries."

Her whisper was more intimate with just a touch of that seductive appeal of the kind of woman who con-

trols men by showing up her vulnerability and need for protection. Her lips were touching Adam as she whispered in his ear, and a tremor of sweet childlike surrender pervaded him, reminding him of the touch of his mother's fingers as she used to ruffle his hair. The tremor then coursed through his body and targeted the pit of his stomach. Sometimes I wonder whether Adam's links with the world of his dream-nymph were simply a rationalization of the inevitability of death, a challenge to the terror of annihilation, his quota of beauty in the face of the ugliness of oblivion. In waiting for the end, he was spending his life searching for something that would for a while measure up to the beauty of the afterlife. He gave up on the love of his mother, who was like a shepherd for her sons and daughters. It was not her role to love, but to feed them and to provide a possible framework for their lives. He was in despair after the encounter with the female prisoner. Then he got fed up with waiting for Iman after a hopeless one-sided love that lasted five years. Fie spent years hoping against hope and waiting for some unknown person to rescue him from his misery. In his years of passion for Iman he became possessed by the idea that he would become a prophet. He passed nights waiting for an Angel Gabriel to come down from heaven to present him with some

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mission. He wanted to be as all the other prophets, both a savior and a harbinger of doom. Didn't all the prophets foretell doom and at the same time bring tidings of salvation? The realization of the terror of death and destruction brought them close to absolute power. They all claimed that their private project prepared people to confront an inevitable fate. In his youth, his craving for prophethood took the form of Superman. His reading of comics made him for a long time expect to have special powers coming from the wreckage of the planet of his unknown forebears. These powers would enable him to save the world and to create total harmony. But as a moustache began to sprout on his upper lip, a desire to change things through politics sprouted in his mind. He dressed the prophet of his spirit in the garb of a modern revolutionary. Sometimes I got angry with Adam when I said the Organization was for him both a mother and the nymph that had been denied him. And the state was a masterful father from whose tyrannical authority he had suffered. He opted for a revolutionary organization to recoup on his years of deprivation and the loneliness of his life. He plunged himself into the mystical love shared by the group, and he sacrificed his life for the sake of freedom and happiness, giving up the pursuit of women and absolute pleasure. A god-

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ness of mercy became an Organization. Believers became comrades in the struggle. The tyrant became the state, and the devils became the bourgeoisie. As for Adam's paradise and its nymphs, that was the promised utopia of love and equality.

The truth is that when I joined the Organization I didn't disagree with him, except that I liked to put my rebellion against grim reality into practice, and for the sake of enjoying the suffering, in words and deeds, of those tough guys who destroyed our manhood, filched our freedom with their laws and notions, their lies, and their jails. He struggled to pledge his life for the sake of the revolution. He said he would achieve immortality in the memory of the people. I, on the other hand, joined the struggle to get a life for myself and to seize some illusion of freedom. I was against the present for the sake of the present, whereas Adam, as was his wont, was against the present and the past for the sake of a far distant future so he would be able to attain his afterlife and the paradise of his undying nymphs.

It seemed to me that he was fighting against feelings of shyness and bad conscience without any clear reason.

He addressed her in a voice that was hoarse and

vibrated with self-reproach, "I want you to tell me who you are." His dervish-like soul, eager for spiritual glory, used to flutter around like a dove whose nest had been taken over by a snake. It had been thus ever since we first became conscious of life. For him, sin was companion to his desires. My mistake, however, was that I never fully gratified my lusts. Deep in his memory were the nights when he lay awake as a child, alarmed at the groaning of his mother and the wheezing of his father. Years passed before he realized that his father was not inflicting pain but was actually giving her pleasure. When he and I were ten we fell in love with the prisoner. Her image never left us. She remained a constant cloud in the sky overseeing all our love adventures. Before his adolescence he fell in love with Iman, a fair young girl from Mosul with a face like an apple crossed with a couple of grapes and a pomegranate. He made up his mind that he would love her until death just after he had seen an Indian film about two lovers, a rich girl and a poor boy: they died in sadness on a bed of love. For years he really thought in his heart of hearts that a woman could do no wrong, unlike men. She was the symbol of purity beyond the common things of life, the lusts of the flesh, or the demands of civilization. Year after year we argued more and more, and the gulf between

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us widened. He attacked me violently and mocked me whenever he caught me masturbating as I fantasized about a neighboring servant-girl. Nonetheless, a sense of solidarity kept us together, not least a great passion for beauty. His passion used to float on high, in the loftiest part of his soul. My passion was earthy, in the heart of creation, and tied up with lust, in its embodiment and its essence, and in the crackle of its fire.

There was silence for what seemed a long time. The silence of the snow was absolute, as when life wraps itself up in the depths of the earth. The woman leaned on the wall and looked up to the sky. The full moon was reflected in her eyes, a white moon, white as fresh milk. For a moment Adam did not notice her talking. It was part of the silence of the mountain. It seemed to him that her whispers came from the forests, from the village houses, and from the mountain peaks. Her words echoed through the valley, and poured out like a brilliant magical light on the town of Sion, spread out among the streetlights glimmering all over the valley. She told him about her lovers among his forebears: kings, bandits, army generals, crooked princes, traitors, hangmen, prophets, peasants, poets, slaves, and mercenaries. She spoke to him about their glories and their defeats, their merits and their

defects. For thousands of years she was handed down from father to son. AH lived with her and enjoyed an eternity of pleasure in her body and soul. She spoke on and on until dawn. Her words entered the depths of his soul, and his very being was transported far, far away. She transcended the limits of time and place. She took him through epochs of history. She wove his spirit into the bodies of his ancestors and took him through peoples and countries, experiences and memories, the impact of which live on in each atom of his flesh and soul.

TWO

The past of the Flask

One lifetime was not enough to listen to all her stories. One world poured out of another, one history led to another. It was endless.

She related that she used to be an ordinary girl, like any other girl. Her name was Hajir. She lived with her people in the ancient kingdom of Ur in southern Iraq, in the age following the great flood that buried the whole land. Her father was a prince from a divine line of kings. He spent his life in combat with tribes of raiders coming from the mountains on the northern and eastern frontiers. Her mother was the daughter of a prince from one of the waves of Bedu tribes who came from the western desert. For a long time they had settled in the south and had married into the people of the marshes and had taken part in sustaining the kingdom.

It happened that their king, Tamuzi, fell in love with Hajir. He fell in love with her even though he already had numerous wives and concubines. He married her, was obsessed by her, and became jealous of other men, even of women and palace servants. He housed her by herself in a deserted palace in the marshes.

No one had any contact with her except some women servants. This king's love reached the point that he refused to allow her to keep the child she had with him. He sent the child to his official palace to live away from his mother. He used to tell her that he could not bear seeing her as if she was like any other woman, giving birth, caring for a baby, suckling him, and allowing her body to get flabby, or having age draw lines over her face. He wanted her to be immortal in youth and beauty, an everlasting source for natural pleasure, immune to the disfigurements of life and the stupidities of the age. He wanted her exclusively for himself, not to be shared even with time.

He was the only one who ever saw her. He spent time sipping arak with her as melodies of a Sumerian guitar resounded through the chambers of the palace. He lost himself in the worlds of her voice as she sang the songs of the desert that she had learned from her mother. He was lost in her beauty and wallowed in her body. He was besotted, like a slave or a dervish, shedding tears of intense emotion. Abasing himself in her breasts he implored her, "If only I had foreseen the flood and you were my boat, if only I had been Gilgamesh and you were the dream of my immortality. Would that I were a temple and you the goddess. I would be nothing, you would be eternity."

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Fear began to take over, with the growing thought that the object of his worship would one day grow old and lose the freshness of her youth. Death would take her to darker deeper worlds. He decided to summon all the magicians and sages of the kingdom and neighboring realms. He offered to give half his wealth to anyone who discovered the elixir of everlasting life for his beloved and so preserve her from the ravages of time.

For years of demonstration and experiment, all the magicians, all the wise men failed to hit upon the secret of everlasting life. Gloom hung over everyone. The demon of grief was about take over Tamuzi's spirits when one of the sages gave his final counsel, "His Majesty must go on a journey himself. He must go into the middle of the desert. He must seek out and reach those shaykhs and wise men who are isolated in oases and desert mountain caves. Perhaps there he may find what he wants."

The king set off with the best horsemen of his army, having delegated the running of his kingdom to his minister and his friend. He took with him his beloved, and all that was necessary for her ease and comfort, shielding her from the heat and dryness of the desert. They traveled through the lands of the Bedu and into the heart of the desert. They reached

some Bedu tribes and sought the advice of anchorites and sages of the desert. Each one of them counseled them to get in touch with a certain wise man living in a certain oasis ... or on a plain at the distance of so many days ... or weeks.

They were about to give up after two years of fruitless wandering when one day they met a shaykh dwelling deep in a cave in a red-rock mountain. The charisma of a prophet radiated from him. Tall, he had a brownish complexion, a broad prominent forehead and a long nose. His eyes were black and sparkling with the intoxication of faith, and his beard was white as was his hair beneath a white skullcap. Over his shoulders hung a black cloak atop a flowing white gown. The king approached him and spoke to him about his burdensome quest. Without uttering a word he looked at the king as if to say, "Give me your trust and all will be well." He gave a sign for Hajir to come up to him. He took her by the wrist and led her into the darkest depths of the cave. They were out of sight of the anxious king. After some time wandering in dark tunnels Hajir found herself in a wide hall. It had a floor of fresh green grass. If you looked up you saw an opening in the middle of a very high vault. It was like the sky and sunbeams and water cascaded down. The shaykh remained standing at the entry to the hall and silently indicated to her that she humbly remove

her clothes and step into the hall. She advanced through water that was pouring out of a small flask placed on the ground. She lifted up the flask and pressed it to her bosom and stood still under the light and water. She looked around her and noticed for the first time across the cascades, walls composed of a mass of headstrong horses, red, black, and white, in rows and forming a solid block. They cantered precipitantly toward the opening so as to refresh themselves at the source of light and water. She raised the flask and closed her eyes. She proceeded to drink as she listened to the soothing, wild, anthem-like whinnying of the horses as they quenched their thirst. She was seized by strange feelings that she had never before encountered. For the first time in her life she really sensed every part, every limb of her body: her blood, her heart, her head, and all her muscles. She was aware that she had the same control over every movement she made as over her fingers. She felt as if she was swimming inside her own body. She was swimming with a current of water pouring from her head to her chest and stomach, until she reached the wonderful junction of a frightening number of rivers. It was a splendid outlet in which were mingled the shades of the streams of life and lust forming an awesome lake. Its waters rippled with jelly-like formations of light that swam and drank and merged together. Hajir allowed herself to dissolve with these for-

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mations. She sank and sank until she lost all consciousness.

After a long wait the king and his attendants became very concerned. The shaykh emerged from the darkness, a black and white silhouette. When the king saw that he had returned by himself, he hid his fear but grasped his sword. He hesitated at the sight of the shaykh's features that indicated good will, and his eyes that suggested good news. The shaykh went up to the king and, gravely and silently, presented him with the flask.

That night, in the middle of the desert and on the summit of a russet mountain, they prepared bedding for Tamuzi with carpets and counterpanes of silk. They erected a broad canopy, its roof open to the glowing sky. They took him there to be alone with the flask. His idol emerged for him, still living in the swoon into which she had fallen as she entered the lake. Neither said a word as they fell into each others' arms. They drowned themselves in a frenzied delight and their cries reached the heavens. Their joy transformed the moon, the stars twinkled more than usual, and the night was charged with a drunken vitality.

In this way Hajir embarked on the first stages of her life leading to immortality. Her king brought her out

every night. With her he practiced the rites and delights of love. He ordered the sculptors of Ur to carve in her form statues of Anana-Ishtar, the goddess of love, fertility, and beauty. Before them he serenaded declarations of his submission to her immortality. He besought her sympathy and blessings for his wars. When there was not enough rain he made offerings requesting rain. During his reign the country prospered. There was a succession of blessings from the Euphrates in the form of rich alluvial mud. The ears of corn symbolized the blessings of prosperity bestowed on the king. Things were so good that the priesthood raised him to the rank of god. During this time the Akkadians, the kinfolk of Hajir, succeeded in sharing with the Sumerians the administration of the state and the community. There were initial plans to unify places of worship and unite the gods. They created one religion under the protection of Tamuzi, king and god, and his beloved, the goddess of love and beauty.

Then one day disaster befell the king. He was traveling with his horsemen and courtiers in the desert nearby, practicing the familiar sports of hunting gazelle and lion. That night there was a chill autumn breeze, coming earlier than usual. Tamuzi was resting his tent in the hunting camp.

The campwomen were in a nearby tent strumming

their musical instruments and intoning songs in his honor. Just as he stretched out his hand to the flask, he sensed a stinging hiss and a massive force winding itself all round, crushing him violently. When his bodyguards responded to his stifled cries they saw something they had never expected: the king was writhing in the utmost terror, entwined by a giant spotted snake. It was staring at him angrily, its tongue dripping with blood. Tamuzi was struggling in vain to free himself from the beast. His hands trying to reach any weapon but to no avail. His mouth was wide open, paralyzed with fear. His shouts were strangled in terror. Horsemen and soldiers rushed from all directions to try to release him. None of them dared to strike with sword or spear, fearful lest they wound him. They continued to flounder around the snake with their swords. Not content with winding itself round the king, it then dragged him away. It crept outside the tent, and outside the camp in spite of its wounds. It bit two soldiers and one horseman, paralyzing them on the spot. It carried on crawling and reached a deserted graveyard not far from the camp. Everybody gathered and surrounded the snake. The men were swarming around anxiously, shouting fearfully, shamed by their inability to rescue their king. The women unbraided their hair, tore their clothes, and wallowed in the sand. Their hymns of praise turned to prayers seeking aid or beseeching the god-

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dess mother to come to Tamuzi's relief. The snake was crawling among the tombstones on which forgotten ancestors had written. The copper-colored rays of the evening glowed onto the sunken graves giving them the appearance of expired beasts with open maws ready to swallow up the dead. The snake crept into one of these graves, as a bewitched lover slinks into the couch of its loved one. On the king's face as he disappeared from view into the grave there was a fiercely disapproving look. He uttered a raucous cry from the grave, its echoes reverberating to the heavens: *Why?*

And that is how the king died. Everybody was persuaded that Kijal, the goddess of the underworld, had exploded with jealousy for Ishtar and fueled her volcanic hatred by putting on a snake's skin and snatching Tamuzi and dragging him off to her worlds of darkness.

This untimely death gave the king no opportunity to bid farewell to his beloved, nor to prepare her for some new role. She remained concealed in her flask for ages—she had no idea how long. Then one day she found herself coming out of her flask and before her was a new king. He was full of the vigor of youth and had many of the features of her king except for a slight baldness beneath the skullcap of his crown. He

was drunk and looked with amazement at her naked body that was dyed with the color of the fires of the lamps of the underground hall. Her reddish skin, her prominent eyes, and her full lips suggested an intense disposition and a tempestuous will, a sense of mischief and sensual desire. He gave her a signal to stand up and threw over her shoulders a black silk shawl. He walked round her, contemplating her with desire and hunger, like a wolf looking for the tastiest part of the flesh of its captive prey. He then pounced on her, forcing her onto the carpet. He grabbed her violently, groped her breasts, sucked at her nipples as if he was a thirsty baby. Without taking all his clothes off and with the black shawl round her neck he made love to her wildly and in haste, all the time making a hissing sound that sounded as if he was in distress. Then he rolled onto his back and covered his face with the black shawl, signaling to her that she go back into her bottle.

This is how things went on. Every night this strange king, drunk and twitchy, would take her out and toss the black shawl at her, circle round her, nuzzle her breasts, copulate with her violently and then, without a word, cover up his face with the shawl and let her return. But one night he took her out of the flask and fell on her in tears. He kissed her body in humiliation

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and pain, mumbling, "Forgive me, forgive me . . . I've got to confess to you ... I must own up to my sin."

At this moment they were in the castle hall. The windows had been left open to receive the cool breezes of the evening. Just as he opened his mouth, a wolf's howling could be heard far away. The king said he was the son that had been removed from her after birth. He had inherited the kingdom after the sudden death of his father. He had three brothers from other women. He was free of their challenges after he had sent the first to the field of battle and had arranged his secret assassination and proclaimed him a martyr of Ur. As for the second, he had persuaded one of his lovers to put some poison in his wine and then accused his rival, the minister, of this crime and had him executed on the tomb of his brother. He got rid of the third by making him lose his wits. The new king made a vow and sacrificed a virgin maid on the banks of the Euphrates to the god of sweet waters who responded by diverting the waves of passion from his young brother, making him spend his life wandering along the banks of the river, proclaiming his passionate love to the convoys of boats that sailed down to the great delta that opened onto the Gulf. When this brother was a child, he had heard his father's womenfolk whispering to each other the story of

the flask and of his mother who had been put away, isolated in a palace on an island between the marshes and the desert. When he saw her coming out of her flask he was unable to suppress his latent desire to ravage her beauty as if he could thereby avenge his father who had deprived him of her. A mixture of hatred and desire made him yield to the instinct of a primitive love, regardless of society's norms and whatever the mind disallows. He said that from that first night he saw her he supposed he had some intimate link with her.

The new king sought forgiveness from his mother. He promised to save her from the deathlessness of the flask and return her to a life of mortal freedom. He consulted all the priests, sages, and hermits, but it was no good. They all said it was impossible. As soon as her body had gone limp and her eyes closed, she was transformed into a fluid that was consumed by the flask. If she refused to relax or to sleep she perished. If they broke the flask the woman would turn into a liquid that would spill on the ground. Her life would evaporate and vanish into the clouds. And so she was sentenced to live forever inside a flask and in the arms of her descendants.

The years she passed with her son were years of drought and famine. Then a sequence of floods sub-

merged the villages and towns and destroyed fields and gardens. A rival nation took advantage of Sumer, which was in a state of collapse. The monsters of plague sprang out of their cages and destroyed masses and masses of people. Anyone who was able either fled into the remotest marshes or ran away to the depth of the desert and resumed his ancestral Bedu way of life.

Nor did the tribes of the mountains miss their opportunity. After the army of Sumer scattered and catastrophes destroyed their men, raiders swept through the northern and eastern frontiers. They spread havoc time and time again. Blood was spilt over and over again. They slaughtered all the leaders, all the shaykhs of the city. They besieged the king's palace. When they failed to storm it, they torched it. While fires were breaking in the wings the king took his mother out of the flask and wept on her bosom and told her that he had decided to die. He refused to escape by a secret tunnel that led to the edge of the city. He said that the death of the city and of his people meant his own death. He had no further wish to live after the disasters that had occurred as a result of his own errors. He used to believe that his blood would purify the land from the causes of the catastrophe. He said his farewells to her and entrusted her to

his followers so she could live with his son whom he had made flee into the marshes. When the raiders seized the son he did not know that they had crucified his father on a burnt trunk, all that was left of the palm tree that, thirty years earlier, had witnessed moments of ecstasy when his father, Tamuzi, had planted his seed into the belly of his mother, Hajir.

One day Hajir found herself standing in front of her grandson who had inherited the flask. He was a strange young man, with wheat-colored skin and penetrating honey-colored eyes like those of an ancient mariner. He inherited the habits of adventure and discovery from his mother who came from the island of Dilmun and had died in the plague. He inherited from his father his sensuality and also his quarrelsome nature. And from his grandfather he inherited a spirituality and a bias to faith in thought. Then in the wilderness of the papyrus plants that had not known any human influence, he founded an army of fugitives and raised the standard of revolt with the aim of expelling the invaders.

He amused himself by hunting the invaders' soldiers. He kept them alive and then brought his grandmother out of her flask so she could derive satisfaction from the sight of the death of those who had spilt the blood of her people. He had their limbs cut off

and boiled and made them eat their own cooked flesh. He left them hanging up to their necks in the water until they died. He placed them naked in a huge cage and set scorpions and black vipers onto them. Every time, he concluded an execution party by withdrawing with Hajir to a furnished marshlands boat, a *mashhuf*, and lay with her amidst the water snakes, the chatter of birds, and the snorts of wild boars.

