

# **I Am You**

A Novel by Dr. Elham Mansour

Translated Edited with an Introduction by

**Samar Habib**

I Am You

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A Novel by Elham Mansour

*Translated and edited*

*with student exercises*

*by Samar Habib*

<teneo>// press

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## PREFACE

This student edition of Elham Mansour's novel *I Am You (Ana Hiya Anti)* was made possible by the cooperation between Teneo and Cambria Press which previously published the critical hardback edition of the novel for which I provided a critical introduction. This student edition is intended for university classroom use in courses on women and sexuality in the Arab world, gender studies, cultural studies, comparative literature and/ or gay and lesbian studies outside the western framework. Instead of providing commentary in the form of the introduction and the uninterrupted text of the novel as the critical hardback edition did, this edition proposes a series of questions or projects (in the endnotes) following each significant section of the novel. The research exercises and questions are intended for group discussion, individual reflection or both and can be used to generate ideas for larger research projects such as theses or dissertations. Unit or

course conveners will be able to select specific exercises for students to attempt that are appropriate to the rest of their course or unit of study.

The dearth of pedagogical material available for use in university classrooms on the subject of women and gender in the Middle East has prompted me to create this student edition. The need for a paperback release of the novel which students can afford is also equally important.

I do not propose specific responses or suggest that there are correct answers to the questions proposed throughout the text (though some answers are of course more correct than others). Students should be able to gain further experience and confidence with close textual analysis related to women and gender issues and should be assessed on their ability to write forcefully, compellingly and to support their views with evidence. The research tasks should be able to assist advanced students in conducting literature reviews and to begin weaving these into cogent and substantial arguments whilst also paying close attention to the primary text. In addition, the reader will note that I have not given full bibliographic details of readings required for the completion of certain tasks. I have done so deliberately and in the spirit of encouraging students to hunt for the material themselves, as they want to do at a postgraduate level. I give students only the minimum reference to a text by mentioning the author and the title; it is up to them to locate the texts and to reference them properly in their responses. Consider this edition a kind of academic research and writing game that your course or unit coordinator will guide you through. I hope you like it and I hope it enriches your reading, writing and research experience of your course.

## THE NOVEL

I do not wish to reveal to you all the facts unearthed by research on Elham Mansour or this novel, simply because I expect that you are now becoming apt researchers who know how to seek out bibliographic databases such as the MLA that your institution's library should be giving you electronic access to. If you don't know what I'm talking about, or are only in your first year of undergraduate training, ask your friendly librarian. There are other non-academic databases through which you can also perform searches, although I would be very wary about the quality of the material I would find through the internet. It is important to discern whether the material is reliable, for example who wrote it? Has it been peer-reviewed, proof read, revised or is it just an anonymous blog? Online encyclopaedias should be avoided at all costs, except those for which you gain access through library or personal subscriptions.

*I Am You (Ana Hiya Anti)* was first published in Arabic in the year 2000 in Beirut by Dar Riad el-Rayyes. el-Rayyes is a progressive publishing house that has been responsible for the publication of a number of daring books dealing with social taboos. Together with the London-based publisher Saqi Books, el-Rayyes is a leading worldwide publisher of Arabic literature.

Elham Mansour is the head of the Philosophy Department at the Lebanese University in Beirut and she is the author of several novels including her most recent work, a novel published in 2005 by the abovementioned publisher.

Mansour based *I Am You* on a number of her own experiences although the novel is not sufficiently non-fiction to be perceived as autobiographical, it is however not entirely fantastical either. The author's primary motivation was to



penetrate a deep-seated taboo in the Arab world, namely, sexual relations between women. As you may know the subject is not particularly open for discussion and the percussion of individuals of this orientation is common-place. Mansour's novel is important primarily for this reason, for daring to broach a subject most would rather forget.

Finally, I would like to thank Teneo and Cambria Press for making this student edition possible and for their dedication to serving the needs of the academic community worldwide. In particular I thank Dr Paul Richardson for his commitment to this project and the patience he exhibited in seeing it come to light.

I AM YOU

## PART I

### 1

Ceasefire. The thunderstorm of canons and machine guns subsided and the night transformed into darkness inhabited by caution. The civilians left their hiding-places. Layal withdrew from amongst her neighbours, who were congregated around the stairs, and returned to her apartment. It was relatively early and she was waiting to see if the ceasefire would hold, so she decided to read for a while before going to sleep. Taking a book, she sat at her desk and continued her work, reading, though not understanding very well what she read and re-read in vain. She continued to suffer the strain of the terror she had experienced for many hours that afternoon, but in insisting on reading she was hoping that she would escape reality, hoping that the words would remove her from the atmosphere and miseries of war.