And so remained Hajir for thousands of years, being transferred from one land to another, from the arms of one of her descendants to another. She passed generations in the marshes, and other generations in the desert. Between the sea and the mountains. For over five thousand years she was passed down by more than one hundred and fifty lovers from among her descendants: kings, bandits, prophets, slaves, poets, cultivators, madmen. Over the course of one hundred and fifty generations she got to know the countries of the desert extending from the banks of the Gulf, from Dilmun to west Africa; indeed, she spent some generations in Europe.

One of her descendants became a prophet. He left Sumer and Akkad, fleeing from the oppression of the king. In the land of the Canaanites he settled and married. Hajir continued to be his secret comfort whenever he was overcome with nostalgia for the

home of his ancestors. One of his sons ran away with the flask and lived the life of a nomad, wandering from one desert oasis to another. He took refuge with a tribe who adopted him after he fought alongside them. He migrated with the tribe among the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula, from the Gulf to the Red Sea and the land of Yemen. He would settle in oases, raid merchants' caravans and plunder the fields of the settled people. He married a shaykh's daughter and established his base among his tribe. After the shaykh died he was chosen as the successor. Thanks to what he had learned from his father-in-law's wisdom, and from what he had learned from Hajir about his forebears, in addition to the experiences gathered during his wanderings, he became a prophet for the tribe. He spread his message among nomadic tribes calling on them to settle down and to forsake warfare and the habits of plunder. He would say, "If the spirit of mankind is based on material matters then the spirit of the people will settle on their land, and the spirit of God will settle on all material things. Your spirit will not be at ease until your material needs are fulfilled. Any land is open to you: settle on it and till that land. Let it be for you as a fertile wife and a watchful mother. The boon and bounty of land brings you the blessings of our Lord. Therefore build among your houses one

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house that will protect you and will bless your deeds." One night they watched a stone in flame descend from the skies. They knew that it was a sign from God. Round that stone they sacrificed a lamb and built a place of worship, a house of God. And around it they built their own houses and settled down.

In this way did the generations pass, as Hajir's flask was handed down from one grandchild-lover to his successor. On one occasion circumstances obliged one of Hajir's lovers to take to the nomadic life again, seeking shelter in the manner of his forebears. He traveled with his tribe that had been overwhelmed by wars and drought to the lands to the north. They spent some years in Sinai and then settled down on the banks of the Nile. They lived there for many generations. They intermarried with the people, had children, and passed away. The flask was handed down, generation to generation. After a century and a half, one of the descendants managed to become pharaoh. He proclaimed that there was one Egyptian goddess so that he might be her supreme representative. Then years passed by and with them setbacks, wars, changes, and triumphs. Yet another descendant was led to resume life again in the desert. He migrated with his adopted tribe, with that flask in his pocket concealing his beloved ancestress. They traveled far

into the deserts of Africa until they reached the Atlas Mountains. After centuries of wandering around one of them married a woman from a mountain tribe that had originally come from the desert centuries beforehand. He kept the flask in a cave nearby. He would bring out his beloved and talk to her about his longing for the tribe he had left years before. His grandsons settled and his seed had mingled with the people of the mountains. One descendant worked as a sailor on a Phoenician craft. The nomadic life took him—and the flask—to the city of Tyre where he settled down, marrying the daughter of another sailor.

Another descendant left Tyre, the city of his grandfather and his father, and settled in Damascus. One of his sons became a Canaanite prophet. This prophet traveled to Mesopotamia to spread his message to the people of Nineveh, Babylon, and Ur. He settled, married, and begat. Things went full circle to the extent that one descendant returned again to the southern Iraqi marshlands. This heir to the king was not like his forbear a thousand years before. He was a bandit who attacked villages and hid in the wastelands of the marshlands. He did not reflect on his inner feelings and dreams that she revealed to him about his earlier exposure to this country. He settled and abducted and took to bed dozens of wives and founded a tribe of evil-doers.

Whenever a yearning stirred in his bosom, he would bring Hajir out of the flask so she could talk to him about his ancestors who dwelt in these places after the flood. Many generations later, one descendant fled with the flask to a city on the Gulf. He was first a sailor and then a pirate, but then fell in love with a Carthaginian princess who took him with her to her homeland. From there circumstances took him to Helvetia in the Alps where he settled with his sons and grandsons on the banks of the river Rhone and Lake Geneva. Five generations later one of the descendants was involved in the killing of a Roman soldier in a tavern brawl. He fled to Greece, became a prisoner in a Roman fleet who took him on to Syria. There he became a monk at a time when Christianity was still in its first stage of being a rebel sect. He based himself at a desert shrine in Hauran. He was very pious and knew no more of women than salacious, devilish pictures of them, apart from the Virgin Mary who represented tenderness, purity, and eternal compassion. One day he came upon the flask of his forebears among his effects. He spent the years of his asceticism fighting his own lusts that persisted within him whenever he brought Hajir out of her flask. He refused to rub it and all but handed it over to his superior but for the appearance of Satan in the form of Eve, even if he had not finally been persuaded that she was really both his ancestress and the lover of his

forebears. One day he drank wine and shed tears in front of altar icons. He was absorbed in the contemplation of a picture of the Blessed Virgin. Hymns resonated throughout the passageways of the monastery. They penetrated his soul and his anxiety was transmitted to the four corners of the desert. He had no idea how it happened. Through his tears he saw the Virgin emerging from her icon and taking on before his eyes the form of a goddess of virgin purity. She covered her charms with a black velvet shawl. She addressed him in tones that combined compassion and maternal warmth, "My son, depart from hence. God has sent to you an angel with tidings of fertility and cultivation. Go far away so that the word of the Lord may be spread throughout the oases of the desert from the mouths of your progeny"

The monk set off with the flask. He wandered the deserts, spreading the word of one God among the Bedu caravans. He ended up at the city of Najran on the edge of the Yemen desert, and it became the base for the spread of his religious message in the peninsula. The life of a merchant made one of his grandchildren put down roots in a city at a crossroads of caravan routes. He married and had children and became part of the community and embraced their religion. It was Hajir who inspired her lover to persuade the shaykhs of these people to construct a city temple

that would house the idols of the tribes of the peninsula. She told him of the cities of his ancestors, and how they used to contend for mastery over most of the gods of the other cities in order to be the supreme religious and political capital. The knowledge he acquired from Hajir's stories made him sit down and think hard about the issues of the creation. When he became the custodian of the Great Kaaba he tried to add to the rituals of the pagans an element of belief in one God. He ordered the sculptors to make huge statues of al-Lat, Uzza, and Hubal. They were to be the great lords who would tower over all the gods of the peninsula. They alone would be able to mediate between mankind and the Lord of Creation.

The flask continued to be transmitted through the generations until Hajir found herself one day traveling on the road to Kufa with one descendant who was calling for revolt against the Umayyad regime. When they crucified him on what was left of that very same scorched palm tree, Hajir was standing with the crowd, wrapped in black weeping alongside her descendant, a young man who had been carrying his father's flask. She lived with her children and her children's children whose tribes built cities and villages scattered on the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates. They married and their blood became mixed with

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the blood of their own ancestors. In the course of the centuries they led the revolt of slaves, they became poets, vagabonds, soldiers, and caliphs. They became mystics who were crucified and burnt at the stake, their bodies tossed into pits. Hajir was their companion in their wars and their captivities as well as in the luxury of their palaces.

One descendant migrated to Egypt. From there he headed west across Africa. In Tangiers he married and left sons. One of them joined the army of the Andalusian caliph with the task of checking the assaults of the Franks and princes of Spain. One day he fell prisoner in the hands of a crusading sailor who was on his way back from Egypt. He was sold to be a servant in a church in the heart of the Alps. Chance alone came to his assistance in keeping the flask in spite of military inspections. He used to hide in an abandoned hut, and brought out Hajir so he could pray to God with her that they would believe that he was a Moroccan merchant, and that they would not discover that he was an Andalusian army officer. If discovered he would certainly be executed. Although for many years he practiced Islam in secret, in the end he became a Christian and married a young woman from a village near the church. He continued as a devoted server of the church until he grew old

and became a grandfather and left behind numerous sons and daughters. When he was on his deathbed, he summoned his middle son who was a young man full of a spirit of adventure and a love of women, and who dreamt of travel through the countries of Europe. He handed the flask over to him and whispered to him, in a voice that almost gave out, "This is yours. Fate may be dragging me into oblivion, but you, my son, will not forget: you will complete my history for me. Take it. It will talk to you about a dream in which you will continue to be my eternal spirit." After years and years of travel and prison, he was able to realize his father's dream when he reached the country to which Hajir guided him. On the banks of the Euphrates he built a house and settled down among cousins and many wives.

The flask was handed down over the generations until, in the course of time, one descendant escaped from the Mongol massacres to the southern marshlands. There he stayed with his family. The family married into the tribes, had lots of children, and expanded. They built cities and villages. Things went on like this until it became the turn of Adam's father.

THREE

The present of the Flask

Of course, dear reader, I don't want to draw this story out. I can tell you that from that day a new life started for our friend Adam. Perhaps I can summarize and say that it was a turning point, not only in his life but in mine as well. You will also see that the new life was quite extraordinary and brimful of unusual happenings.

On the first night in which Adam entered the world of the woman of the flask, his body remained in this world but his soul crossed a threshold into a world defined by this divine girl. He entered into the labyrinthine corridors of a history that had neither beginning nor end. At dawn of that first night they made love. Every moment of trembling desire was equivalent to the events of a whole year. It was as if his body was turned into liquid jelly that had taken human form. He was born, grew up, and spent the periods of his life—with all the experiences and changes in life until the end—in one ultimate quivering moment of ecstatic tranquillity in Hajir's arms, leaning against the railings under the eye of the moon that had sank into the rudely tints of dawn.

At the end of that night Adam went back to the cha-

let in the mountains, carrying the flask in the bottom of his black bag. He was surprised that he had no twinge of conscience for having betrayed his wife for the first time since he had fallen in love with her. Even more, he had passed a night of technicolor rapture without feeling tired. He only felt an extraordinary desire for his wife. As they were entwined with each other, a song of Fairouz merged with Marilyn's sighs, forming melodies that released a sense of unending pleasure. In those moments of rapture his wife's face seemed to take on the features of the woman of the flask. It bore the words of the song:

Hand me the flute and sing

For the song possesses the secret of life

The chant of the flute lingers on

After life is lived no more

At that moment Adam felt his spirit soaring in the heavens and then plunge to the depths. It also flowed feverishly into the innermost soul of his wife. They remained entwined for a long time. They did not realize until some weeks later that their hour of love was also an hour of fruitfulness, and that a seed was planted in Marilyn's womb. For two years they had

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been waiting for a moment such as this, ever since Adam had agreed to his wife's desire to have a baby. Marilyn told me afterwards that they had spent two years trying to get her pregnant. She consulted medical specialists on the matter. They told her that the problem lay in her husband. He suffered from a special and rare form of infertility. His seed refused to link up with that of any woman, but not because he was infertile. Far from it. His sperm count was good and more than necessarily active. It was this excessive activity that got in the way of the act of conception. They said that this defect basically went back to the psychological composition of men who, in spite of their vigorous sexual appetite, subconsciously hated women. They loathed everything female and fertile, especially the maternal personality. A basic love affair with death created in them a misogyny because women were a symbol of life, fruitfulness, and continuity. She was the soil, truth, and history. In their subconscious, all they loved in women was a penetration into the heart of the unknown, a return to a timelessness before life, to the secret of primitive existence at its most basic in women. They hated life because in relation to men, they were the grave in which they buried their own lives. This is the state of things when we are long deprived of something we desire. Our

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love becomes mixed up with hatred and becomes part of it.

The doctors suggested a form of artificial insemination. Adam agreed to give a sample of his sperm to a laboratory for them to blend with the seed of his wife so they could create artificially the circumstances of fertility in her womb. Two attempts of this kind failed, but Adam and Marilyn decided to make two further attempts. They were still trying right up to the day when Hajir appeared. Marilyn became pregnant and the doctors were amazed, but they simply considered it a stroke of good luck.

Adam used to carry the woman in the flask in a small bag. He traveled to cities and the Geneva suburbs. He spent a night with his houri at a hotel in the countryside. Then he was bold enough one day to tell me that he needed my room for a few hours whenever I was absent. I surmised that he had a secret lover whose identity he did not wish to reveal. The idea of Adam doing this had never occurred to me before. Only later did he reveal her to me.

In the course of time, Adam became bolder in selecting new places in which he and his houri could indulge in their pleasures together. He would go to the cinema and take a seat in the empty front row. He

would bring her out of her flask and clothe her in a transparent dress and informal shoes. He would place her at his side and explain the film to her. He would find other fresh locations: swimming pools, discos, trains, alleys, and parks. Things reached a stage that the pleasure was more intense the stranger the place and the more challenging the circumstances. He did not overlook museums, government offices, banks, and places of worship, either.

My attention was drawn to perceptible personality changes affecting Adam. He was more responsive to my invitations to spend evenings at bars and at parties. He began to discard his normal introspection and his usual way of spending time at home with his wife and his computer. He would first reluctantly sip at a few glasses of wine, and then release himself to excesses of intoxication. At first I couldn't understand some of his obscure mumblings about a flask and a houri and the history of his ancestors. I thought he was repeating something he'd read in a book. I was amazed—after having seen him for seven years living as a recluse—when he set off with me for nights of debauchery during which we'd stagger together from bar to bar. Then, for the first time, he asked me for news about the war and joined in debates with friends.

He no longer made fun of me when he saw how my life was fulfilled by enjoying it in the company of other people. Their eyes were a mirror in which I saw myself. And I loved to penetrate their secrets. I heard my own voice in their voices. My self existed in their selves. Indeed, I often used to imagine that my appetites were like a stable-bound, impetuous stallion. In order to obtain release I had always to get to their hearts either as a guest or, at worst, an intruder.

Here then was the woman of the flask possessing him like some dream that had been planted in him. From that day we grew apart. As far as I was concerned, the age of development was over. His philosophy and his revolutionary dreams were consumed in the fires of the distant East. All he had to do was to look for philosophies and dreams that fitted in with his new way of life. He chose oblivion to be the weapon for this struggle of his. Instead of the Organization, he had found Marilyn. The computer took the place of political issues. As for the dream of the new Jerusalem and the paradise of his houri, he replaced them with ambition and a dream of future prosperity. He would become a rich man, a well-known expert, and a respectable Swiss citizen with all the rights conferred by state and community. It became a principle of his life: everything here was better than in our own coun-

try. Oppression and racism was better here than there. Any kind of suffering in Geneva could be cured by remembering earlier greater and cruder sufferings when he had been living in Iraq. If the police insulted him here, he would recall the kicks and blows and savagery of the police back home. If he was rebuffed and someone hurt his feelings here, he would recall the violence of people back home, their cruelty to each other: his body still bore the marks of blows and burns he had endured. He would never forget the hours of his father's fury when, on a day that was etched deep in his memory (he was five years old at the time), he beat him and swore at him for some unknown reason. He then took Adam's clothes off and threw him out onto the street to become the laughing stock of the boys of the neighborhood until his mother came and covered him up in her black cloak. To this day he is haunted by the nightmare of being naked and people laughing at him.

This then is Adam today, spending his time with Hajir as she tells him her memories of his ancestors. She was in possession of an amazing memory; it was both fertile and detailed. It was not her body alone that lived eternal and youthful, but also her spirit and her feelings. She was in tears at the idea of sacrifice, but was thrilled at the thought of triumph. It was as if

she still lived with them. She was childlike in her habit of always questioning the significance of things. Every hour she spent outside the flask she made some new discovery. She wanted him to explain everything to her: the cinema, television, the news, technology, revolution, women, history. Our friend did not hold back. He poured out from his brain everything he had learned from life, from books, from political experiences, and from exile. He observed that whenever she was absorbed in discovering things and listening to his tales, there was a remarkable fire in her eyes that was almost orgasmic. This made Adam come out with the following observation: she doesn't just feel or discover things, she makes love with them. If God had made man from clay mixed with pleasure, then she was purely pleasure.

The thing that most amazed Adam was that ever since he had met the woman of the flask there returned to him the picture of that imprisoned one who overwhelmed the imaginations of our young men. We succeeded in burying the memory of her after he fell in love first with Iman and then with Marilyn. In pleasures of the flesh I'm fickle, but the memory of that woman lived on with a force that made him live again the details of an incident that changed the course of both our lives and contributed to the severing of one of the bonds that linked our souls.

In the 1960s, when we were nine years old, Adam and I worked in a shop next to the headquarters of the Security Every afternoon when we came back from school we'd take foodstuffs and bottles of drink to sell to the political detainees. We didn't answer any of the questions the detainees put to us and we avoided eye contact because the guards and our families and the owner of the shop had told us that they were unbelieving criminals who wanted to kill people, ruin the state, and commit wicked deeds—even with their sisters and their mothers.

One day they sent us to the interrogation room to hand over what Commander Adil had ordered. We had never actually entered the interrogation room before. We'd only heard on many occasions screams of pain coming from there. When we pushed open the door and went inside the darkened room we encountered a smell of rotteness and human sweat. The commander was sitting on a wooden chair. Before him was a table on which lay instruments of torture: a stick, a plastic pipe, electric wire, a bottle, and handcuffs. There were also some papers and pens. As we leaned against the wall watching the commander take his food and drink, we avoided looking at the man who was hung up on the wall opposite. The noise of the commander guzzling his food was mingled with

the broken, stifled breathing coming from the detainee. Adam pinched me and whispered in my ear, "Don't look." But we couldn't resist the fateful temptation of working out where the drops of dripping blood were coming from. Slowly and cautiously we looked up. Adam's fist was clenched as if he was about to see a djinn. First we saw a pair of feet almost touching the ground. They were bare and the toes shook from time to time as if they were struggling to get some purchase on the ground. They were smooth and soft like the feet of young people. With anxious fear our eyes looked slowly up to his naked white bloodstained legs. At his knees was the rim of a black skirt, loose and torn. As for his thighs, their plump form was clearly noticeable behind the cloth. This was the first time we saw real thighs in this way. Their whiteness could be seen through the tattered skirt. Adam looked up further before I did. His shirt was white and adorned with different colored flowers and stained bright red. Two ample breasts bulged through holes in the shirt, and one nipple was hanging out. The arms were raised and the hair in the armpits could be seen. A delicate neck was twisted to one side. The head was leaning on the shoulder. We could not restrain ourselves. We raised our eyes to take in ... a woman's face: we hadn't reckoned on

seeing that. A young woman was suspended from her injured wrists by tight shackles to the bar of a window just below the ceiling. I shall never forget that agonized, sweet face, those full eyes bursting with hopeless questions. The image of her will endure for ever, embedded deep in our memories. Her face would reappear to us in the faces of all the women in our lives. As for her eyes, in spite of the anticipation of the horrible fate awaiting them, there was an incarnate brightness that was as pure as water trickling from a virginal spring from which no creature had ever drunk. A strange shudder passed through us as if we were being washed by the magic of what we saw. Never have I come across a face like this, eyes like those, until I met Hajir, over twenty years later.

We were traumatized for three years. We found excuses to go into the interrogation room in order to set eyes on the prisoner. We stood, entranced in front of her, trembling in awe, sunk in feelings of respect, devotion, love, and scandal, as if we were alone in the presence of a goddess of a primitive people who spoke of fertility and immortality. That evening we hid in a park behind that room. We looked at her hands stretched across the bars of the window, quite visible from the outside. Fearfully, we listened to the screams of agony that accompanied the curses of the torturers

and the word, confess. On the fourth evening we saw them shoving her, blindfolded, into a lorry with three other detainees. We heard the commander whisper confidentially to the shop's owner, "They'll be buried alive in a grave outside Baghdad. Like all the dangerous detainees who refuse to *confess*." From that day the pillars of confidence and faith in the family and in the national beliefs we had been taught began to crumble. Like a flood, doubt and uncertainty swept over us. Mercilessly they began to gnaw away whatever we had learned and might learn until the day we went into exile.

We fell ill, and Adam was bedridden for longer than I was. His life hung by a thread. We were both in the grip of a fever of grief and disillusion. We were lacerated by nightmares of a semi-naked woman prisoner crying out to us. Her moist, warm, glistening eyes appealed to us and established in us a lust that we had never experienced before.

From that day, our lives changed. We started to embark on different paths albeit with one objective: finding perfect and timeless beauty. Adam opted for death in order to find his promised paradise. He would liberate that prisoner from her chains and dress her in a diaphanous white dress so she would be a *houri* with whom he would soar over the gardens and the

rivers of wine, honey, and milk. By contrast, my distress and love for my prisoner was transformed into a strange sense of desire mingled with memories of her cries of bloody agony. I spent many nights lusting after her flesh as she hung suspended, by the wrists to the bars of the window. I did not want in my heart of hearts to savor her pain. I wanted to share with her her torture and to wrap the sight of her injuries and death in a cloak of desire and lust for life. For Adam, death became a means to meet his houri in his eternal paradise. He sought her in Iman of Mosul and in Marilyn of Switzerland. He sought her in the revolution, in the Organization, in debate, and in his computer. I preferred to keep her alive, embodied in my fantasies so I could enjoy pleasure with her in spite of the torturers and the walls of the interrogation room. In both imagination and in reality I used to plunge into the body of a woman and consume her with the fire of my lust, trying to get to her innermost core, searching for the immortal world of the prisoner.

Today, when I look into Adam's eyes as he is telling me about his houri, Hajir, I can still see that suspended prisoner on the brink of death as if I was looking at her constantly through his eyes. Indeed, for the first time I saw her as free and glorious in brilliant gardens and in rivers of light. Adam was transformed. From

the time he met the woman of the flask he became a man who lived for the stories she told about his forebears. In his blood she swam through ancient worlds with their lands and their tribes, the extinction or the endurance of their stock. I did not appreciate the force of the magical impact of these stories until I too had lived them to some extent. I realized later that everything concerning Hajir was supernatural. Her experiences with our ancestors turned her into the ideal woman. Endowed with heightened lusts and practiced in arousing hidden desires, she contained within herself several covert personalities. Distinctions were obliterated and existence achieved an immortal peak of refinement that approached the absolute acme of timeless beauty and sheer glory.

She overwhelmed Adam with the ease with which she made love with him. There was no need for foreplay as is the case with most women. She was always ready to make love, warm and damp. More than this, she always arrived at an orgasm at exactly the right moment. She never made him feel, not for an instant, that he had to hold back on his thrusts and passion, or to have to think of something else to give her time to reach her later climax, as happens with other women. He used to say of her: she is lust without beginning and without end.

Their relationship started with a purely physical exchange. He started by offering her his starved lust and a quiet flame of desire. She would give him a deathless responsiveness and the skill of five thousand years of the practice of love. Over time and with a succession of meetings when each of them chattered away, she with stories of his forebears, he with exhaustive commentaries on the developments of the age and dreams for the future. Then a fresh rapture would start to creep up on them and their bodies would start to tremble with a deep frenzy. His frenzy for returning to the past mingled with endless stories. Her frenzy was to open up to a future embodied in the promises of Adam's talk. He would soak up her tales of the past, his imagination would plunge far into the caverns of her talk, to the extent that he could feel his body and look at himself in the mirror seeking traces inherited from his forebears. She would seize upon his description of the computer age and developments in science and technology and the conquest of space. She would surrender to his dreams of justice, equality between men and women, the abolition of frontiers, and the union of people in one democratic state under the leadership of the United Nations—as he used to go on to me when he was drunk.

At this time I observed in Adam's face signs of radiant good health. It was he who would make fun of

me and call me "Old Man." He would come and visit me in my room during the daytime, waking me up, look at my drawings, and ask me about the goings-on of the night before. Seven years earlier we had decided, each of us, to go our separate ways. I lived a life of frivolity quite different from his. I would get up at two in the afternoon. I would start to paint, drink tea, and cook a meal while listening to the news or to music. In the evenings I would frequent the Black Cat Bar in Geneva, start with drinking glasses of red wine and then move on to bars and night clubs until dawn broke when I would go home with my night's prey. At my first drink I would stipulate that my "prey" would be a frolicsome filly whom I would tame on my bed. But as I drank on, I would gradually retreat from that stipulation until things reached the point—as the night was less generous in what it had to offer—when I would accept someone who was much older than myself. Indeed, sometimes I would close my eyes and put up with some skinny dried-up frump or some flabby tart. I would swallow my feelings of disgust with a certain amount of ease of conscience on the grounds that I was giving a woman satisfaction. The main thing was that I didn't have to go to bed alone. All I had in life was art and love. In each case the woman was the subject and the object. I was a fisherman and the

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night was my river. I never got tired or bored. My strength lay in a fisherman's patience. I would cast my line into the river of the night, time and time again, without flagging until dawn. On one occasion I landed a rusty old tin can. On another a frog. The branch of a tree. A dead fish. Every day, when I faced up to my canvas I would see an abundance of new color from which would form in the crevices of my memory the woman of the previous night. Every woman used to leave on my canvas some of her color, some of her line. If a woman had been hot and generous with glories in her bodily geography—such women were in a minority—the recollection of her would make my brush flow glowingly on the canvas, with satisfaction and tranquillity. It would paint like dancing waves, with light and water and sky, with fields and distant horizons. If the woman of the night was frigid, like a stove without any fuel—such women were in a majority—throwing herself at me as if she were a blow-up doll, with a mind but scared of any passion or recklessness, in the light of the following day, my brush would attack the canvas with angry nervous jabs so as to release onto the canvas violent, hot color and sharp, broken, jagged lines. It would paint onto some obscure form tempests and clouds, fire and bloodshot eyes, and black holes.

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On every meeting, Hajir would strip Adam of his sense of reality and cast him into the depths of some world he had forgotten. No opportunity was missed to remind him that history was everywhere. If she saw a historical film she would come out with tears pouring down her cheeks and tell him about some forebear of his who underwent circumstances similar to those in the film in an underground prison after Alexander the Great had stormed the city of Babylon, and so on and so forth. Or she would laugh helplessly in a way that would attract the attention of other customers in the cafe and tell him that the way he sat and the way he looked thoughtfully at his cup reminded her of one of his ancestors who was a profligate poet in the palace of the caliph.

One day Adam was out with her in the woods above Lake Geneva on the outskirts of the city of Montreux. The autumn sun was sinking behind the Alps that towered over the lake, leaving in its wake a copper glow that made the leafless trees look like the tombstones of some phantom graveyard. Hajir was wearing a light white dress that gave her an angelic appearance blending with the scene. She was walking in front of him like a headstrong foal, her head raised, swinging along, her hennaed locks falling onto her swaying backside. When he was telling me about

this, he was deeply moved and there were tears of confusion in his eyes: he was like a child talking about a horror film. He spluttered out words in expressing to me the feelings of astonishment that he underwent whenever he gazed at the form of Hajir sashaying along in front of him in those woods. It felt familiar and he sensed a fragrance as if he had been here before. He saw Hajir, confused and jellylike, as if she was in a picture, as if in a dream. He was overcome by feelings that went beyond reality and the normal. He noticed that she was murmuring in disbelief as she stared at the woods as if recollecting something. Then suddenly she uttered a cry of wonder. She stopped and froze. She turned her head up as if in supplication. He went up to her and looked into her eyes, searching for what she had discovered. Her astonishment was beyond description. He had never in his life seen eyes so wide that they turned beauty into ugliness. There was in them a scene as if he was looking through a pair of dew-stained windows: fertility and love mingled with destruction and anger. The woods in her eyes were packed with trees and warriors armed to the teeth with glittering swords and cries of pain and fear resounded to the sky. At one side of the scene, there was Hajir in the undergrowth of the woods at some distance from the warriors. She was

lying naked with one warrior who was like Adam. His body was striped with open wounds and he was practicing love and death on her body.

Adam was unaware how long this situation lasted. He imagined that he had been unconscious and had become lost inside her eyes and lived through events that lasted years and years. He swore to me that he had never lived any day like the one he lived that day. He mentioned that his arms reached out to her and carried her to an overgrown, secluded corner. He set her down on an old tree stump. His fingers and lips and inner self plunged inside the folds of sweet flesh, smelling of childhood and outrageousness. As this was happening his eyes were staring into the world of her eyes and his tongue was lapping up the tears of her memories. At the moment of a frenzied shudder, the silence of the woods was broken by an explosion, the sound of a death rattle and a huge cracking in the branches of the old tree. Then something fell from overhead onto their bare breasts. It was mobile and warm. When they recovered from the shock, their horror was tinged with what was left of lust and they saw a snake on the ground, covered with wounds. It was lashing about in the dry leaves and dust, struggling against death, its body injured by a shot from some unknown hunter.

At this point I must tell you clearly that over time and after listening to the succession of Adam's stories, and as I followed the changes in his behavior, I was gradually being drawn into the complexities of the matter. There grew in me a stubborn wish to share the houri with him. When my mind slept and my secret desires were released, the image of Hajir dressed like the prisoner started to invade my dreams, as a prostitute. I saw her in my imagination grafted onto the bodies of the women I used to pick up and play around with. In my mind I created a composite image that didn't much differ from what she actually looked like when I later met her. I penetrated with her the undergrowth of papyrus, among the channels of the marshes that I had never seen in my life. Only I knew her from the stories of Adam's father. We used to pass many nights together, listening to his stories about the tribes of the marshes, about their wars and their shaykhs, about their life among the waters, the cattle, the snakes, the birds, and the wild boars. Hajir spoke of the life of his father and betrayed his secrets. She said she had met him when he was a young man with still a light down on his face. After a failure in love with a young girl from his village, he pinched the flask from his father, left the marshes, and joined the first divisions of the army Hajir lived with him through all

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the stages of his life, most of which were spent fighting against tribal uprisings in Iraq: Kurdish revolts in the snows and rocky mountains, combating Bedu tribal raids from the deserts of Syria and the Najd, facing rebellions from the tribes of the south and the marshes, sometimes against each other, sometimes against the feudalists and shaykhs.

What surprised us above all was that she used to speak about wars and violence as if they were just like any other experience through which she had lived. It is true that she showed sadness when she spoke of the death of one of her lovers. But she was unaffected by the recall of the death of all those men, the result of wars, floods, or devastating plagues. We realized what caused this lack of grief when we understood that for five thousand years she lived wars and catastrophes in a way that no other people did, even if they lived for five thousand years. From her we learned that we were from a stock of people who owed their lineage not just to blood, but who had lived and built up flourishing civilizations and spread religious and peaceful humane ideas. She said that our forebears ridiculed the notion of their land being called "The Fertile Crescent." In their view it only deserved the designation, "The Fertile Sword": wars against people, wars against destructive floods, wars

against devastating plagues, wars against foreign invaders, in addition to the minor daily wars between individuals for the sake of the trifles of everyday life.

But today she disclosed to Adam the mystery of a strange event that took place on the day his father was on his deathbed. I remember that a man who distantly resembled Adam's dad paid us a visit. None of us knew him and even Adam's mother didn't recognize him. He said he was an old friend and he came from the same background as Adam's dad. He'd left the marshes at the same time and had taken part in all the same wars and had shared the same experiences. But we'd never heard of him before. We said there may be some explanation for Adam's dad not remembering him in his stories about the past. He was an old man, well into his seventies, with old scars on his brown, sun-scorched face and hands. He wore the traditional dress of the people of the south: an Arab cord and checkered headdress, a jacket over a coffee-colored tunic, and a collarless white shirt. A set of shiny black and sparkling green prayer beads hung from his hand. The clicking of the beads was delicious. When he approached the bed, Adam's father looked at him with a wan smile that presaged impending death. The old man leaned over and embraced him. They both wept silently. They then began to

whisper but the words could not be heard. But I realize full well today, after ten years, that the word *flask* was uttered, and then I heard Adam's father say, "Thank you," in a voice that throbbed with sincerity and dignity. Then the old man turned toward us and asked Adam's mother and sister to bring a glass of warm water, a basin with a jug of liquorice juice, two glasses, some cake, and some dates. After these things were brought and placed on the floor by the bed, he asked us to bring out Adam's father's chest full of old things. Then he asked us to leave the two of them alone together. We went out and closed the door. We asked no questions. We were mesmerized by his mysterious personality, something like Adam's dad, and by the strange love that brought them together, and by the authority with which he gave us orders. After a few minutes he left and closed the door of the room and sat with us in silence for the rest of the day. He remained stretched out on the sofa, sipping Basra tea, *numi*, with some yogurt. He let his eyes be distracted in counting his chaplet beads and mumbling the glorious names of Allah. He said his midday prayers and then stared at us all as if he was looking deep into our souls and observing our troubled thoughts. He was invading our low spirits. At this moment we felt intoxicated currents coursing through

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us. We all looked at each other. We slid to the floor as if we were beginning to turn into liquid, and the walls were shifting like ice and giving way to a wide world without horizons, without end. We were wandering on the surface of this watery reality, while the old man levitated and then disintegrated into the heights. Countless particles formed over our heads, a fearful heaven, clouds and planets. In each part of our creation the eyes of the old man were gazing at us. We were still dissolving and parts of us were scattered among the sea of our existence. We saw ourselves in each drop of water. We listened to the click of the old man's prayer beads. They became louder and louder until they represented existence itself exclusively. When we emerged from this waking dream we found that the old man had disappeared and all that was left was the darkness of the night. We all headed for the room. When we opened the door we were assailed by a powerful fragrance of sex, incense, liquorice, and dates. The father's eyes were shut; he was dressed in a white garment and lying on his bed that he had rearranged. We saw him open his eyes as if he was in the middle of a happy dream. He gave us a smile full of gratitude and affection. His whole frame quivered with life and warmth like a river that was throwing its mud and jetsam into the sea and was recovering the purity

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of its normal color. A flagon of liquorice juice and two tankards with the remains of the juice in them and a devoured cake and some dates. Who had lit the incense? Or straightened the bedding and helped the father to wash himself in the basin? And the old man, who was he and how did he go away after he had put us all in a trance?

None of these questions found an answer until ten years later. Here in Geneva we met Hajir. At this time I remembered the father's story about the miracles of Imam 'Ali and his reply to any who asked him. He said he would not tire of helping the prophet Jonah when he was swallowed by the whale, or Joseph when he was thrown into the well, or Mary when she was giving birth to Jesus. Indeed, he had gone to the help of his mother before she was married and gave birth to him. He rescued her from the claws of a lion. This was because he remained immortal. It happened many times when the father was sick. He would wake up in a sweat from a dream and tell the family that he was a healer because the Imam had paid him a visit a little beforehand. He said that he had a radiant brown face, with his head wrapped in a black headdress, wearing a white cloak, riding a white steed. He was armed with the sword, Zulfiqar. He addressed him in ringing tones, "My son, for the sake of your two sons,

I will help you as a healer." And he became a healer. But that night Adam's father died without saying another word. He opened and closed his eyes from time to time as if he was following a happy dream. We all took our turn in giving him a kiss and tried to fathom the secret of the lines of joy that could be traced on his features as if he was setting off on one of his old campaigns.

FOUR

Ancestors and masters of the Flask

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As you see, I was beginning to see Adam as some ancient citadel from which the winds of time had stripped its beauty and grandeur, but was now restored to a former glory by the woman of the flask. Her magic and artful skill had infused a vigor into him and displayed to the world all his secrets.

One cold spring evening Adam came to see me in my room. We were sitting in a dim light half listening to some songs from the Atlas Mountains on the radio. We were smoking some pot from Morocco and sipping white wine. Here was Adam, back with me after seven years more or less of a break in our relationship. We were meeting every now and then, enjoying silence together as well as chatting together. I was the only one to talk about the latest news from Iraq and the developments of the war. I told him about the publications of the factions and I made him listen to the latest scurrilous jokes. Then I spoke to him about my nocturnal adventures and about my paintings. He was exposed to this torrent of talk and all he did was nod and mumble something. He then took out a pen and a piece of paper and explained to me the latest things he had learned about using the computer and

the wide and growing impact it was having. Nothing had changed in Adam except for the way he put things. He was still that prophet who fought against his feelings about impending catastrophe, wishing to escape to a paradise he had created in his own imagination. He really believed in it and toiled night and day to assume its gentle mantle. But the computer was an alternative paradise. It was the means for changing and rescuing the world. I noticed that whenever the horrors of war were particularly awful and news of successive disasters came one after another, he spent more and more time with his computer and stayed more and more at home. When I went to call on him I would see him perplexed with a worried look on his face. I realized that nightmares had been disturbing his sleep. I continued to be the opposite. As disasters piled up I would throw myself into drink and drugs in search of release, rest, and oblivion in other people and the embraces of women. In their bodies I would find refuge and solace.

He was now with me in my room. From time to time we would break the silence with some observation, without any enthusiasm and just out of politeness. Actually we were both utterly preoccupied with one idea—the woman of the flask. At the very moment I made up my mind to express my wish to raise the

subject, Adam gave me a particular look whose meaning I couldn't work out, a look that reminded me of that day, after time had brought us to the city of Geneva seven years earlier. We had obtained our residence papers. One day we were strolling over the bridge that looks down on the joining of the rivers Rhone and Arve. Adam tossed a stone at the line marking the meeting point of the two rivers. "Look at that, my friend," he said. "Look at these two rivers, how the Arve loses its color as it pours into the Rhone. I don't believe either of us would blend into the other and lose himself. Then let us go our separate ways, old friend. In these refugee papers and in the streets of this city each one of us will make his own way."

But I can see us in my room, with Adam's hand going into his black bag. He put the flask against his breast. His fingers began to undo the top. On his face was the look of an old midwife bringing out a newborn babe from the womb. Before lifting up the top he raised his face to me. It seemed to me that it was totally familiar; it was as if I was looking at my own face in the mirror. The more I looked the more I seemed like him. It is true that I shared with him all the details of his life but I was always different from him. Even our shared experiences had different effects on each

of us. In the years we were at school, what we learned was mixed with fear, threats, and violent beatings. One teacher, Abbas, taught religion and history. He used to choose a new pupil to stand in front of us to be the canvas on which he explained the course of military engagements. One trembling hand would come down onto the pupil's head to indicate the army of the infidel, with the other hand on the thigh to indicate the army of the Muslims. They would meet below at the pit of the stomach in the decisive battle. The teacher used to order pupils who were in the wrong to hit each other hard. Any who hesitated would receive a more ferocious punishment from him. The result was that Adam was lenient and I was violent. Many times I had to intervene to rescue Adam from the claws of a gang of louts. I was also a lout: whenever I didn't find anyone attacking me I would pick on some feeble pupil and beat him up. I learned at an early age that you had two options: either to be yielding, weak, and an object of contempt, or to be a lout, tough and quarrelsome.

He took off the top, skillfully and with emotion. A light vapor came out of the flask with an aroma—a mixture of oriental perfume and human sweat. In a few moments the vapor took on the form of a strange being. A female voice whispered, sounding like an in-

sect's rustle, a child's muttering as he dozed, the hiss of a viper, and a young girl's sigh.

Never before had I had an experience that was so clear and detailed. Across the room that was pervaded by the smoke of cigarettes and Moroccan pot as well as breath sodden by Swiss wine and the scent of spices from the east, Hajir appeared as a vision of fabulous beauty. For a long time I had constructed the image of her from my memory of the female prisoner who had never ceased to visit me during feverish nights. I now realized that the secret of the fear of the true believers was hidden not just in hellfire, but in their distress at being deprived forever of the lusciousness of those houris. If I were to lie with one of them I would never leave her. I could lay aside all the other delights of paradise, the rivers of honey and wine and milk, the splendid palaces, and wonderful banquets. I would bury myself deep inside my houri and pass an eternity in one unending orgasm.

She gave me a glance and a bashfulness appeared on her features. Like the lava of a volcano, the locks of her hennaed hair cascaded down to her breasts. She fluttered her eyebrows and glided her hand over her navel. She tilted her head with the nature of a woman so familiar with the glory of her beauty that she forgot all about it.