### 2

On the other side of the capital Siham did the same. She left her hiding-place, returned to her house and entered her bedroom.

She too could not sleep. She was immersed in planning something and was suffering from a disappointment she could hardly bear. What was she going to do? There was of course the option of surrender. No! After determining that she would not surrender she began to recollect the events that led up to her current condition.

*How did my story with her begin? Did it begin with her, really? I was eight years old when she held my hand , and I felt that strange sensation that invaded my entire being every time I remembered her and remembered the touches of my mother's hand on my back. My mother used to sit in front of the television in her usual armchair in our lounge room, and I sat next to her on the floor and put my head on her knee. She would place her hand inside my shirt and tickle me lightly on my back, until I would fall asleep or go to bed and to my secret habit. <sup>1</sup>*

*My primary school teacher resembled my mother and when she held my hand I became a satellite orbiting her. I used to melt or fall apart whenever she walked into the classroom... and I found myself drawn to her... perusing her face without hearing what she said. I used to come closer and closer to her until our bodies touched and then I'd put out my hand and she would take it and we'd go out to the playground and I'd hear her say: "Hurry sweetheart, to playtime!" In the beginning I used to do just that—leave her and go to my girl friends to try and play with them, but I always looked back towards her and it made me extremely happy if I ever chanced to see her looking at me and smiling. Her smile used to encourage me to return to her and then she'd stroke my face and embrace me and that strange feeling would invade my whole body. My image of her intersperses with that of my mother, as she runs her hand over my back.*

---

When Siham reached secondary school she began to isolate herself from her girl friends and reject her femininity. People began to call her a tomboy. The day she got her period for the first time was a day of intense mourning. Her mother, however, eased her dread by explaining the implications of menstruation: that Siham was a *woman* now, that this is a natural matter, and that it is the fate of all girls! But even though Siham understood what her mother was saying, she could not bring herself to accept this. The days where she had her period became a time of illness and extreme pain, and thus the first year passed with the period doing what the period does, and Siham found that the unacceptable condition had become a matter of fact; a necessity that could neither be rejected nor avoided. She used to express her protest through rejecting all forms of feminine attire, by always wearing pants and button-up shirts was never comfortable in anything other than boys' shoes. Her mother was at pains to witness this, because she had hoped to see her daughter looking elegant, beautiful and womanly, but she did not succeed in convincing Siham to conform in her attire and thus the mother determined that the matter was of no importance. It helped that the seasonal fashion itself was leaning toward unisex clothing. The mother submitted to her daughter's will without knowing, or possibly ignoring, what was seething inside Siham.

Things continued in this fashion for the entire duration of Siham's journey through junior high school. She was among the most energetic and successful students in her class despite the capricious nature security, which translated into long-term disruptions and closures for the schools. Thus Siham concluded that stage of her education and advanced to the final year of school with a First Class grade. In her final school year her mother began to worry about her predicament

and took to concocting solutions that would ensure that Siham completed her education securely and safely. She decided to send Siham to Paris to complete the remainder of her final senior year. She had thought that the duration of one year gave them sufficient time for dousing the war in Lebanon, or for finding some other solution that would return the country to what it had once been. She pursued her cause vigorously and managed to secure a scholarship for Siham who was told: “We will go together in the beginning so I can secure your accommodation and so forth, and then I’ll come back alone.” And this is what happened. They travelled together. Siham’s mother found accommodation for her daughter close to relatives who lived in Paris and then returned to Lebanon. Siham resumed her studies and her life began to regain some sort of order.<sup>2</sup>

### 3

Siham began her Parisian life with the utmost excitement. She was an intelligent girl; fearless, invading every unknown in order to learn its secrets. She was overwhelmed by this magical city and decided to discover its landmarks and worlds. And in Paris there are many landmarks and many more worlds, but what designates entry into a particular world are a person’s specific inclinations, that draw them into walking through open doors; and in this magical city doors are flung wide open for the purposes of fulfilling desires and inclinations of all kinds.

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school Siham made an effort to form close relationships with her girl friends in class. And as it often happens in relationships, there is a particular person, or more than one person, to whom we find ourselves naturally inclined---perhaps due to a likeness between us. This is what happened with Siham; she befriended one of her French schoolmates and began to spend all her time with her. Outwardly it appeared to be an innocent and naive relationship, that of two study friends who sit together, eat together, who visit museums and go to the cinema and the theatre together, and none of this generated any concern or curiosity in anyone's mind. But what about all that time that they spent in each other's company when no one was watching, what were they doing then?