She looked toward Adam. He pressed his lips forward and silently nodded his head. She obeyed him at once. He took from his black suitcase a diaphanous gown. She put it on and stood proudly a commanding presence. Her gown was white and spotted and reflected the lights of cars and of the cinema across the road. She seemed like a Babylonian goddess who had been dumped by history into an age of flashing lights, smoke, and crowded cities.

He gestured to her and she sat down with us on a cushion. She folded her legs beneath her in the manner of Arab j princesses, and leaned her back against the window. Her hair gleamed red, green, and silver. He handed her a joint and a glass, whispering to her, "Speak."

She sipped the wine and breathed out deeply a few times. She raised her eyelashes and her glistening eyes took over the whole room. With her fingers she traced a strange picture in the smoke as it ascended. Her tongue moved between her lips like a conductor facing an orchestra of words in her throat. Her voice seemed a harmonious mixture of conflicting tunes chanted—reverence, licentiousness, the palaces of princes, and shepherds' humble homes. She

started to speak, and spoke on all through the

night. The lights and noises in the street faded away. A breeze came into the room sweet with the scents of dawn and moistened by the waters of Lake Geneva nearby.

I did not notice how things proceeded. It was as if I was a drowning man who had spent his life struggling for breath and life and who then suddenly found himself washed up on the shore of some island. In similar manner I found myself alone in the room, floating onto Hajir's body. Where had Adam disappeared to? I don't know. She was lying there naked and I was lying alongside her, absorbed in studying the contours on the canvas of her body. With calm and caution my thumb gently touched her body, starting with the area by her forehead, her eyebrows, her eyes, her nose, her lips, her chin; then down to her neck and shoulders. I ended by tracing her arms and fingers and then moved up to her breasts. I lingered there until the nipples became erect. As a final touch I moved my lips and gave her some color, making her navel stand out and kissed her pubic area, and so on, down her thighs as far as her toes.

She had a body that exactly fit with what I had dreamed of finding in any woman. Her skin was neither brown nor fair. It rather had the color of freshly baked bread. She was not so slim as to suggest emaciation or poverty. Nor was she so plump as to sug-

gest gluttony or excess. She was somewhere in between. It was as if whoever had created her had poured into her whatever there was from the most beautiful of bodies of creation: tall and slender. Her breasts were the size of large pomegranates, graced with aroused nipples that were tanned and moist. Her slender waist and her rump were richly plump like a newly sliced pear. When I fondled her buttocks they quivered like the surface of a lake that has been kissed by a gentle breeze.

Her beauty brought back to my mind Adam's account of his first meeting with her all those weeks earlier. He said that one question came to his mind: where was the divine element hidden in mankind? He spent his life looking for some latent divine excellence in the deep hearts of mankind. He would try to look beyond the lines etched on their faces, the marks of tragedy, the lines of ugliness, oppression, pride, humility. He looked beyond illusions of superiority or inferiority. He would see through physical superficialities and would seek deep inside them for what was immortal, for the divine spark, for that boundless soul round which was built the human frame with its built-in mortality and elements of frailty and decay. He tried to banish his own life from existence, to erase his own fears of death. He would envisage the eternal spirit as

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a mannequin hiding from time to time behind the veil of death to make off with an old body and take over a new body that would then be displayed for life's celebration for a fixed number of years. The spirit would then disappear again behind the veil of the grave and await another body.

Here then I was looking at the mannequin he had told me about, but a characteristic of the woman of the flask was that she did not change her physical clothes but put on clothes anew each time she emerged from the flask. Her spirit was immortal, as was her body too. She had been renewing it and clothing it for thousands of years. When she disappeared into the flask she rested her spirit and cleansed her body with the sap of youth and permanence. Each time she returned to the flask she would die, only to be reborn every time she emerged again. Death was not the end for her, nor was birth a new beginning. They were nothing more than two stations in her cycle of timeless way of life. She annihilated the old and revived the new, and made the spirit in total harmony with the body.

I threw myself on top of her. I kissed her eyes and caressed her breasts, sucking the milk of a lover that was sweeter than the milk of a mother. There was a mixture of the fragrance of tenderness and depravity. I allowed my fingers to penetrate a moist and warm

mine. With a growing fire of wantonness, the image of her stories grew and grew in my imagination. She would chew my lips and grope at my flesh. My senses gradually slid up into a labyrinthine spiral. Her wild hisses became a synthesis of the history of thousands of years, thousands of nations and individuals, all transformed into moments of timeless pleasure. With the shaking of our two bodies I felt my own body increase in weight, drawn by an unseen force to the depths of an abyss of a secret existence. It was as if I was melting into a liquid that was being swept into unlimited space the center of which was the body of the woman of the flask. I glided down into a maze that was like the unconsciousness of one falling into a ravine. It was like a dream that summed up thousands of years of events and images in a few dozen seconds. It was like the life of a microbe that lives no more than a few moments but yet will seem for the microbe richer and longer than the life of a human being. Thus I lived the life of one of my own ancestors for a time, each year of which was equal to a moment of sighing and moaning on the part of Hajir.

* * *

I was a child lying at the side of my sister, among filthy clothes in a broken-down wooden cart that staggered in harmony with the swaying of the buttocks of

the mule that was pulling us. A few paces ahead of us, wolf-like dogs were sniffing the soil of the rough tracks, looking for the scent of people who had run away. From time to time, these dogs picked up something that could not be seen from the ruts. The dogs then fought violently among each other as if they were tearing that something apart with their teeth.

I was a child when elementary questions began to emerge, like drops of water falling onto my head: Who are we? Who are those people running away? Why have we been pursuing them with Mother and Father for all these years?

It was possible to extract fragments of answers from my mother as she ruffled through my hair looking for the odd flea on my head. "Our glorious emperor and the father of our people, the one who brings fertility to our mother goddess, has ordered your father to pursue these fugitives and find out more about them. Your father has sworn before our king, our god, and our priests that he will be deprived of the blessings of parenthood if he does not complete his task of pursuing those fugitives until their inevitable capture."

Some nights, exile forced us to stay overnight at a village abandoned by its people because of floods and plague, or in a city that had been destroyed by

raiding tribes. In order that our father might struggle against the place and banish fear from our hearts and after he had carried out all the prayers of the night, he used to gather us around him and talk to us about the fugitives whose numbers, nature, or religion nobody knew. As for their leader, he was a man no one could describe—that's what Father said, his voice interrupted by a barely noticed shudder. Their leader was a formidable giant feared by all his sons and followers. Nobody was such a giant as he was, nobody so perfect except the father of our people and the glorious emperor and the one who brings fertility to our goddess. He loves weaponry and women. Among his sons he left behind a number greater than those who were victims of war. He never saw a virgin without being the first to impregnate her. He never entered a battlefield without his sword being the first to shed blood. His gigantic size knocked against the tops of the loftiest trees. His skin was as brown as the soil. His eyes were like two bottomless wells. And his voice reached you from your innermost depths.

Meanwhile my body was in a state of nerves. I looked hard into the faces of my mother and my sister, searching for answers to questions that I was unable to form or to articulate. I held back my hot tears while my hand held onto a stick and was drawing in the mud a strange face that resembled that described

by my father. In the light of the flickering fire that engraved face was clothed in a fiery color and its features assumed an appearance as if it had been invaded by life itself.

And so over the years and with a succession of Father's stories, and with the continued panting from our dogs as they pursued the fugitives and other invisible matters, the picture of the leader of the fugitives slowly, secretly grew in my imagination.

It's true I was like my family. I prayed in humility and my heart was full of alarms before my idol of our king and our goddess. But the image of the leader of the fugitives started to occupy a growing corner in the depths of my mind. Many was the time I felt shame and dread as I looked at the face of the idol of our king, and I saw his features gradually change into the features of the leader of the fugitives.

One day I was playing with my sister some distance away from our parents. We were on the bank of the Tigris, taking scoops of red clay and fashioning it into human and animal forms. Then suddenly we found ourselves unintentionally absorbed in making the statue of a human as long as an arm. He resembled a great man. When we saw it we cried out in astonishment. Yes, it was him, yes, him.

It was the leader of the fugitives.

From that day my sister and I invented excuses to get away from the control of our parents. We took out our image of the leader of the fugitives and prayed in front of it, in awe, intoning chants declaring our total submission to him and our faith in him as our savior from the problems of the world. We then made an image of our mother goddess to complete our prayers, and chanted our hymns of fertility and eternity.

Our cart continued to take us through the lands over the years. It took us to the young men, it took our parents to the older generation. Dogs died, leaving their progeny to continue to sniff the tracks and squabble to get a bite of things unseen. Mules grew old and died leaving behind other mules who unflaggingly went after dogs as they sniffed the tracks. Within a year my father repeated his promise that the forthcoming year would see the end of our quest. We would go back to the capital, to the bosom of our people, so we could tell them what had happened during our long exile. There we would build a warm house from the gifts of the emperor, adorned with a snake's egg and a ram's head to ward off evil.

In the afternoon of one scorching day, Father insisted on continuing the trek, refusing to take a rest in the shade of a citrus orchard that overlooked the river. Before sunset we could see the ruins of a city. It

seemed suddenly to burst forth from among the arid hills. There were the remains of decayed palaces that time had stripped bare of its walls, decorations, and people. All that survived were some scattered columns, stones, and statues of winged bulls with human heads, and foul spirits whispering through the wind their stories of vanished tribes.

Our cart stopped by the huge statue of a lion making love to a woman. Mother said that it was all that was left of a city where our forebears had lived. The goddess had destroyed it after it had been overpowered by floods, plagues, and the armies of its enemies. For they had been wanton and dissolute, abusing the sanctuary of the goddess and the sanctity of their fathers. Our father left us and disappeared among the ruins after whispering to Mother some vague words that seemed to distress her. When these ruins became bathed in the light of dusk Father reappeared among the ruins accompanied by an old man who resembled him. Both were followed by a sweet girl in whom there were many of the features of my sister. She was carrying a heavy basket on her back.

Thus was the matter settled in a sudden way that we had not counted on. That evening rites of marriage were concluded, marrying me off to the old man's daughter. The images of our queen and our goddess

protected us. Amid tears of farewell and appealing sobs, my sister went off with the old man to where their cart awaited them at the far corner of the ruins. She was married to his son who resembled me and who lived a nomadic life with his parents and sister looking for the everlasting fugitives.

I spent my wedding night swimming in a pool of delight, albeit with moments of sadness, in the bosom of my wife and mindful of the separation from my sister. When a magical glow began to rise above the eastern banks of the Tigris, and the golden red sun poured its light onto the waters, the river mirrored a temple of palm trees, as if they were the bodies of drowned men who were swimming up from the depths. My father called me and took me to one side on the bank. Straightaway he told me in a hoarse voice that I would henceforth be a man, responsible for maintaining the continuation of our stock, and that consequently I had the right to bear the burden of the task that had been imposed on him. He said that time had tired him, and his age no longer allowed him to complete his journey. All that was left to him was to stay with Mother on the banks of the river, looked over by the spirits of their ancestors until their last day. He pointed to the south and said that our capital lay thereabouts. It was my duty to travel there with my wife to beg for-

givenness from the father-king and the goddess-mother. We would apologize for our fathers who were unable to complete their task. Age had enfeebled them before they had overtaken the fugitives. After he gripped my shoulder firmly he took a flask from his pocket. He hung it around my neck saying he had inherited it from his ancestors and he was handing it down to me as I would in my turn hand it down to my sons. He said it was a secret that I would discover for myself when I opened it when I was alone. He then kissed me and took me to the cart that was ready for us. I said farewell to him and to Mother. I set off with my wife at my side and the dogs and mules took us along the river bank to the south.

In the late afternoon we entered the capital by the huge gateway that was cluttered with horse-drawn carts belonging to soldiers and merchants, caravans of camels and farmers' donkeys. As we approached the city center it became more and more crowded with the street cries of traders competing with the auctioneering of cattle merchants, the scoffings of magicians and jesters with their monkeys and snakes, and young girls, faces uncovered and breasts bared.

I stopped the cart and asked my wife to wait. I got out and followed my dogs as they wove a way with some difficulty through the throng. I was able to pick

out a word here, an expression there. I would pause and listen to the broken bits of conversation coming from women swathed in black. It seemed to me that what I heard was vague, something between fantasy and reality. I did not wish to believe what I heard. I said to myself that I had probably misunderstood. I was bold enough to ask someone selling weapons and aphrodisiacs that, he claimed, he had concocted himself from the skulls of his foes. From him I learned a truth that was as clear and as decisive as one of his swords: "The leader of the fugitives has managed to take over power once again with his people. He has proclaimed himself emperor and father of his people. He is the stallion for our goddess-mother. The previous emperor has gone into hiding with his people and has become the leader of the fugitives."

I stood transfixed, struggling to absorb this new information that Father had not anticipated. My feelings were torn between joy and despair, between doubt and certainty, between disappointment for Father's sake and happiness for my own. Here, my secret god had become emperor and father for everyone. Now my hopes would be realized for settling down in a place where my people had lived and which would be ruled by the object of my devotion. May the sin of my forbears be expunged forever. I would no longer be a

nomad to be cast out by cities and led by dogs and fettered by inherited undertakings.

Without realizing how, I was being drawn along by the force of the dogs that did not stop running and getting into the middle of the jostling crowds. I suddenly found myself in front of a large courtyard that was hemmed by soldiers. In the middle was a group of priests and courtiers who surrounded a splendid throne on which the new emperor was sitting.

Without a moment's thought the dogs charged ahead to the emperor and his attendants. But the soldiers were faster and fiercer and sprang on them and sliced at them with their swords and lances. Then they pounced on me, kicking and beating me until I lost consciousness.

When I came round the guard was calling at me through a small hole. He handed me a bowl of soup and told me to keep quiet until there was an order from the emperor. He pointed to the small hole in the ground of the cell that I was able to use for the necessities.

I didn't know whether it was night or day when I opened up the flask in the darkness of that cell. I had totally forgotten about it until I became aware of it hanging round my neck and concealed beneath the

tatters of clothes that had been slashed by the soldiers like a tree that has been stripped of its leaves by locusts. But when I took this engaging goddess I noticed the full moon peeping through the small window at the top of the wall. I saw her appearing before me with all her charm and magic and felt as if my soul was moving from the wildness and loneliness of the grave to the warmth and fruitfulness of the womb. Far from the eyes of the guard, our spirits soared and mingled with the din of insects and in the light of the full moon as it shone through the bars of the window. I ranged through a time without kings or fathers or dogs or fugitives.

One night I lay with my goddess near a ditch, and heard the sound of whinnying and braying, rather like birds in their nests. I bent over the ditch and shouted, "Who's there?"

After a moment of silence I heard someone down below shouting, "I hear you. Who are you?"

"I'm a prisoner," I replied at once.

"I . . . I'm also ... I too am . . ."

It was an answer from scores of different voices, maybe hundreds. Voices of men who were scattered underground, all declaring that, like me, they were prisoners.

Through these underground drains and ditches the truth became clear. My cell was surrounded by a frightful number of underground cells full of men cooped up like me, awaiting an unknown fate. In these dark pits redolent of death and decay we discovered a shared identity: we were prisoners of an emperor whom we revered and worshiped when he was the leader of the fugitives. We were the offspring of parents who had passed their days chasing after mindless dogs. Each of us had married the sister of another. We had mothers who I mourned the loss of their husbands among the ruins of their ancestors.

I don't know how much time I spent before the guard opened the door and dragged me as if I was a piece of meat and threw me down in front of the emperor. After pardoning me for the crime of having, with my family, pursued him I when he was the leader of the fugitives, the priests baptized me with the waters of fertility flowing from the statue of our goddess mother. In order to atone for all the sins and crimes of my forbears, they ordered me to catch up with the fugitives and find out what their news was. I pledged before our queen and goddess that I would be deprived of the blessing of their fertility and be childless unless I fulfilled my task by pursuing the fugitives to their ineluctable end.

At dawn they brought to me my wife whose belly had swollen while I had been imprisoned. They put us in a cart that was drawn by mules and escorted by dogs. They said, "Go forth and may our queen and goddess protect you and may your prayers to them bless you." Outside the gateway to the capital the parched ground was full of great numbers of carts that were drawn by mules and escorted by dogs that raced along in the direction of an unknown horizon. But I embarked on no track; instead I headed in my cart for the river. On the shore I released the mules and let them go by themselves in pursuit of dogs that did not refrain from scrapping over something that was out of sight. Our cart glided over the water. My wife dozed on my arm, and under my arm dwelt my flask, against the beatings of my heart. The full moon of the night was glinting among the stars, voyaging with us from one heaven to another. The Tigris was down there in its hollow offering its fecundity to the lands and to generations of people around its banks as it had done from the beginning of time. Their names and faces changed, as did their languages and their beliefs, but their spirits passed eternally from one people to another in those rivers and that mud and those breezes. The cry of women rose into space as they mourned the absence of the expected Messi-

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ah. They spread over the water candles on plates that floated toward the shores and inlets of the everlasting river.

* * *

I woke up to find that the wailing was the wail of an ambulance racing through the streets. I found myself in my room, in bed alone. The ambulance wail reached me through the window breaking the silence of the city that was sleeping deeply the sleep of an early Sunday morning. There was no sign of Hajir except for a whiff of musk, all that was left of the scents of a night of burning passion.

FIVE

Pirate of the Flask

You may agree with me that Adam was sliding more and more into the labyrinthine world of Hajir. Without any restraint he followed his instincts with her. In every word she uttered there was gathered all the allure and coquetry of the women of the ages she had lived through. Without disclosing to me his real intention, he asked me to find some appropriate function where he would be able to dance with her as well as with Marilyn. He promised to pay for my entrance fee.

It was a Saturday evening in spring. After dinner at his place with his wife, Adam and I got through half a bottle of vodka. Marilyn carried the rest of the bottle in her handbag. We then prepared a joint of pot to smoke at the party. Marilyn didn't care much for either booze or pot. But she was happy with us with a child-like delight. She told me that she hadn't been dancing for ages. For a long time I had secretly envied Adam and his wife in spite of my absolute resolve never to get married. What attracted me most about her were her humane qualities that forced men like me to deal with her politely and to be happy to ask for her help,

even when there was no need.

When we reached the Palladium dance hall, it was about ten at night. The place was full of youngsters and modern jazz. As soon as we sat down Adam whispered in my ear, "I've got a surprise, Come here . . ."

I was not aware of what he wanted. He insisted I find some secluded quiet spot nearby. Only then did I notice that he had brought a bag. From a door opposite the main entrance we went up the stairs of an empty block to the third floor. There he took the flask out of the bag and smiled that diabolical smile he employed to perfection whenever he was drunk. He released his houri and dressed her in a gown and shoes. Then he wrapped a scarf around her head. Black tassels hung down over her forehead. She looked like some sun-tanned princess.

We introduced Hajir to Marilyn, saying she was one of my girlfriends. I wanted to be with her as she shimmered around with her lofty body and her deliberate regal steps that caused every head to turn. I wondered what was going inside the minds of Marilyn and Hajir. Was it Hajir who persuaded him to introduce her to his wife, or did he want to bring her into the details of his social world in which she had not previously shown any interest. Why did she have to get to know

Marilyn? Never in all her tales did she mention any wish that some day she might meet the wife of one of her lovers. Was this some indication of a wish to get away from a way of life she was used to from earliest times? Perhaps this was the first step on a road that had unforeseen consequences. Wasn't it logical that her life would become more complex if she were to live the details of our daily lives? She would come down from her timeless elevated existence to the minutiae of a complex life with its jealousies and sacrifices, its competitiveness, its hypocrisies, its prevarications, and its consumerism. There is a hidden danger here, because she could turn into a woman of this world, interested in the mundane, practicing the arts of existence. If only she knew how our lives contain so much of fine slogans and principles, lofty dreams, how all this is nothing but flashy garments that would be tailored with the ordinary details of everyday life, with its hidden feelings and human impulses. If only she knew that in the recipe of love and loyalty the taste is improved whenever a spoonful of jealousy, hatred, and possessiveness is added. In the bitterest hatreds there is the scent of love, and in the most pacific principles there is the scent of war. And in the holiest and purest of feelings there is the whiff of madness and greed.

The music that arose from all corners intensified

the effect of the vodka and the pot. The hall spun round and the walls opened up onto boundless space. Everyone was dancing on a planet that was circling in space. I was struck by a delicious panic of falling through a void.

I saw Hajir, overcome by the alcohol and the pot. She was moving toward the dance floor. She was looking around, sometimes in my direction, some times toward Adam and Marilyn. She was a queen keeping an eye on her attendants. Unthinkingly, I was apprehensive about going near her. I don't know how to explain this. It was as if, for some obscure reason, I was embarrassed by Marilyn. I stood, a prey to a guilty conscience. Perhaps my relationship to Hajir brought me closer to Marilyn. I'm not sure.

I was standing at a slightly raised corner of the room. This allowed me to look down on the dancers. I could hear the sound of the amplifier loud and clear. Marilyn's green eyes were wide open, sparkling with a rare love declaring the happiness she was offering her husband that meant he need look at no other woman. But he was like me. There was in his soul and body a rich well of desire sufficient to water the largest oases and spill over to others. In the past Adam's well of desire poured from the oasis of his wife and became lost in the deserts of questions and mys-

teries. But the woman of the flask had come and gathered up his reserves into her channels and created a river that watered cities and tribes and meandered down to sea after sea.

Hajir began to glide at serpent's pace in time to the African music as it became louder and louder. Gradually her limbs loosened and she seemed to spread herself into the music and the colored lights. It was as if she was imitating the movements of the fountain in Lake Geneva. The water poured out slowly, not very high, and then grew, rose and spouted up violently dozens of meters above the lake, a symbol of birth and growth.

Adam's eyes were on Hajir as he danced with Marilyn whose pregnancy was just beginning to show in spite of her flowing dress. She was leaning, gently anxious about the three-month-old fetus in her womb. She danced with economy of effort but with a graceful vigor—like gentle melodic waves. Can you believe that people were to say that she had become pregnant not through him, but thanks to this woman I was dancing with? Because of her immortal fecundity she had given Adam utter confidence and had released those desires that had been frozen in his spirit. She made those fertile seeds flow with the intoxication of genuine desire for which he had been waiting all his

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life. Even I had recently been feeling broody. I had all my life detested the paternal role. But in my day-dreams I was inclining to a fancy that I either lusted after or sought refuge from—the idea of offering my seed to a sperm bank so that I could have children from an infinite number of women. I continued to have this dream for a number of years, until I was a white-haired elderly gentleman! I would see before me dozens of sons getting in touch with me to declare to me that I was their biological father. I would be happy to have planted my spirit in people who would succeed me and perpetuate my seed. I would enjoy their connection with me and I would feel that I was their father without being obliged one day to fulfill the role of provider. Is there not then an instinct for paternity that is an expression of a desire of the body to be everlasting and undying—like the soul? Are not the immortals unfertile? Only our ephemeral bodies contain fertility inside them because with fertility they combat death. Perhaps the body endures for years, anxious to be immortal like the soul. What is death but an attempt by the body to leave some place for a higher body, one that is more celestial and closer to the soul? Does this mean that this ordinary existence of ours is a perpetual quest to attain a loftier, nobler reality? Is mankind simply a higher stage in this sensual life be-

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cause we are the only ones who can feel and think, can enjoy a world of imagination and so approach that higher insensate reality? Does biological sophistication and our procreativity for generation after generation lead us on until our bodies completely attain that absolute higher reality? At that moment we become immortal, reproducing ourselves with neither birth nor death.

I noticed that each one of the four of us was glancing at the others. I was looking at Marilyn, Hajir, and Adam, how their shapes were transformed into jelly-like formations through the light, the smoke, and the music. With our movements we were plunging into a crazy but affectionate discourse, full of sorrow, blame, and a struggle with desire. Every movement of each of us was a response to the movement of one of the others. Hajir was in the middle of the hall under a white light that gave her a violet halo. Her eyes were cast down, her arms were raised, and she began to sway with serpentine movements that made her breasts and thighs seem to try to break free of her transparent dress. In every movement she seemed to rise up from the floor, her eyes sparkling with a fire that seemed to overcome the whole room. It was as if she was in a dream, with the call to prayer beginning to reverberate through the Senegalese African

rhythms: *Allahu akbar... Allahu akbar... hay....* The call to prayer in the pattern of the first muezzin, Bilal the Abyssinian, emerged through the beat of the drum and the melody of the electronic guitar, beseeching the Almighty to come to the aid of mankind in his eternal dilemmas. Before me there began to appear an extraordinary sight: it was as if we were in a forest among people of some remote age, and we were practicing the rites of our religion in the presence of the goddess of light and music. My body seemed to be disintegrating and I was losing my balance. It seemed to be melting and merging with the bodies of the other people. We were gradually being changed into cells that were scattered throughout the forest. Like birds we were swooping around Hajir and then landing on her body, tearing at her flesh, swimming in her blood, dissolving into a solution of water and light. Hajir became a lake, and we were three rivers pouring into her, and the rest of the dancers were springs that poured their waters into us.

I was suddenly dragged out of my reverie by the voice of Adam. In strangled tones he was shouting, "Hajir, ... I can't see Hajir."

We looked for her everywhere without seeing her. I then believed my own fears. She was far away, in revolt against her nature. Her jealousy must have

pushed her to this act. We thought she had, as people like her did, drifted off into the city. We arranged for a taxi to take Marilyn home and set off to look for Hajir. I followed Adam as he wandered around in the darkness in the middle of the night among the alleyways and on the banks of the Rhone. Adam was like a rabid dog with its tongue hanging out and jumping all over the place, staring into dark corners and into women's faces in search of his houri. The skies were heavy with black clouds chased by a moist wind that created a drizzle. He leaned against a railing. His eyes gazed down into the depths of the waters of lake perhaps taking her down south to its junction with the sea. He was muttering to himself, and seemed to be complaining to the river. His body language suggested that in this hour of pain he was going through the sensation of taking some unusual poison. All his feelings were drawn out to pick up any sign. He collapsed into a seat, worn out by exhaustion, cold, and anxiety. He slumped down, his head in his hands, and sobbed silently. The street was lit up by the lamps outside the Hilton hotel. There was the din of the wind and a stifled noise coming from some unseen night spot.

When I got close to Adam I could just work out what he was mumbling. Maybe I was imagining hearing him muttering a lot of historic words, the names of

ancient peoples, wars and kings. He even repeated the names I had learned in the lives I had lived with the woman of the flask. In his collapse he seemed like a neglected statue. I found myself going up to him and sitting down beside him. He was sweating profusely from a sense of loss, his vulnerability, and his embarrassment. I stretched out my hand and ruffled his hair and patted him on the shoulder. Did I really sympathize with him and want to help him, or was I really feeling sorry for myself and wanting to rescue her? Time passed and torpor spread through our limbs. The din became clearer and clearer. At that moment the most sensitive radar system would only have been able to pick up an amazing mixture of disparate noises coming from windows, doorways, roofs, and odd lairs: conversations, jokes, curses, laughter, smacks, singing, broken bottles, fancy cars, and the noise of insects. All these noises were mixed up and became soaked up in the sound of the surging waves of the lake, forming just one confused sound. But Adam got up as if summoned by some unheard appeal. He went down to the right where a small peninsula jutted into the lake—the Weeper's Pool. He reached two giant trees that rose up on the bank. For a long time they seemed from a distance like two lovers passing their time contemplating the waters. We

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found her there. There was no sense of surprise in her face, nor in his. It was as if they had made an arrangement to meet. She stood there in her spotted dress under the canopy of the two trees, apparently rooted to the spot for some time. Her eyes were on the dark horizon and her bosom was savoring the breeze fragrant with the scents of creatures that had been in the depths of the lake over the course of history. How many tribes had drunk and washed themselves in these waters? How much blood shed in wars had flowed into them? *How* many desperate souls had ended their lives there? And how many lovers' sweet nothings had been uttered to the rhythm of its waves? The lake will continue to offer its pure, sparkling waters to life, inviting us to eat and drink and plunge in.

Without saying anything she took us in her arms. At the moment Adam placed his hand on her bosom I placed my hand there too. And when his lips met hers I kissed her as well. When he threw himself down with her on the sands of the shore under those huge trees, I too lay down with her. My body was entwined with hers and I sank into an ancient world created and enlivened by her quivering that danced in celebration of life.

* * *

I found myself a youth living in a village lost in the southern marshlands. My father was a seed merchant, religiously observant, passing his time in the worship of idols brought from Babylon, the distant capital of our tribe on the banks of the Euphrates. He was an uncouth man who thought only of business and avenging himself for the disgrace he had received from my mother. I remember that I was only three years old when my father turned up one dark night. I was lying in my mother's bosom as she was whispering to me tales of my grandfather who traveled all over the land in search of hides. I will never ever forget the image of that affectionate smile and that artless surprise that showed itself on my mother's face as she received my father's dagger. He was shouting with crazy savagery, "You've betrayed me, you've betrayed me." He grabbed me by the foot and brutally snatched me away from her. He pounced on her, tore off her black skirt and dragged her off by her hennaed plaits. I remember well how she looked at him with disbelief in her face as his Chaldean dagger etched a wound on her pure white throat. I have all my life been haunted by the image of blood gushing out of her as she died. She was not angry and made not a protest. She simply looked at me with sadness and rebuke, as if she was saying, "Look at your fa-

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ther. He kicks and fights himself so much that he is killing me for your sake. This is all for your sake, my darling boy."

After my mother's death I spent years in utter submission to the will of my father. I never understood anything about the story of her betrayal. I never once heard any comment on the subject. I lived with his new wife. She was an Egyptian prisoner of war whom he had bought at Ashour, the city of my mother's people. My father was ready to do all in his power to rid himself of Mother's memory. He wanted to wipe out any trace of her from existence. But I was the only trace that his conscience would not allow him to wipe out. I was a symbol of his disappointment and his vengeance. My body became a land of desolation onto which he cast the squalors of his own life. In spite of his wife's kindness to me, her attempts to treat me the same as my step-brothers, her children, she was unable always to safeguard me from the lashings of his tongue and the savage blows of his hand. On any pretext he would curse me with all the abominations of the tribe and beat me with his salt-drenched stick. Then he would take me and throw me into the river, telling me to go to hell.

He would not let me learn to read and write. It used to be the custom for one of the priestly caste to

adopt a child and teach him literacy and religious studies, but my father wanted to turn me into an animal whose only comprehension of this world was to obey orders. He made me look after his cattle. I spent the daytime with them on the edge of the marshes. I would feed them and protect them from the attacks of wild boars and wolves that used to creep in from the neighboring desert. I used to call secretly on one of the priests so he could teach me the characters of our language and the culture of our forebears. I would make tablets from red clay so I could write up my mother's nursery tales. I would illustrate them with pictures of the distant worlds that my grandfather had visited in search of youth and immortality.

When I became depressed, I used to take out the dear statuette of our goddess, Ishtar. I would put it up leaning against papyrus stalks, and weep tears of release. My prayers would be accompanied with a lowing of the cattle, the twittering of birds and insects, and the sound of the wind. My spirits would find ease as I felt that somebody else was sharing my suffering and my hope with me.

One day I was all by myself praying to my goddess in the moonlight that peered through the branches of the palm trees that were scattered over the village cemetery. My blood froze and I was shaking in fear as

I listened to strange noises that were coming from one side of the cemetery. They were obscure sounds as if they were presaging the judgment of death and the transience of life. With hope and curiosity I made my way to the sources of the sound, responding to some sense of joy that made me approach Ishtar after she had replied to my prayers and taken pity on me for my sufferings. But when I got close I did not find what I had hoped for. There was something else, something that had not occurred to me. Among the tombstones I saw my aged father sitting and leaning against my grandfather's grave. In his arms was a young girl outstandingly beautiful, the very goddess of beauty. My swarthy father with his sunburnt arms, his feeble old age and his squalid commerce, was holding tight that queen! I saw her as a butterfly that had been trapped by a spider. It was the mumblings of their love that had reached me, discordant and incoherent: the hiss of her lusts full of pain and complaint, and his grunts that were like the growling of a wolf as it smacks its lips over the flesh of its prey.

Feelings of anger and jealousy overwhelmed my soul. It was as if I was witnessing the usurpation of my own rights and sense of honor. I felt glued fast to the ground as I lay down. My teeth were chewing at the gravestones and I was breathing dust, and my

fingers scratched and dug deep into the ground. My eyes were fixed on the ghastly sight that was being enacted before me. I felt that my whole being was being transformed into a bundle of fire based in the pit of my stomach. In my body and in the ground there spread a strange shuddering of desire and amazement. This lasted a long time. My body faced the crash of waves. I had never experienced anything like this before.

As the noises died down I also suddenly calmed down and sank into a daze. For some time I lay on my back looking at the sky, in a state of intoxication that made me repudiate the idea that there was anything in life that merited anger or distress. I was at that time in total harmony with existence. To me the stars seemed like candles celebrating the wedding of the moon to the planet Venus.

When twilight made itself seen through the trunks of the palm trees and the tombstones I woke up from my semi-consciousness to the sounds of kisses and whispers. I saw my father taking a flask out of his bag. He put it down on the ground in front of him, then embraced the girl and kissed her with passion and anxiety. Then suddenly the young girl melted and vanished. Then my father closed the flask, shoved it in his bag, and went away.

From that night I knew no peace. At every moment I felt that I had lost something from my life. Then I suddenly discovered that I was a man in possession of some hidden powers that enabled me to escape, not from just my father's tyranny but even from a most formidable ogre. I did not cease to keep an eye on my father during his outrageous nights at my grandfather's tomb. And every time I saw the woman of the flask in his embrace I was filled with feelings of destructive hatred.

One evening my soul was singed by sparks of devilry. While they were lying there in each other's arms on my grandfather's grave, the west wind blew up, bringing with it the bitter cold of the desert and grains of red sand that brought the desire to break free and to wreak vengeance. The cry of hungry beasts growled in my stomach. This sound was mingled with the whistling wind. At the moment I got up from the tombs with the eager Chaldean dagger in my hand I saw my father without him seeing me. He had left the flask on the ground and had slipped away some distance from my grandfather's grave. It was the decisive moment and I shook all over. As far as I was concerned the killing was, then, a crazy reckless act of pleasure. I was about to go up to him and stab him in the heart but I noticed the flask, pounced on it and

grabbed it. Then without thinking I ran off. I ran with the wind. I ran until I found myself at our hut. The dagger was still crying out and I wanted to kill. Without reflection I jumped on the cattle. I stabbed them and ripped open their bellies with an unparalleled ferocity and then tore their entrails with my teeth. I was in such a state that I was ready to kill any human being who confronted me. The only thing of any importance I was conscious of was that the flask was in my pocket, and my identity was concealed there too. More than that, my history, my life, and the sentiments I had been deprived of. I tasted the warm blood of these cattle. I took it into my hands, drank it, and washed myself in it until I became a blood-encrusted mass.

I headed for the river bank. I jumped into my father's boat—a mashhuf—which took me along in the strong current of a stream that was a branch of the Tigris. I embraced the flask and kissed it. Each time I uttered a cry, one of the walls of the prison that was my past came down. A future of freedom opened up before me.

When the fury abated the darkness and the dust lifted to reveal a golden dawn. The current with its limpid sheen surface took us past palm orchards. Coming from the distance, I heard the voices of peo-

ple working in the fields and herdsmen with their flocks. I negotiated the mashhuf through woods. I moored the boat and went onshore clutching the flask. I hid myself in the shade of a palm tree in the middle of sugar cane. I opened the flask. She asked me no questions when she emerged. Nor did she give me the chance to speak. She looked at me sadly, and, with the reaction of a mother concerned about the follies of her child, she took me by the hand and led me to the water. She removed my torn and muddy clothes, and set about washing away the soil of my rebellion. Through her eyes I saw the water of the river recede, taking with it with the dirt that represented my vulnerability and degradation.

I stayed in the company of my beloved, following the current of the river in the mashhuf. For days I lived off food I stole from farms and orchards and the peasants' homes that lay alongside the shore. Although I was not more than twelve years old I had become a mature adult thanks to the sense of manliness and self-confidence I was given by the woman of the flask. I reached the shores of the Gulf and obtained work as a sailor on ships that plowed the seas to distant oceans.

The experiences of the past years and the lingering hatreds of the past continued to boil within me as in a

volcano. They turned me into a ferocious pirate. I sailed the seas in search of merchant vessels. I boarded them and slew their crews. I had no friend in my whole life apart from the woman of the flask. As far as I was concerned, human beings were of two kinds: enemies whom I feared and fought, or despicable subordinates whom I crushed so I could impose my will on them. Hajir was the only harbor to which I moored my body and soul, weaponless, and with feelings neither of hostility, fear, nor contempt. Concealed in the flask, she was my everlasting refuge.

Then came a day on which my life changed. A woman entered my life who was like a shower of rain putting out the embers of my bitterness, nurturing in their place flowers of innocent love. One day we attacked a Carthaginian boat that was drifting off the coast of North Africa. We had no difficulty overpowering it because all on board, crew and passengers, were weakened by hunger and thirst after long exposure to the Great Sea. I issued orders: booty was to be collected on one side, the captives on the other. I was standing on the bridge, supervising the task of amassing plunder and getting rid of the weaker captives by throwing them overboard. A pile of gold, silver, and precious metals accumulated on one side, a group of men and women, physically and emotionally exhausted, on the other. The silent sea imposed its

authority even on these pirates who clamored for booty and blood. All attended eagerly to my instructions. Suddenly one of the pirates, drunk on Canaanite wine, leapt up and threw himself at a young girl squatting in the front row of the captives. He seized her by the hair, took out a sword, and uttered a crazy cry of triumph as he made to cut her throat. The girl raised her face to the heavens. I was just above her looking down. For a second our eyes met. Her eyes were pure, with the blue of the sky and the calm of the sea. Never had I seen a face of such tranquillity. She represented features of an infant innocence. I was enchanted by this childlike calm. My mind filled with images of a storm-tossed past. Mother's smile, my father's knife, the years of my wanderings, the looks of my victims. I shouted out, took my knife out and threw it with the desperation of one looking down on an abyss. Just as the young girl's neck felt the blade of the sword, my knife sliced off the pirate's ear. He squealed like a rat in boiling water and fell to the floor. The girl closed her eyes, her face spattered with the blood of the pirate.

My life changed direction that day. The girl turned out to be the daughter of a Carthaginian prince. She was returning from a visit to her family in Tyre, Jaffa, and Damascus. Attacks and menaces from Roman ships had made their ships lose their way and they

had been drifting all over the place. I was besotted by my captive. Her name was Azar, meaning virginal, and she was indeed a virgin, in body and soul. She breathed a spirit of calm over me. She quenched the cinders of anxiety that smoldered within me, and she made me quit my former life, never to return. For me she was a sacred light that dissipated the clouds of violence that had gathered in my life. I clung to her as one who has entered the sacred presence of a savior. I abandoned my pirates and my somber past to strengthen my ties to her. Only the flask came with me. Hajir continued in my eyes to be the symbol of a past I might lust and hanker after but over which I had complete control.

In order to gain the approval of her family and her father, the prince, I volunteered to serve in the Carthaginian army. I obtained citizens' rights and became an officer in the navy, charged with the task of protecting the shores from the raids of the Roman general Scipio. The Carthaginian commander at that time was Hannibal, who for fifteen years had been waging a grueling campaign against Rome with the objective of checking its expanding empire. My relations with the woman of the flask did not change. She continued to be my secret lover and partner of my suppressed desires, but also a comrade in my journeys and whenever I was separated from my love, Azar. Car-

thage suited me. I lived there in peace and prosperity with my princess. We spent the hours of the afternoons in her father's palace garden overlooking the sea. The blue of the sea and the sky and the green of the olive orchards were reflected in her eyes, enhancing a sense of spiritual wellbeing. She made up for the years of austerity and bloodshed, the years of my childhood in the marshes, the years of my youth on the high seas.