Claire was from the country; she came to Paris to study and lived with relatives of hers. When she met Siham and realized that the girl lived on her own in a studio apartment, she became restless about living with relatives and from time to time spent the night at Siham's. They studied together and ate together and... This is of course a natural situation between two girls who share the same inclinations and goals. This relationship lasted throughout the spring.

Siham's mother missed her and decided that she wanted to visit her in order to see how her daughter was coping with her estrangement from home. She prepared herself for the journey and rang her daughter to inform her of her plans. Siham felt ambivalent. She was happy about seeing her mother, whom she treasured, but at the same time she felt uneasy about it and she expressed these feelings indirectly. Her mother noticed this disquiet but insisted on putting her plan into action, ignoring Siham's obvious discomfort and panic. Siham claimed that the mother's visit was untimely and inconvenient for her, because she was

preparing for upcoming exams. The mother seized on this point and asserted that there was no better time for her visit, since she would free Siham from the obligations and worries of cleaning and cooking and so forth. Siham accepted this because ultimately, she was unable to refuse her mother anything.

Siham and Claire discussed the mother's impending visit. They were both sad because this meant a temporary separation and for this reason, they decided that they would spend the night before the mother's arrival together in Siham's room. They would hold a little farewell party and agree on appropriate meeting arrangements. Consequently they spent all the time leading up to their separation together. Siham had become incapable of living without Claire, who filled her entire conscious and unconscious mind, precisely in the same way that *she* inhabited Claire's mental scape. A mutual passion, unperturbed by prohibition because they were of the same sex.

The night before the mother's arrival they prepared drinks and food and cigarettes and sat together doing whatever they liked in terms of fulfilling their similar desires. They continued until the morning, in a state of ecstasy, each enamoured of the other whom she loved. When they were finally worn out, they both fell asleep until the afternoon, when Siham awoke in terror realizing that her mother's landing time had come. She woke up Claire, they tidied the room with what little time they had and separated. Claire went to her home and Siham to the airport to meet her mother.

Siham drank coffee hurriedly hoping to appear energetic in order to prove to her mother that everything was as it should be. But even if her face showed traces of exhaustion she planned to use study as an excuse.



There was a fervent meeting and long embraces at Orly airport and continuous conversation in the car that took them to Paris. Siham asked about the rest of her family and the situation in Lebanon and her mother asked about study and Paris and her financial and emotional situation. And thus the trip continued until they found themselves outside Siham's building.

They walked up the stairs and into Siham's room. Her mother entered first and headed toward a seat in the corner. She exclaimed: "Thank God... I've finally arrived!" She had barely finished saying this when she caught sight of a photograph of a girl sitting on Siham's desk. She suddenly felt tense without knowing why, and without thinking she asked: "Who is she?" Siham's reply was cool, calm: "She's my friend Claire." The mother directed her gaze around the walls of the room and found nothing but large posters of naked or semi-naked women. For a moment she recalled Siham's adolescent years when she so vigorously rejected her femininity. She found her suspicious excruciatingly difficult to contemplate and expeditiously distanced herself from them. She genuinely did not want to know---as though unknowing had the capacity to erase the reality. She obviated the subject and asked Siham about her health instead, and Siham, who possessed intelligence and perceptiveness, understood what her mother was feeling and so she headed for the kitchen: "I'll squeeze you some fresh juice." And thus their conversation continued without either of them being able to see the other. In this way, Siham succeeded in circumventing awkward confrontation, because the mother knew and refused what she knew, while the daughter knew that her mother knew, but also knew that her mother refused to know. It was through this arrangement that she found room for evasiveness and for eluding the obvious and candid question.

The ringing of the telephone complicated things a little. Siham hurried to answer it, knowing full well that it was Claire. She said: “Thank you... She’s well... No... You know I can’t... until tomorrow...” and she hung up the telephone. Here the mother intervened to say: “she’s very disrespectful...” Before she could finish, Siham interrupted her: “that was Claire, she wanted to know if you arrived safely and ...”

“*And* she wanted to know if you could meet her as if nothing happened, she’s insensitive. She knows you’re with me and still wants to impose herself.”

“No, it’s not like that at all. Anyhow, I’m so happy to see you, so it doesn’t matter.” Siham replied and drew closer to her mother, embracing and kissing her. She changed the subject completely by telling her mother about her success at school and about the teachers and Paris. The whole atmosphere was transformed and the mother soon found her daughter as she wanted her to be. She began offering advice and lecturing her about the necessity of success and continuing education. They spent that night in a climate of closeness and tenderness, as was to be expected of a mother and daughter who had spent several months apart.