But fate did not totally extinguish my fire. The tempest of war raged anew. Dangers beset the city of Carthage. My spell of enjoying love, peace, and prosperity did not last. I said farewell to my beloved and joined up in a military campaign under the command of Hasdrubal, Hannibal's younger brother. I went with him to Roman lands with the aim of rescuing his brother whose army was exhausted after fifteen years of fighting and wandering in enemy territory. But our campaign ended in disaster. We managed all right in Spain and crossed the Pyrenees and the river Rhone and reached the eastern coast of Italy. To attain our objective, there was not much to do except to join the army of our great commander. But Hasdrubal did not have the same military talent or far-sightedness as his brother. We lost days and manpower by getting involved in battles here and there, in sacking remote villages and besieging peaceful cities, without achieving

any reasonable advantage. We were delayed and gave time to the enemy to rally his forces. At the river Metauro, early one morning, we woke to the sound of the bugles of the Roman army. We had fallen into a trap with two ferocious armies on each side of us. By nightfall our army was wiped out. Our commander had his head cut off and sent as a portent to Hannibal.

I succeeded in escaping with my life, though my left leg was shattered by a Roman lance. I hid in woodlands that bordered the banks of the river. I found refuge among a tribe of Celtic pastoralists who were heading north, away from the war zones. By good fortune, this tribe was one that was in conflict with the Roman. They sheltered me and helped to amputate my leg with a red hot axe.

Even at the worst times of pain and exhaustion I would resist losing consciousness by thinking of the flask that I had concealed at the edge of the woodlands. My dreams were filled with images of a long past and with the eternal quest for peace and liberation. At times the image of my princess, Azar, came to me, in a glow of olive-green and marine blue. At other times I would be haunted by the picture of Hajir, protecting me from the elements, the wind, the waves, and the weather. As soon as I was able to limp along on one foot, I slipped away to the woods in search of

my flask. The sun was sinking. Copper-colored streaks tinted the branches, making the leaves glimmer sensuously. There were the remains of the slaughtered bodies of Carthaginian soldiers all over the place. The stench of death mingled with the scent of daisies, cedars, and linden trees. For the first time in my life I had a sense of fear and loathing, and being in the presence of death. I shuddered and panted like an injured wolf that was seeking escape from encirclement. I began to scramble around. I felt my way into the woods scratching at the ground with my fingers, and sniffed at the grass, looking for my flask. I could see the rays of the sun turning into burning copper-colored spears that would from all directions pierce my body. I found my flask tucked away in the blood-stained grass. I brought my lover out and collapsed on her breast and wept tears of defeat and perplexity. I had a desperate need to make love to her. I found comfort from the spears in her breast. We made love, surrounded by the corpses of my slain comrades. Through every tremor from our bodies I felt the lava within me flow to heat my subdued spirit with a primordial passion.

I stayed with this tribe for years. I migrated with them through woods and valleys, along rivers and over mountains. We were in search of a land of peace, far from Roman wars and the assaults of

tribes of barbarians. We went north and crossed the Alps. We spent time on the banks of the river Rhone. We followed the river down as it flowed south toward the great sea. In spite of the ice, in spite of the rigors of migration and attacks from other tribes, we did not give up our travels, but were driven on by one motive, the desire to be free. As for myself, Hajir represented liberation for me. She was my secret refuge whenever nostalgia stirred. In my dreams I lived the nightmares of my former homelands. The marshes, the home of my forebears and of the pain of my infancy. The sea, the homeland of my early manhood, I the place of my early upheavals. And Carthage, the home of my love and of peace of mind.

I learned the language and the customs of my Celtic tribe. I observed their men in their dilemmas and their disputes. I was on intimate terms with their womenfolk, both secretly and openly. One day the wonder-worker of the tribe wanted to kill me in his anger, but I submitted and agreed to marry his daughter after I had made her pregnant. She was a mature girl with long red hair. They used to call her Carl rather than Carla: she was strongly-built and her manly movements gave her a toughness and a coarseness that was unusual in a woman. In time I found out why this was so. She adopted this pose on purpose in order to appease her father. He had never achieved his

dream of fathering a son. Our relationship began when she assisted her father in cutting off my leg. She then was in charge of treating my wounds. The wells of sentiment and a repressed feminine desire gushed forth through that carapace of manliness. When she became pregnant she was happy to wear women's clothes. She let her hair grow long and she responded to me when I called her Carla. Even the freckles that covered her face and her body were hotter during our moments of passion. She gave me a love that permitted me to forget the past and I became absorbed day after day in the life of the tribe. I did not stint on the love I gave her. But from time to time the feelings of my heart overflowed to other women. It may be that she was able to occupy most of my heart but she overlooked some empty parts of my being.

I learned from the wonder-worker of the tribe the values of the simple life, of upholding old traditions, the worship of nature, and how to hold on to hope, delusory though that hope may be. I tried to communicate to him some of the knowledge I had acquired over the past. I spoke to him of the god of Babel, and the secrets of worshiping stars, of astronomy, and of the signs of the zodiac. I told him about the science of the Egyptians, the philosophy of the Greeks, and the laws of the Romans. But, more importantly, I taught

the womenfolk, through Carla, about cosmetics using Yemeni powders made from stones, trees, and flowers. On the day Carla gave birth to a son, there was universal rejoicing. It was an opportunity for the women to adorn themselves with enchanting skill.

My standing with the tribe grew, first because I had provided them with a male who would strengthen them, and secondly, because my son was the grandson of the tribe's wonder-worker. Without doubt he would inherit his gifts, knowledge, and magical powers. In their gratitude they let me choose my son's name. When I gave him the name Adam, they found it strange, and laughed, but in the end came round to nodding their agreement.

The more I became integrated into the tribe, the more my memories of my past faded.

In the end we found a deserted site on the western shores of Lake Geneva. We settled not far from what is now the village of Vevey. My son grew up in his grandfather's household. It was the grandfather who ritually washed him, and intoned charms to him. He spat in my son's mouth in order to transfer his store of knowledge. I was happy beyond measure as I watched my son's features form and take on a wheat-en color, distinguishing him from the other children of the tribe. I failed to persuade them to have him circumcised. They could not believe that any reasonable

people would agree to sever some part of the flesh from a child's body.

Again, fate did not give me time to be father of this child, husband of this wife, or son of this tribe. One evening I left the village in the valley and was with Hajir among some rocks at the foot of a slope near the shore of the lake. I had on this occasion brought my son so Hajir could spend time with him, as she had wanted. I was contemplating the twilight rays of the sun as it sank behind the mountain. I thought of my father-in-law's warning of the mountain's anger. For a whole week he had been warning the tribe of impending disaster. We had failed to fulfill our habitual vows to the mountain. A poor harvest and the sickness of our animals had prevented us from making our annual sacrifice.

Suddenly the whole world shook with an almighty savage din. It was as if it was the end of the world. A mass of boulders tumbled down the mountain, filling the valley and turning it into a frightful bowl of dust that was mingled with shrieks of pain and of dying agony. Had it not been for a huge rock beneath which we—Hajir, the boy, and myself—had taken shelter, we would all have been crushed to death. It became quiet again after a few minutes and the tumbling of the rocks ceased. I got up and looked at the green shore where I had left the tribe just one hour earlier.

All I could see were stones. The men, women, and children of the tribe had departed to an everlasting slumber among the beasts, the meadows, and linden trees. Rocks. Nothing but rocks. Hundreds of people with their dreams and memories had been buried alive in just a few minutes. Another piece of history was scattered beneath the rocks of an unthinking mountain, angry because it had not received its due sacrifice.

How can I describe the scale of the disaster that struck me, and the disappointment that sapped my strength? A wolf woke from its nap and uttered a wail of distress. Other wolves started to roam among the rocks looking for remnants of corpses. I threw myself in among the rocks, wanting to get through and pull out the bodies of my dead friends. If it had not been for Hajir and my son being with me, I would have embraced my desire for eternal oblivion.

After I spent seven days in silent grief by the burial place of my wife and my tribe I was sitting on the bank of the lake, my leg stump in the soothing cold water. I was alone and looked at my son who slept at my side after Hajir had given him milk from her breast before disappearing back into her flask. The June sun was waking yawningly, emerging from the Alps on the opposite shore to take a morning dip in the blue golden waters. A gentle breeze came up from the south, cre-

ating slight waves on the surface of the water. The breeze brought with it flocks of swallows bearing the sand of the desert and the whiff of marshes and the sea. I never felt so alone in my life. I always had the dream of returning to my own country. A flame of nostalgia burned within me. Nostalgia for Azar and Carthage, for the Gulf, for my ship and my life as a pirate, for my village, for the marshes, and my little brothers. I looked at my little boy and thought of what was in store for him as my companion. I was a stranger in a land where even the owners of the land were strangers. Germans, Helvetians, Gauls, hungry tribes who fought among each other for the sake of a patch of land on which to settle. Romans, Etruscans, Carthaginians, armies of highly civilized peoples, fighting for dominance and influence. All I could see of nature was its anger, its meanness, its snows and floods, and the wolves that were excited by the smell of death.

I got up, leaning on a stick, and clung to my flask, and my son in his ragged clothes. I made for a small craft, boarded it, and headed toward the glittering blue sky. The boat glided southward, taking us wherever it wished.

* * *

When I opened my eyes I was alone on the bank, Adam and his flask nowhere to be seen. They had left me alone on this spring Sunday morning. The clouds had also left the sky and the flamingos had returned to strut in groups. The two huge trees were no longer above me like two faithful slave girls awaiting their pleasures. When I got up I felt an unnatural pain in my left foot that made me limp along the esplanade.

SIX

Life of the Lord of Universe

منشورات «آلف ياء آلفYaa»

Wasting no time, I am plunging into the chapter in which Adam announced his wish to liberate Hajir. I'd more or less predicted this. Adam had not changed in spite of his isolation over the course of seven years. The world of his houri took him back once more to when he aspired to be a prophet striving to change history and better the world. He started to see the woman of the flask as a prisoner who lived in a state of perpetual servitude, knowing nothing of life except through the pleasures and torments of her lovers. She came to life when they were born and passed on when they died. She was deprived of tasting life with its setbacks and its joys. Adam made her bury herself in reading books and following what was happening in the world. As time went on, her stories began to be filled with questions and demands.

We agreed to tackle the impossible and to release her from the magic of the flask. We examined carefully the possibilities of disclosing her secret to others and seeking help from those who were well versed in these matters. We gave this idea up immediately, for we were unwilling to expose her to danger. Specialists, surgeons, sorcerers, and chemists would be intent on carrying out experiments and analyses on her.

The press and media folk, the fashion world, the cinema and all the others, all these adventurers and gamblers, would be vying to create out of Hajir some eternal symbol of dreams of disappointment. She might become a political issue between states claiming rights of owning her. When that happened we would lose all contact with her.

We said no to that. We would try to consult people who had some expertise—magicians, spiritualists, those versed in astrology and the occult without disclosing the precise details of the issue. We first made contact with people who lived in Geneva, Paris, Berlin, and London and knew all about the followers of Indian and Asian cults: Buddhists and Hindus, followers of Baghwan, and others from cults old and new. Adam spent time corresponding with Islamic Sufis. He looked through old Arabic books dealing with Sufiism and magic and medicine. We read everything we could lay our hands on—books on the civilizations of the ancient Middle East, religious beliefs of Semitic people and of the tribes of the desert. We made contact with hermits and visited many monasteries in the Alps and in the Jura.

To no avail. We got nowhere. All we found was one message: go back to the desert. That's where it had all started. There we would find the answer. Only the sages of the desert were in possession of the secret

of the flask. We wondered, which part of this desert that stretched from Yemen to Syria and then on to Sinai and on to the mighty Sahara that reached as far as the Atlantic Ocean, which part should we head for? We could spend ages in the desert. We took Hajir out of her flask to share our concerns with her. At first we laughed with her when she suggested we make contact with the shaykh who had first put her in the flask. But she persuaded us when she told us she was absolutely convinced of his immortality. No one who is not immortal himself can confer immortality on others. But where could we find this shaykh? Hajir did not know the name of the desert where she had met him. The circumstances of her wanderings had not made her distinguish or retain the names of the deserts she had crossed with her king, Tamuzi, in the two years of their quest. She was able to describe the place to us which she remembered in detail, but without remembering the names. She said the mountain was red, and that there was a shimmer of copper color in the rocks and the sand.

Adam did not stint on time in striving for the liberation of his houri. I did not understand why, the more he saw the bulge in his wife's belly grow and grow, he became more determined to liberate his houri. He was so convinced of this that it was as if Hajir had

spent thousands of years waiting for the day he would come and set her free from her immortality. It was as if he was wanting to save her from death! Perhaps he really wanted to make her a transitory being like himself. He was like all saviors, unconsciously concealing the seeds of vanity beneath a humanity that was honest and pure.

In the time we spent with Hajir I tried to persuade her to resist what Adam wanted but his enthusiasm had communicated itself deep inside her. Her dream was one day to live as a woman of our time, as illustrated in books, films, and newspapers, as well as in the words of Adam. Was it in order to satisfy her lover that she agreed to sacrifice five thousand years of memories of love, as well as the prospect of the delights of thousands more? Adam taught her how to make me angry by telling her that it was not from love that I wanted her to remain eternal in the flask, but in order that I may have my way with her and enjoy pleasuring her.

We got everything we could for Hajir—illustrated books dealing with the deserts of Arabia and the Eastern Mediterranean. We spent hours with her, poring over the pictures as she recalled the places she went by. First of all, we concentrated on the Petra area near the Gulf of Aqaba because of the rose-red

rocks. But Hajir knew the area and remembered crossing the area after meeting one of its hermits. After some discussion and more research we came to the definite conclusion that the place had to be Sinai. Its rocks and mountains were reddish. It linked Asia to Africa and was the meeting point of all the tribes and caravans of the peoples of the desert. And from ancient times it was the natural recourse for hermits and the ascetics of the religions of Egypt, the Fertile Crescent, and the Arabian Peninsula.

We had no option but to travel to Sinai. For weeks we did all we could to overcome financial and logistic problems. We sorted out visas and money. We got out the maps and made a special study of the Sinai Peninsula.

In Ismailia on the Suez Canal we met our guide, Musa. He came from one of the Arab tribes that had maintained their Christianity, a Christianity that was replete with the spiritualism of the desert. He was a swarthy-skinned young man with chiseled features, a prominent jaw, a broad chin, and the small sharp eyes of a hawk. In the morning Musa had arranged for us a pick-up truck and provisions for the journey, various tools, a couple of daggers, and a revolver. We set off into the desert as the sun was creeping up from the heart of Sinai. Just before the journey and out of Mu-

sa's sight, we brought out the woman of the flask. After she gazed all over the sky she pointed to a cloud that was scudding southeast and said that if we followed that cloud we would reach the shaykh of eternity.

For seven days we pursued this cloud that led us among wolves and sandstorms that wrecked our camping sites and snuffed out our fires, draping us in red dust. We passed by small towns and caravans that had been traveling since time began, as well as Christian monasteries and military bases, hills, mountains, and coastlines that stretched forever and ever. As the light of dawn spread we were filled with a complex feeling, a sense of pride but also of insignificance as though we were witnessing the union of land and sky. It was as if we were the fetus that had sprung from this union. How many prophets and sages had worked on this? This I serenity that inspired nothingness and basic instincts would be transformed with the wail of the wind into anthems that would be chanted for all time.

I remember one night. We had camped at a spot to which we had been drawn by our cloud. We were close to the Mountain of Moses and St. Catherine's Monastery, occupied by monks and the God of the desert. We were exhausted and were overcome by what we saw around us. We had followed a routine

whereby two of us slept while the third stayed awake, on guard with the revolver. We switched round every two hours. It was my turn at eleven o'clock. My companions were fast asleep after spending the evening listening to Musa's tales—about the past and about places, told with an unfettered freedom. He told us about the one-eyed devil anti-Christ who slaughtered the faithful and who was slain by none other than Jesus, and about the people of Gog and Magog who destroyed the walls of the world and laid the land waste. He pointed to the red mountain in whose shade we had erected our tents and said it was the Mountain of Moses, at the summit of which Moses had spoken to God. Whoever wanted God to respond to his prayers had to climb to the top of the mountain, offer his prayer and seek forgiveness. When a meteor shot through the sky Moses would rebuke it and it would be extinguished. Our guide Musa blessed God and cursed Satan and said that meteors were brands flung by the angels at the devil whenever he approached the doors of heaven.

My two hour vigil embraced the middle of the night. I was sitting in the pick-up and my companions were slumbering a few paces away from the tent. A gentle breeze had an intoxicating effect and lulled me seductively to behold a vision of a sky full of stars hurling

themselves and blazing like fiery spears in silent celebration. Various images from memories passed through my mind like a film made up of images stuck together by chance.

Behind the mountain, the moon appeared so close that it seemed to be resting on its summit. In its glow that flooded the plain, I saw two points of light gleaming not far away. On top of a tapering rock a long spotted snake raised its head and directed its sparkling eyes at us. Despite some apprehension and distaste, I had a strange feeling of captivation. Involuntarily I stretched out my hand to the flask that was stored in the cab of the truck. I hung it over my shoulder, my fingers nervously fingering the trigger of the revolver. I found myself following the snake as it climbed the rocks. Every now and then it would stop and turn its moonlike eyes toward me. I laughed at myself—here I was in front of a snake, filled with feelings neither of disgust nor fear, but instead, of celebration, fascination, and mockery. Its body was swaying and turning with the rocks that were bathed in the faint light of the moon. At times it seemed like a crawling child, at other times like an alluring temptress.

I did not realize how much time was passing. When I saw it stopping at the entrance to a cave from which there glimmered candlelight, it stared at me and slith-

ered inside. As I approached, the air was filled with the fragrance of perfume. A host of questions went through my mind. Is it a military base, a bandits' lair, someone's home? I took a deep breath and then sighed as if, by so doing, I was inhaling courage and breathing out fear. I made sure of the flask around my neck, grasped hold of the revolver, and advanced.

I found myself at a wide opening. Directly in front of me was a shaykh sitting as if he was expecting me. He opened his eyes and looked at me as naturally as if he knew me and was used to seeing me. I was rooted to the ground, breathlessly amazed at the congruence of the place and my anticipation of it. I had already visualized it from Hajir's description. But so strong was the similarity that it was as if I had known it and had seen it before. A few meters away in the middle of the cave, the shaykh was sitting on a mat of palm leaves, leaning back on the trunk of an old, ever-green oak, its leafy branches extending into the dark corners of the cave. He was wearing a clean, flowing white robe, and on his balding head was a white lace skullcap. His face seemed to be brown with a beard and hair of silver. It was like the face of an imam or a prophet as illustrated on a popular print. He was sitting cross-legged and his lips were moving to the rhythm of the telling of beads that were black with a glimmer of green.

"Peace be upon you," I said, trying to conceal the revolver beneath my shirt.

All I heard was not his voice but the click of one of his beads. I could make out what seemed to be a smile on his face. I sat down in front of him and detected in his eyes a pure honey color, and an apparently childlike expression, tranquil like a boat on calm waters.

At that moment it occurred to me with amazing conviction that there was only one language that I could use with this shaykh, the language of ecstasy going beyond ordinary feeling. His features and gaze, his whole appearance, expressed some universal language, addressing some part of me of which I had no idea. Without words, without syllables, our conversation entered the heart: it was full of reproach, tenderness, violence, and query.

When I put the flask down in front of me, the beads continued to click rhythmically along with sounds that emerged from between his lips, like some very basic chant. He put his beads around the flask, put it between his hands and rose and started walking with heavy steps. He entered the heart of the cave and was lost to view.

I crawled to his mat and sat where he had leaned

against the stump of the evergreen oak. The only traces of life were the leaves of the tree and some earthenware plates scattered carefully on the ground. On some stone shelves were some cuneiform writings on earthenware tablets, Coptic writing on papyrus, documents in vellum and cloth written in Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic, Greek, and Latin; yellowing volumes, the Gospels, the Torah, the Talmud, and the Qur'an; books of wisdom, of mysticism, and volumes of poetry.

From time to time a dried leaf would fall from the evergreen oak. A puff of wind from outside would blow the leaf into the farthest corner of the cave. I got up to examine the leaves of the tree. Each leaf bore the appearance of a human being, of either sex and of all shapes and ages. As soon as a leaf became yellow and dry, the human being was destroyed and its image obliterated. I looked around, breathless, seeking out among the branches for leaves that had the appearance of people I might know. On one branch that extended to the cave entrance I saw two isolated leaves that hung down in the light of the moon. One of them was very green and bathed in dew and bore the appearance of Hajir. The other was half yellow and was drying up at its edges. It bore the appearance of Adam.

مشورات «الفباء» AlfYaa

The shaykh then emerged from the bowels of the cave, his white gown fluttering in the light breeze. He had the flask in one hand and a small glass bottle in the other.

He sat down and put the flask and the bottle down in front of him. He adopted his customary posture, and the beads of his rosary began to click in harmony with the movements of his lips. There was no change in my flask and the bottle was filled with a pure transparent liquid. He shook hands with me; his hand was beautiful. He looked at me, taking me all in. There were on his features traces of a smile. He brought forth his other hand and our four hands came together. I was then overtaken by a quiver of sweet numbness. I withdrew into myself. My jaw hung down and I sank into a swoon.

* * *

It was as if I was turned into a ball and was becoming smaller and smaller until it seemed to me that I had turned into a particle that swam around in a bright light that dominated all existence. I was light, weightless, totally liberated from the constraints of time and place. For some time—I don't know how long—as our hands were intertwined, my soul rose in a flood and

منشورات «آل فاء آا»

coursed over thousands and thousands of years.

I am time with no end and no beginning. I am absolute reality. I am the eternity of eternity.

Delight! This was what I sensed in existence itself, in my development in total reality. Delight was a process, harmony, converging, diverging, closeness, remoteness; it was existence, life, the synchronization of opposites. Perfect concord between entry and departure, closing down and opening up. The utmost delight expanded with sensuous frisson: the most sublime love was achieved with the most perfect reality.

I was fusion itself. I was an atom that I was creating myself, and with it my existence was being perfected, mingling with all parts of me in the heart of one pearl: my light in my darkness, my firmness in my flexibility, my clarity in my obscurity I was tranquillity and oblivion and complete unconsciousness. I was death, frozen beyond the bounds of time and place.

For some immeasurable period of time, while I was a prisoner in that pearl, there grew in me a strange need to struggle against my frozen state of harmony. I was nauseated by my soft malleability, and I choked on the toughness of my inner self. The shell of my pearl was too restrictive for me and was stifling a strange unprecedented desire: I wanted to move and

to rebel in a life that knew no boundaries, I wanted to take off for unknown lands, to combat my state of restful harmony, to roll myself around my own being and to indulge a growing need to move.

Then a great weariness grew into a holy rage. Deep within me all the power I possessed built up to a sense of revolt and a need to break free. I did not expect this. I exploded.

I exploded with a violence that ripped me apart into a thousand fragments, until I reckoned that I was turned into small pieces that were forever breaking up into even smaller pieces. A fate of unknown nothingness.

I was the sparkling pearl and was splitting into a huge number of particles, concrete and abstract. Fragments were being thrown off me like great chunks of lava, turning existence into a fiery celebration of never ending movement, enticing light and explosions one after the other.

I discovered that I was there, that I could move and take delight in an awareness of my reality. I could toy with my existence and make fun of the scattered fragments of myself.

I turned round myself, bit by bit, and felt repulsion and attraction. I withdrew and expanded, I absorbed

and received. I was delight itself, a licentious, despicable quiver of existence. I scandalized this planet and snuffed out the fires of another. I made one part clash with another, one part divide itself off from another. I concealed one sun and lit up another. I changed the form of my jelly-like existence just as I wished. I studied my body with stars and decorated my face with moons. I chose the night for my rest, and contemplated my image in the mirror of my soul. The daytime was for play and for indulging my whims in dealing with the different parts of me.

Ages passed and I played games with myself. I took delight in my authority in those parts of me that were hidden. Gradually the delight began to pale and I was filled with a growing weariness. The repetition of delights dissipated the pleasure, and my astonishment killed my spirit. Weariness is the opposite of delight, and increases from repetition and from a lack of harmony among contradictions. It is excess in getting close to the limits of being rigid and being buried. It is excess in getting far from the limits of loss and dissolution. I became weary of being in concord, of being in a state of schizophrenia. My pleasure lay in a hesitant harmony between the two.

I examined myself, and saw that what was hidden was extinguished and growing cold. It froze and hard-

ened and turned into colored balls. It turned round itself and round the suns that it heated with its fire.

Another planet attracted my attention. What drew me to it? Appealing color or an alluring shape? Perhaps it was in the most important part of my reality: my head.

This planet Earth rescued me from my weariness, and conducted me to a place that would give fruit to my appetites. I was aware of it and wanted it. I would apply my inventiveness to it. I would blow on it my breath of creativity I would water it with my fecundity I would create seas and rivers, I would dig valleys, I would build mountains and create lands. I would turn them all into a featureless desert and would make forests grow in other lands.

I craved this Earth. It was my plaything and provided the pleasures I wanted. I played with its lofty mountains. I breathed in the scent of its forests. I soaked my soul with its seas and rivers, and brought to it untamed deserts. When I became tired I cooled myself in its frozen spaces and left them to melt and evaporate and become clouds that I would blow to the heights.

It was a planet that offered me the pleasure of realizing beauty. The most supreme, the most voluptuous

of pleasures. A realization of life and its possessions. Was there anything more delightful than watching life grow on Earth? Trees and plants, fish and insects, fertilizing each other, bringing forth young and multiplying, and then declining and decaying and dying. What a miracle!

It is a pleasure to build and to destroy, to create and to kill, to offer life, and to withhold it. It is the greatest pleasure of power. I realize my immortality during the birth and death of my creations.

And that is not all. I advance in my creativity I create animals with feelings so that they appreciate what I am doing for them. They feel joy and grief, fear and hope, hunger and a full belly. The most important of all is that they are aware of death and are in awe of it. Whales, reptiles, carnivores, herbivores, all are at my beck and call. The creations to whom I have given sensations thanks to my generosity or my meanness, my compassion or my tyranny As I give life so I give death. They are my slaves, submissive to me, my supreme creation.

The Earth I created and with it capped all that I have made. In the course of this I realized the nature of my own existence. I am a giant body: the solar system is my head, the Earth my brain, the refuge of my imagination. It is the center of my feelings, my

dreams, and the realization of my dreams.

The development of life on Earth means the development of imagination in my head. Living creatures are cells in my thought processes. Everything undertaken by plants and animals are images created by my imagination.

Before humanity took its place in my mind, the most elevated images in my mind were represented by animals: humble and weak, wild and predatory. My desire would soar to the limit whenever I listened to or witnessed in the recesses of my mind the animals as they carried out what instinct prescribed: the moans and groans of untamed love, the cries of victims as they were slaughtered by ferocious hungry beasts.

But the animals became boring: they were happy, they were sad. They loved, they hated. They were scared or they were bold, but all they knew about life was the spot they dwelt in. They bred and lived and massacred one another; they died and were turned into dust without one thought, even for a second, that they were part of a chain of existence that was boundless in time and space. Their birth was my wish, their life the sport of my imagination until I wearied of them and got bored.

Boredom again seeped into my very being like an

infection. Perhaps I would explode a second time. I sought another course, a new pleasure. I began to be alarmed about what I could do to myself. The feelings of boredom piled up as time went on and on, until it broke out in a series of explosions— volcanoes, earthquakes, tornados, and great tidal waves that swept away from the face of the planet of my imagination my stupid cells of creativity, these inventions that disgusted me with their lack of awareness of their own grandeur as they sullied the earth with blood and savagery. Even the seas and the clouds were stained red with their blood. I poured into my world all my feelings of frustration and the years of weariness.

Gradually my anger cooled, and my explosions abated. The tornados blew themselves out and the blood-red gloom dispersed. The seas were restored to what they had been and the rivers found their old courses. My sun shone its torrid rays onto the soil of my Earth and its creations.

Bizarre creations issued forth from the mud. Like fungi they grew and swayed proudly and dried up under the sun. Over time they solidified and took on a living form that was the most beautiful I had seen.

I indulged myself by observing these new creatures. I helped them grow. I showered them with all the creative skills I had. I made the fingers beautiful

and gave the breasts some firmness. I altered the position of the ears and reduced the size of the nostrils. I lengthened the chin and plucked out some of the hair, and I arranged the limbs to improve articulation and coordination.

This was my brilliant new creation, created from an explosion of my need for some inexhaustible new delight. Created from my anger, my disappointment, and my quest for an ideal beauty and an absolute harmony I made it enjoy the supreme features of my former creations: the fidelity of the dog, the duplicity of the fox, the ferocity of the tiger, the gentleness of the gazelle, the hawk's capacity to pounce, and the dove's qualities of harmony. It had the simplicity of the microbe and the usefulness of the bee, the stupidity of the fish and the sharpness of the monkey, the ugliness of the octopus and the grace of the mare. I then breathed into it the breath of life.

It became Man. He was the pinnacle of my creativity and the very best of everything in my repertoire, the most developed, the ideal of what was in my mind: a creation that was the image of myself, a shining example of my thought. I distinguished him from all the other creations. I endowed him with the best quality I had—imagination. This is the sovereign notion, for it transcends what can be seen or felt, it goes beyond

memory of the past, experience of the present, and expectation of the future. And most important of all, Man is aware of his own reality, remembering it, analyzing it, and projecting the future with it. He held me in awe, built places for my worship, I offered sacrifices to me and produced myths and mysteries about me. In my name he spread love and brotherhood, and sanctified justice and a sense of right. In my name he declared war and spread devastation and shed blood and practiced tyranny. For Man I was symbol of good when he did good, for him I was also a symbol of good when he committed evil acts. My delight was his paradise, my weariness his hell, my whims lay in his idea of Satan.

With Man I completed my acts of creation and saw myself in him. I was able to recount my own story. With Man I produced a living being that was refined and elevated, capable of inventing, creating, and giving. With Man I too turned myself into a human being everlastingly hungry for information and stripping away the veil, turning darkness into light. I would pass my time between answer and question, certainty and doubt, coming close and getting far away. With doubt and questioning I was afraid and removed myself, with certainty and the answer I found confidence and felt harmony. An answer led me to a question, a ques-

tion led me to another question. It was the delight of knowledge and its infinite permutations.

The powers of my imagination increased and my worlds multiplied. I indulged myself in creating history. Birth and death. States. Peoples. Religions. Victories. Migrations. Revolutions. Discoveries. All was speculation, imagination, all turning in my mind. People never realize the truth of the matter, that they are people from the cells of my brain, living out my whims: their ennui comes from my ennui, their pleasures are derived from my pleasures. They live and die and renew themselves in my imagination.

It did take not long for the joy in my new creation to go to pieces. It was not just boredom. It brought on a host of questions and doubts that touched my faith in the history of myself. If only I had not created him. He made me lose my confidence in the reality of my own absolute existence. Was I in fact a creation of Man?

The problem grew the more Man penetrated the labyrinth of questions and answers. As his discoveries pile up, so do his doubts and his taste for rebellion against my authority. It is like any subject—as soon as he finds out most of the secrets and mysteries of their sultan, he is filled with a spirit of conspiracy and treachery.

I sometimes wonder how it is possible for my creatures to go outside my sphere of authority if they are in truth part of my own existence. Can one limb repudiate the rest of the body? Is Man nothing more than imagination in my mind? Does not his life just roll around in my brain, are not his thoughts simply my own thoughts? The problem then lies within me . . . my own self-doubt is expressed by Man as doubt in myself.

I think that Man is a creature in my own image. He possesses a brain in which there are countless imaginative cells. Like me he can create worlds and peoples and dreams. In his head he can create a complete history that begins with the agony of separation, grows with the unending restlessness in search of love and a sense of belonging. He is thus an absolute in miniature who lives in the head of myself, the greater absolute.

My awareness of this led me on to a strange notion that shook and destroyed my conviction in my own integrity, and shattered the enjoyment of my own power. Was Man with all the confidence in his own intelligence, maturity, and superiority over the rest of creation, nothing more than a cell of imagination in my own brain? And was he not unaware of this? He might guess or imagine it, but he would never feel the truth

of it or be convinced of it. In that case, how could I be sure that I was unlike Man? Was it within the bounds of reason that I was some greater cell wandering around somewhere beyond my comprehension? What persuaded me of the truth of what I remembered and imagined? Perhaps I was only a cell in the imagination of some greater Absolute, more powerful than myself insofar as he exceeded my capacity to realize this. And that all the phases of my own existence were simply in the imagination of the mind of the greater Absolute.

In that case, who am I?

Perhaps all I am is a cell in the imagination of some human being. Man is my greater Absolute and he is my slave! I am his creator because I am his total reality. He is my creator because I have realized myself through his intelligence. He is the intelligence of existence and the higher reality the focus of imagination and the noblest stage of coordination and harmony between contradictions: male and female, subject and object, sense and sensibility. Man is the ultimate delight of reality. With a tremor their seeds are joined together, with a tremor his life develops.

I am everything. I am the Absolute. I am life: physical desire for movement and embarking for the unknown. I am death: physical desire for tranquillity and merging into the bosom of Mother Nature. I am love:

desire of desires, the union of lust and the quest for the peace of death in the heat and movement of life. My existence is in touch with my confusion, in my harmonious contradiction between my transient humanity and my immortal being.

The tribes and peoples of my soul still crowd the recesses of my mind. They sweep away jungles, deserts, and seas. They pass through cities and forests, palaces and battlefields, caravans in the desert and by the seashore, by rivers and marshes and remote graveyards. States of birth and states of death.

My soul settles on the tribes of the marshlands and the deserts. It lives various lives with them, migration to the north, to rivers, deserts, seas, marshes, and mountains. It makes love, builds dams, and digs water channels. It constructs cities, temples, towers, and pyramids. It sows and builds, talks and writes, and wages war. Floods, plagues, and the invasions of armies. My soul is born time and time again. My soul dies time and time again. It plunges into a deep abyss. It falls and falls and falls until it is destroyed.

* * *

I found myself flat out on the ground. I was alone, bathed in the red light of the evening. The sky was

dappled with different colors, with clouds scudding by, making it look I like the well-made-up woman's face. I heard cries coming from afar, reverberating throughout the valley, calling my name. I got up trembling. I inspected myself, looking for I some break or injury. All was well with my clothes and my revolver. The flask was leaning against a rock and alongside it that glass bottle.

It was Adam and the guide Musa whose shouting pierced the valley. For an hour they had been wandering around looking for me. I hid the flask and the bottle in my bag. I went over to them and made apologies on behalf of the guide, saying I had suddenly fallen asleep on a rock at the base of the mountain.

When I was alone with Adam and told him what had happened to me that day he would not have believed me but for the evidence of the bottle. I told him what I knew about the shaykh so as to counter the magic of the flask: after Hajir had left it, the flask was filled with that fluid and closed. The woman was liberated from it forever. The shaykh told me also that the fluid in the bottle was the elixir of immortality. Whoever drank it would be swallowed up anew by the flask and become as Hajir was.

And so, as you see, we concluded our journey to

Sinai and went back to Geneva after spending the first morning hours wandering aimlessly around the Mountain of Moses and St. Catherine's. The cave disappeared and with it the cloud that had led us there. All that could be seen were red rocks, among which our guide came across a snake's egg. He put it in his bag to turn it into an amulet that would repel evil and find good friends for him.

SEVEN

**Loss of the Flask
and the journey
in search for her**

To cut a long story short, I will launch straightaway into this final chapter. You will be able finally to make a judgment as to whether it is a last chapter or if in every beginning there is an end. As you will see it is a chapter of separations, of absences, and of moving on. We reached Geneva, eager to check out the liquid that liberated our houri. From the airport we went straight to my flat. It was four o'clock in the afternoon and the June sun was adorning the sky above the lake, making the water shimmer and glint reminding one of a shattered mirror. We closed the door of my flat, opened the windows, and drew the curtains. We lit some incense and sorted out some bedding. We prepared ourselves a joint and took out some champagne and a bottle of Syrian arak. We lit some candles that danced to the rhythm of lute and drum. And we put our trust in God.

I brought the bottle out. Adam took the flask and started to open it. It seemed it was joining in with the flickering lights. Would it really be the last time our houri was to leave the flask? Would we confine her to our mundane world the moment her eternal world was immersed in the fluid? The last time we brought Hajir

out was the previous evening in our Cairo hotel. We told her about the shaykh and briefed her about the bottle of liberation. She nearly caused a scandal. She threw herself at us and hugged us making a noise that was half moan, half laughter. She went back to her flask and waited until we reached Geneva.

And now here she was leaving her flask for the very last time. Parts of her were receptive to an old-new world. She was fresh and nubile. Her nipples were red and resembled a clown's eyes.

She refused to put on a dress because she wanted to spend the moments of her breaking the umbilical cord to the world of the flask as naked as a new-born babe. She took a glass of champagne and drank a toast to our timeless encounter. She puffed slowly on the joints. She looked hard at us with eyes that sparkled with strange feelings. She said that her life would follow ours until her dying day, and that she would never leave us. I stifled a laugh when I thought that this houri was many times our great-grandmother and had been the lover of our forebears for several thousand years.

None of us uttered a word. The silence was filled with the music of a lute that was dancing to the beat of a drum and the melody of a flute. Our eyes met and

separated, as we tried in vain to suppress our feelings. In Adam's eyes I read apprehension and questions too frightening to express. In those moments I was prey to thoughts upon thoughts. My head was like a radio receiving broadcasts from a hundred stations. Waves of lust and possessiveness were strongest. I could see that my connection with Adam, had become complex and profound, thanks to Hajir and her strange and wonderful circumstances. He had been changed back to being a simple child in spirit, on whom a host of my questions had been piled.

Under Hajir's anxious eyes Adam took the flask and handed it to me. I opened the bottle and with as much coolness as I could muster I poured the fluid into the flask. Just at this moment Hajir leaned against a wall. Her eyes closed, deep in a swoon as the fluid poured forming a slender thread lit up by the light of the candle.

When that was done, Hajir remained lost in thought, her eyes cast down. For the first time I saw her perspire with sticky drops of sweat rolling down her forehead and arms. She was experiencing those momentous seconds that would liberate her forever from the thralldom of immortality.

I put the flask back in my bag. With one movement Adam and I raised our hands and touched Hajir at the very same moment. She opened her eyes and surprised us: she was not as she had usually been. She looked at us coyly smiling wearily and anxiously. It was clear that she was physically exhausted.

From that evening Hajir never went back to the flask.

Just then, before the disaster struck, Adam was overwhelmed with a simple delight at his success in achieving his lover's wish to escape from the flask. He looked thoughtfully at her, hoping that she would fit in with life. He had feelings like the pride of a god flaunting his own creativity. He was not listening to me when I told him that she would lose her talent of producing endless pleasures. She would become like any other woman on the planet, a slave of life with its joys and miseries. She would be subject to the weather, to the laws of the state, and the conventions of the community. Her sensuality in pleasing her lover would no longer be secret. Anxieties of disease and death would impel her to take advantage of every moment of her life: she would love, hate, be jealous, be generous, be unkind, and excel in social behavior and the everyday customs of human intercourse.

Adam imagined that when she obtained a resi-

dence permit she would spend her time studying French, looking for a suitable place to live, making contacts, getting to know Geneva, and meeting the challenge of her new life. Not a moment would go by without her getting something or learning something. Her great pleasure would be educating herself. Her knowledge of the past and her competence in ancient oriental languages would be in demand—the languages of her lovers, her descendants: Sumerian, Babylonian, Coptic, Berber, Assyrian, and Arabic. She would dazzle people with all the Greek and Latin she knew. She would draw attention to herself with her detailed encyclopedic knowledge about the history, legends, and customs of the people of the Eastern Mediterranean. She would not be telling the truth if she claimed that she had actually studied them.