When Siham went to school in the morning her mother began to examine the photograph of Claire, studying all of its features. Before long, the image of Siham’s primary school teacher entered her mind, but she quickly put an end to the thought that brought on this association. She wondered why Siham placed the photograph of this girl on her desk. The mother had always thought that girls around Siham’s age kept photos of boys with them. Why all these naked women on the walls? “Good God, is what I’m sensing true? If it is true then this is a

frightening thing. Should I confront her or pretend to know nothing? But if I ignore it, I would be allowing Siham to fall to her death. Can I leave her situation to deteriorate before me and say nothing? No, I'm going to confront her and ask her directly. She tells me everything. If what I think is true then I'm going to treat this with extreme thoughtfulness and calm. I'll try to show her that what she is going through is a phase, after which she will find herself on the straight and narrow. This situation, however, needs a clear head, because it will require great will power to get through. I'll make her understand this and make her feel strong. I will show her that she possesses all the qualities she needs to direct her life as she wishes..." She paused and then continued: "But if I confront her with what I am feeling and it becomes clear to me that everything I sense is wrong, then Siham is going to think I'm obsessed with sex and a pervert; she'll think poorly of me. Perhaps taking my time is better... I'll observe first and if required, then I'll intervene."

Claire kept Siham at arm's length at school that day in order to let her know that she was unhappy with the situation. In turn, Siham tried to explain that the new arrangement was a temporary one and that after the mother's departure their life together would resume as normal. Claire, who was of French rearing and mindedness, cried: "Are you that scared of your mother? She's such a castrating mother! You can't even go out by yourself when she's around. I can't put up with this."

"Let me sort it out. I feel the same way you do. I can't live without you either. Just give me some time to convince my mother that we need to meet up."

“If you don’t act quickly I’m going to break up with you.” By this, Claire was hoping to increase the pressure on Siham, since she was aware of the intensity of the latter’s attachment to her.

“Just give me another two days. After that I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Two days, no more. Otherwise I’ll bust into your room and expose what you’re trying to hide, or leave you for someone gutsier than you.”

“Don’t rush into things you will regret later, I’m going to sort it out. I need you too and I love you more than you realise.”

She leaned forward and kissed her on the mouth, precipitating her anger. By the end of the day they agreed that Siham would put an end to their troubles provided that Claire refrained from calling her throughout the short time Siham needed to do this.

When Siham returned home she hugged her mother and asked her how her day went and if she was bored being by herself. Her mother was no stranger to Paris though and she reassured Siham that she couldn’t possibly get bored here. “Don’t worry about me, I’m doing very well,” the mother said, “it’s your well-being that’s more important. I’ve made you dinner, so eat up and hit the books. Don’t mind me.”

After dinner Siham sat at her desk, opened her books and began to study. Meanwhile, the mother read in absolute silence trying not to disturb her daughter. A short time later, Siham began to exhibit deliberate signs of restlessness and distraction, conveying the idea that the presence of another person in the room was distracting her from her studies. Suddenly she asked: “Where’s Claire’s picture?”

“I was dusting your desk today. I think I put it on the shelf. Look it’s over there,” her mother replied passively. Siham walked to the shelf and returned the picture to its place on her desk. Her mother watched this silently, harbouring swelling anger. Managing to contain herself, she announced: “I’m going to sleep.”

How could sleep come to her, she who was awake and angry? She lay down for a while then got up to go to the kitchen, ostensibly, for a drink, and as soon as she retreated to her bed, she rose again under the pretext of going to the toilet, then again for a cigarette and again for... With her mother’s every move, Siham displayed irritation at being distracted and unable to concentrate. She was indeed distracted but only by looking at Claire’s photograph and plotting for the next stage of the operation. Several hours later they both fell asleep, each in a turbulent world of her own. But Siham could not sleep until she had concocted a plan for meeting Claire the following evening.

As on the previous day, Siham came home from school, spoke to her mother a little and ate hurriedly as though she wanted to begin studying without wasting any time. Her mother was delighted by this but was quickly disappointed. Soon after Siham opened her book she got lost in a daydream and then picked up the telephone and spoke loudly without looking at her mother: “I’m going to ring Claire, she didn’t come to school today, I think she’s sick.” She dialed a phone number and said: “So you’re really sick? I’ll come over and explain the classes we had today, see you later.” She put down the telephone, stood up with her school bag and said to her mother: “I won’t be late.” And her mother, who muffled her anger, asked:

“What is Claire’s phone number?”

“What for? She’s really sick.”

“I don’t doubt that, but I’d like to make sure I can reach you, if I need anything.”