But disaster came as a thunderbolt to destroy the very foundations of his dream. It did not occur to him that the end would be so swift, so awful, and so cruelly mocking. We spent the first weeks organizing her residence qualifications, as a woman of this world. We worked hard to get the necessary forged documents. We housed her in a hotel and told her how to answer questions put to her by the police. Then we relied on a lawyer to obtain her residence status as a political refugee.

To this day we do not know precisely what happened. We got her ready one morning and she went with the lawyer to the police immigration department. But she never returned. We waited, we searched but we did not find her. Then the lawyer one evening made contact with us and told us that they were deporting her, expelling her from the country. We had been naive: this had never occurred to us, even as a joke. We contacted all the political parties, all the human rights organizations—to no avail. It was as if a hand of fate had frozen the hearts of all in charge of matters of deporting people. They said she did not fulfill the conditions for being a political refugee. War was an insufficient reason, especially as she was a woman. They said the country was full of foreigners and they had to take such measures. They said they were confident that she would not suffer oppression in her country. They said this. They said that. Adam and I spent nights drinking ourselves silly at the awfulness of the disaster. One dawn as black clouds hung over Geneva airport we caught up with her, being escorted by police who were putting her on a plane. She was unable to hear Adam's hysterical shouts. When the doors of the plane closed on her, clouds turned to black crows that alighted on the plane and bore it and her off to some hidden destination.

We said nothing. We realized that any attempt at speech would be useless. The executioner's axe had descended. Any word would drive it deeper in. Oblivion was the answer. This is not what I said. But as far as Adam was concerned, oblivion meant the impossible whenever the rage of lust welled up in him. It would drive him crazy with self-torture expecting some release. The woman of the flask with her unlimited charms had brought him into a paradise of dreams. When she disappeared, he slid once again into an inferno of expectation. When she renounced her immortality and disappeared, he broke down, laden with the injuries of the loss and his search for the houri of his paradise.

He would meet up with me every evening and open up his grieving heart to me. His words would add furrows to his brow. He would say we were cowards and should have done everything to protect her. We had betrayed her when we let them take her away. He would then rub his eyes and say that he was tired of questions, and it wasn't just the wine. He spent all day trying to get hold of some news of Hajir. In vain did he get in touch with the Red Cross and find some information from people who had traveled to Iraq. "Nothing . . . nothing. Only war news," he would say. He would mumble to himself and concentrate on facing up to his distress and disappointment. When he got drunk he

would launch a torrent of complaints that expanded as he spoke. Sometimes he would be quite philosophical, at other times he would jump up and down in a way that would make me laugh and at the same time be sorry for him. He would be like an addict deprived of his fix. He devoted the nights of Geneva to limited and repetitive pursuits. His yearning increased when he met friends to whom he would bellyache about his distress. He continued to tell them the stories of his forebears and their adventures with the woman of the flask. In the end they made fun of him and considered him a victim of delusions. As for his infatuation with women, he became fanatical. He wanted to appease the insane wolfish lust that the woman of the flask had aroused, but she had gone. She was lost in the mists of the land of his ancestors.

Day after day I used to see Adam coming down the road and trying to catch up with me. He was no longer interested in Marilyn, nor with computers or his work. He got drunk every night at various discos and bars in search of his houri in the face of every woman.

One Saturday night, after staggering from bar to bar, from glass of wine to another glass of wine, he found himself in a great hall. Loud music could be heard all over the place and people were dancing and celebrating. It was a costume party with people wear-

ing animal masks or period dress, with crowns and the clothes of Arab princes, as well as Roman warriors, and huntsmen of vanished ages.

In spite of being drunk he tried to control himself and the effects of the wine so that he would not fall over and wreck the night. He saw seats scattered around the place among people who were dancing slowly. Some of the men and women went onto the dance floor and became lost in the dark mass lit up from time to time with lights. Some were leaving the dance floor, pouring with sweat.

There was a grave look on his face. He looked with utter self-regard at the dancers, men and women, as if he was extracting some electricity from them.

His gaze settled on one woman as if he knew her. Two virginal arms, a slender waist, and a delicious navel were uncovered by a short blouse, decorated with flowers and butterflies. Her jeans were too tight for her thighs and petulant bum while her head inclined and nodded in harmony with her shapely body—like a frisky colt.

He wondered where he had seen this woman. He thought of Marilyn and Hajir and even thought back to Iman. Then, dazzling as a snowy day, the image of that woman prisoner flashed before him—she had

somehow never left his consciousness. He saw her abandon her fetters and slip out of the interrogation room that was his head. This woman's movements made him want to take possession of her, to seize her and devour her like two snakes that nibble each other, starting at the tail and ending up at the head. Her vulturesque look brought him out in a warm sweat. He then felt an irritation grow all over his body, and a numbing shudder passed from his head to the small of his back. He was battered by alternating waves of lust and pain.

He was roused from his reverie by a laugh nearby. A young couple touched his backside and said jokingly to him, "You've got a lovely tail. It could be real."

* * *

He swung round to face them. He saw them pick up a long thick tail. It was not a game: he was covered in thick hair and a tail protruded from his body through a hole in his trousers. Adam tried to reassure himself that nobody noticed and everyone was in costume.

He turned round, wanting to leave the hall and sort himself out. The music and the dancing stopped and there were noisy protests from everyone. They kept

repeating, "A game, a game," and people started pointing at him. They surrounded the woman who stood proudly staring at him, with a smile on her face that was both modest and predatory. More and more fingers were pointing at him; more and more eyes were looking in his direction.

The crowd drew back and formed a circle around the two of them. The woman stood full of dignity before him, as if he was an old partner. Adam froze, riveted to the place, and but for the questions that were piling up in his mind, he would have had doubts about whether he was a human being like others. A deep-seated voice inside him invited him to pounce on her and devour her. Suddenly the lights went out and just one strong white light shone on them. From the loud-speakers came the sound of a drum's simple beat and a flute's sad plaint. It rose as the lights slowly came on again.

Adam could not shake a feeling of sluggishness. He did his best to resist a need to collapse. He found he had to get down on all fours, his head shaking and his eyes staring stupidly at the woman. She meanwhile was holding a sword that sparkled like a live coal. He shuddered when he saw his shadow on the floor creating the image of a real live bull, with tail and horns, hair and muzzle. Even his own feelings, he re-

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alized, were basic and savage, without bounds or restraints.

As the music of the drum and flute grew louder, a young man and his girlfriend detached themselves from the crowd. They came up to him, walking theatrically, dodging him with skillfull movements. They reached him and lightly seized him. He felt a couple of sharp pricks as if two pins were puncturing his sides. There were shouts of encouragement accompanied by laughter and cries of disgust greeting the young couple as they withdrew into the shadows.

His spirit was in turmoil and a flood of questions drowned out the pain of his injuries. Torrential anxiety filled every fiber of his being, and his nerves jangled with fear, making his heart beat furiously, pumping his blood through his veins as if it was liquid fuel. His face reddened, wrinkles furrowed his brow, and his eyes bulged. Cries of protest welled up inside him more and more. He opened his mouth, but it was not words of protest that emerged, but the roar of an angry injured bull. He then advanced defiantly toward the woman. His eyes and his horns were targeted at her navel, but she dodged him neatly. She jumped up in front of him. Her face constantly retained that look of sympathy and modesty, and sweat dropped onto her sword making it shine all the brighter.

Once again the couple emerged from the crowd. They sidled smartly toward him and stabbed him in the chest. They went back and were lost in the shadows. There were more cries, cries of encouragement and revulsion. He felt a fire flare up in his flesh and a warm liquid poured out on his cheeks while in his chest words formed and grew like a fetus, "My God, how alone I am."

The noise of the drum and flute was louder than the din created by the crowd. The woman walked around him seductively. His whole body shook with the sight of waves of the flowers and butterflies that swayed drunkenly before him. Adam's head shook right and left and he squatted down on his hind legs. He summoned up all his strength and with a grain of hope strove to get out of this farce alive. But deep down he had misgivings and wanted this all to end at once. His wish was for the curtain to fall on life and farce together. He then gave himself a shake and leapt up from where he had been, like any other strong-willed bull that sought to determine his fate by the force of his horns. His eyes were drawn to the navel by an invisible skein of music and light.

The woman lightly sidestepped to avoid his charge. She raised her shining sword and struck him with unerring precision. It fell shimmering to pierce the lower

part of his throat and, like fire, reached as far as his chest. The blade settled in his heart and he gave a detached and noble shudder, which became a release from turbulent existence.

His strength collapsed and he sank to the floor. He could no longer hear anything. Under the pale light, the ghost of the bull was stained with blood. As he lay on the ground he saw the face of the woman hovering over him, in her eyes a contemplative look as if she was examining a painting. Faces of men and women gathered around her. He knew them, he knew their names, had lived their lives, and the seeds of their being had impregnated him with a life force.

In these last living moments and before his eyes finally closed, his tongue murmured, "From what stupidity have I sprung? From what random past is my life a legacy? How many wild deserts are there in my soul? How many rivers, living and dead, flow through my veins?"

* * *

When I found him flopped against a wall I did not realize at first who it was. It was after three in the morning and I had come back after an agreeable evening with some friends, including Marilyn. Adam

had not turned up, leaving us to spend the evening wherever he was. Even his wife did not know where he was. We had discussed among ourselves that he had changed, turning into some boring joker who couldn't bear anything that got in his way however necessary or important. His growing remorse caused a transformation in his character and a tendency to violent self-destruction. An hour earlier I had left Marilyn after we had been to the movies and had a chat in a cafe. I was wanting to end the night at some party where I might pick up a woman who would agree to spend the rest of the night with me. Near the disco in Rue Carouge I found Adam drunk, his clothes drenched in red wine. I did not hear the story of him turning into a bull and his death by a woman's sword until the next day, after he woke up at noon in my flat.

He never tired of remembering Hajir and was always asking, "What do you think? . . . Where is she now? . . . What have they done to her? . . . Have they found out that she was carrying forged papers? . . . What punishment will they give her? . . . Will they believe her if she tells them her story? . . . They may think she's crazy. Or a spy. Even if they let her off how can she live without her grandchildren? Perhaps they. ..."

I was unable to say a word. I could only imagine, if

she had been able to survive, what my relationship with her would be. I felt sure I would one day meet her and I would be unable to convince her to continue our love. She would say that she no longer wanted that. She had become like all women and it was hard for her to separate lust from love. The more lust merges with love and dreams of love, the more she achieved the pleasures of the flesh. Was not lust and love with women completely muddled? It was hard to separate one from the other. With men it seems that they coexist side by side. He can mix them up and he can pull them apart. Hajir would say to me, "Maybe for this reason you men can get a kick out of desire, whereas all women get is money and revulsion." She would go on to say, "Perhaps it's all rooted in the past. Hasn't it been the case that from earliest time, the act of sex for you men needs the desire for offspring, whereas sex for us women needs the desire for offspring for the pleasure of sex? The act of our pleasure is held in check by the notion of creating a human being in our bellies, a being that we will create and nurture and to whom we will bestow life."

I felt that deep down Adam was unwilling to talk about her frankly and directly. He preferred to hide her behind a screen of philosophical questioning and existential doubts, but I guessed that in the middle of

vague, fragmentary remarks he made he could be eloquent about her while drunk: he was making a tireless comparison between his wife and the woman of the flask. Perhaps the experience of Hajir had uncovered feelings in his heart that were familiar to many lovers and married people: as familiarity blows stronger, so the flame of desire wanes. Their personalities harmonize more with the length of the relationship, but physically there was an ennui in repetition. He said that desire was the opposite of familiarity. Desire was originality, a basic liberation from reason and mutual understanding. Familiarity was custom, knowledge, and appreciation. His body was detached from his wife but his personality was completely tied up with hers. It was more likely that the dilemma did not lie in physical sensuality or spiritual purity, but in the limited nature of the power of the body to satisfy the yearnings of the spirit. He continued to make love to her as usual, but he lost that special fever of the uniqueness and of each act of love. This is what the woman of the flask had taught him.

I met Marilyn on many occasions. Each time I saw her I detected in her features sadness and concern for her husband and for the child in her womb. She did not understand what was behind the changes that had suddenly afflicted Adam. I was the one who no-

ticed the return of feelings of alienation that I had supposed had gone after we left Iraq. His affection for his wife had become like his former affection for his family. Each evening when we used to return home in Baghdad, Adam's soul was aflame with both fear and apprehension, that some disaster had struck his family, that all his brothers and sisters and his parents had been killed in a road accident. It was a waking dream close to the surface of his consciousness. He would visualize his neighbors' children rushing up to him to tell him of the catastrophe. He would imagine his feelings when he received the news: he would be sad and weep and grieve, but at the same time he would be free of the burden of their affection.

I don't know how I found myself one day persuading Adam and Marilyn to take a picnic and spend a day in the Alps where there was still snow even though summer had arrived. As the train sped along the track heading for Valais I could see in our faces that we were full of anticipation for the fun of the snow. Our intentions were not transparent; even I was in two minds: a break for Marilyn, and providing an opportunity for them both to reach a better understanding of each other, but there was also a deeper wish: that we could all stand together and tear ourselves away from the web of vagueness and embar-

rassment that circumstances had woven around us. I wanted to escape definitively from this obsession. The sun shone on their faces as they looked through the carriage window. The colors became gradually more and more distinct, starting with the blue of the lake and the green of its banks, the darkness of the slopes and the whiteness of the peaks and finally the silver and blue of the sky. I was thinking that if Hajir had been with us she would have loved Marilyn as we did and would have found her to be an excellent and sympathetic friend. I observed that my feelings with regard to Marilyn were deep and complex, a contrast to my past behavior. They were feelings that were as commonplace as they were unfathomable. I looked at her belly great with child and felt as if I had had something to do with it. And what had brought on all these changes? Adam was still sliding around in a lie of frivolity, a bit like my normal life, though I had withdrawn into myself, thinking less sensuously. I was inclined more and more to stay in my room, spending time painting and thinking. I didn't want to be with people, with women, with friends so much.

We reached the village and rented a toboggan. I wished that Hajir had still been with us. She would have talked about history and people, about men who were merciful or evil or good, about heroes, and about

the oppressed. I was certain that if she had still been with us, her love for Adam would not be affected by any change of his feelings toward her. She would love him and wish Marilyn to share in cherishing him. She would preserve her individuality and her frankness with him though she would have lost her former submissiveness and instinctive surrender to his whims. She would not follow him in whatever he wanted after she had become more like his wife, an equal but separate partner. The more he saw her as a woman who got tired or ill and dreamt of a man who could provide her with security and relieve the pains of loneliness, the more disappointed he would be with her. He would lose that madness of fun and spontaneity. He would have to take her arm, flirt with her; he would even have to make sure that he did not reach an orgasm before she did. And when it was over and he withdrew, he would have to carry on cuddling her, caressing her because her passion did not end with his coming, but continued for a while before cooling down.

We spent the day at the snow-bound summit. Golden beams lit up the silvery snow. Without any thought or calculation and as if I was carrying out the orders of a higher power such as destiny, I quietly opened my black bag and looked at the flask that Hajir had left and to which she had never returned. It

may be that Marilyn did not understand what was in my mind as she watched me pour the liquid of eternal life into our bottle of red wine. She stared at me, a distant glint in her eyes. She raised the bottle and started to fill the red undulant skein into our three glasses. We raised our glasses and our eyes turned toward Marilyn's belly. We placed our hands on it and said all together, "Here's to you, little one. May you have everlasting peace."

We remained seated after we had finished the wine. The sun was shining on the summit of the peak opposite us. I could see in their eyes how Hajir—present or absent—had had such an impact on each one of us. Marilyn was pregnant thanks to Hajir's fertility. As for Adam and myself, she had given us a new role. I imagine that when we set out from the island that was our childhood, each one of us sailed in a direction that was quite different from that of the rest. When we had been half way round the world we all met up on a desert island with the woman of the flask. She was a dream where we all met and in which we merged, but we split up after our dream was submerged in a cloud of darkness. We came back once again, only destined to split up again in order to complete the remaining half of our contrasting voyage through the waters of the unknown. Adam headed off in the direction he had come from, I in the direction I

had come from. Perhaps we might meet again on the island that was another world.

I felt a sudden energy and irresistible wish to set off tobogganing: it was as if the liquid had pressed a switch inside my head. We got up with Marilyn between the two of us. We took our long wooden toboggan and headed for a nearby slope. The place was full of people playing around and arriving there on their toboggan. We placed our toboggan and faced it in the direction of the plain. I sat in it front, then Marilyn behind me and then Adam. Marilyn put the flask in her lap. She put her arms round me, and said suddenly and doubtfully "Hold on. I think something is stirring. ..."

I didn't hear the rest of her words. Her voice was drowned by the sudden rush of the toboggan. I have no idea what capricious hand gave us a shove without our being able to prevent it. The toboggan cut its way, gathering speed as it went down. It was unnatural that the slope went on so long. Usually there were sandy hillocks that could stop us. Marilyn clung to me tighter and Adam enfolded us in his arms. She cried out, "It's coming, it's on its way. . . ."

Cries became distant and then disappeared. The shapes of people and toboggans and cedar trees flashed before me as if they were on a screen that

was bursting into flames. The toboggan went on and on. It devoured the mountain and was heading toward a huge drop. All attempts to stop it were useless. Our shoes were filled with snow and our fingers sank into it. We tried to throw ourselves off. No use. We were as stuck to the toboggan as if we were part of its woodwork.

* * *

There was no escape from plunging over the edge down to the base of the gorge below. Our expectation of this fate bound us all the closer together and we were as one, without individual feelings. The whole thing seemed out of some impossible fairy tale when we saw our toboggan go over the edge and soar over the valley. We were flying! We saw woods, frozen streams, huge rocks, shepherds' huts.

Our toboggan headed toward a mountain summit, toward the sun as it rested there. We penetrated its copper-colored rays. Adam's and my cries were mingled with Marilyn's cries as she screamed, "My baby!" We were flying into the great ball of sun embraced by golden showers of light.

The dazzling light slowly, slowly eased to allow us to realize that the toboggan was continuing its rush in-

to a desert that stretched before us toward an invisible horizon. Little hills and mounds were scattered all over the surface. The sand was littered with the carcasses of camels, horses, and machines. On the horizons there were wells from which gushed forth eternal flames, with dark copper-colored clouds tinting the blueness of the sky, their stale foul-smelling odors corrupting the air. The father says, "This is what is left of the people in revolt. They are garbed in wealth and sin. The earth eats them up and belches them forth as burning gas. . . ." Around the wells of fire there are bodies strewn: soldiers and civilians, women and children, all dressed in costumes from different historical eras. A breeze, coming from the sand and smoke, toys with them, and there is the numbing sense of death and of birth.

Our cries were drowned by a blast of a gale that stormed around us, and our toboggan did not pause in its onward course, heading toward a river that cut its way defiantly through the middle of the desert. On its banks were fields and palm groves and orchards of citrus fruit. In its red muddy waters they had tossed away my umbilical cord. The mother said, "If you live, my boy, it's thanks to this river. Following the custom of your ancestors we tossed your umbilical cord into the river on the day you were born. By the grace of its waters you are created. By the grace of its waters is

your soul made immortal."

Impelled by the speed of fate, we made our way through the fire, the carcasses, the sand, the palm groves, and the fields. There opened up before us the embrace of the river where gentle whirlpools had swallowed nation after nation and cast them forth again before our time.

In spite of the terror of reality that we had been anticipating, the ravenous whirlpool sucked us in and swallowed us, and our eyes bade farewell to superficial reality, and our cries became subdued. We shuddered and fell silent. Bit by bit we were overcome by a feeling of cleanliness and a vision took shape before us that dazzled us with its clarity. The fetus issued from our whirlpool and floated with its flask on the surface of the water, making its way to the shore, toward the fields and groves and the wells of eternal flames.