“But Claire lives with her relatives and it’s better that you don’t ring her except in case of a real emergency. You know how the French think!”

“Don’t worry, I know how they think well enough and I won’t bother them.”

Siham took a white piece of paper, wrote Claire’s phone number on it and gave it to her mother before leaving in a hurry. The mother did not approve of this behaviour and sat up thinking about all the possible explanations for Siham’s sudden departure and then she settled on the one possibility that comforted her most. “What am I so worried about? Obviously Claire is sick, and being her friend, Siham went to visit her. What are friends for otherwise? It’s normal for Siham to have friends, *girl* friends, precisely because she lives alone as a foreigner and needs people to keep her company. When I was her age I had a friend whom I adored. I studied with her and spent most of my time with her... but I never put her photograph on my desk... we had a natural friendship that everyone accepted. Well then, why am I so worried about Siham’s relationship with Claire? Would it be better if she had a boyfriend? She might have gone to meet a boy and used Claire as an excuse so that I wouldn’t worry. Should I call her to make sure? No, I won’t do that; I will lose her trust this way.” She heard the sound of the footsteps on the wooden stairs. “How silly am I and my ideas! I’ve been accusing her of the worst things and here she comes!” She sat quietly, expecting the door to open but the sound of the footsteps began to fade with their continued ascent. She looked at her watch: It’s ten o’clock. She has to come back before the metro shuts, it’s nearly

that time.” She rose from her chair and began to pace the room, attempting to shake off the dark thoughts erupting in her mind. Shortly she immersed herself in a book, and reading it genuinely distanced her from her anxieties, with the exception of the occasional glance at the clock. More time passed and Siham still hadn’t returned. She cast the book aside and stood waiting by the window. “Dear God why is she so late? Maybe something bad happened to her, maybe she was attacked in the street. Should I call the police? Call Claire? But it’s so late, what am I going to do? If she was going to be late she would have told me, she would have called me... what happened to her? Should I go looking for her? Where?”

She continued in this manner for some time, slapping her face and calling out from time to time: “My God did I send her to Paris to lose her? What will become of me if something bad happens to her? Did I save her from the dangers of war in Lebanon to throw her into greater ones?” The sound of footsteps along the stairs. She held her breath and waited. This time her hopes were not disappointed, the footsteps halted before the door and a key went into the lock. She felt great relief, but as soon as she saw Siham she fulminated, reproaching her daughter for what she had done and the worry and fears she had caused, concluding that she cursed the day that she sent her daughter to Paris. She threw herself on the seat and said: “And now, what is your reason for being late? Don’t tell me you were studying with Claire because I won’t believe that. Admit to me where you were or I’ll take you back to Lebanon tomorrow.” Siham’s continued silence caused the mother to grab and shake her by the shoulders whilst yelling out: “Tell me where you were!” She suddenly caught the smell of alcohol on her daughter’s breath and so she pushed her aside: “You were getting drunk you whore! Who with and

where? What's your relationship with Claire? I'm not stupid and what I'm sensing is definitely true, you low-life, isn't it?!"

"She's my friend."

"And what else? Why is her picture on your desk? Why all these pictures of naked women on the walls? Is this what you came to learn in Paris?"

The mother raged and berated while Siham remained silent like the Sphinx. She realised that, because her mother had worked out what was happening, any attempt at self-defence would be in vain. Her lack of response proved to her mother that her suspicions were true, and at this realization she too became quiet. "I'm going to take care of this now. I won't let you drown in the mud of Paris. Tomorrow you'll see what is going to happen to you and that... *Claire*." She went to her bed and lay there. Calmly Siham did the same and silence prevailed between them. Morning came, they both rose early and Siham went to school without either one of them speaking to the other.

At school Siham could not find Claire anywhere. Siham's chest narrowed and she could not think about anything or anyone other than what might have happened to Claire. At the end of the first class Siham hurried out immediately to call her friend. Then she saw Claire sitting on one of the wooden benches with her head in her hands, as though she did not want to see anyone. Siham hurried towards her and called out: "Claire! What's wrong? Why weren't you in class?" Claire neither moved nor replied, instead, she kept her head in her hands, staring at the ground. Siham came closer and made an effort to lift Claire's face in her direction and as soon as she did this she realised that Claire was crying and she heard her speak with a broken voice: "Get away from me. You are a barbaric people!"



Siham had an inkling of what it might be but she wanted to make sure: “I won’t let you say that, why are you accusing us of barbarism?”

“Your mother...”

“Did she call you?”

“Yes, she rang me and called me every filthy name under the sun and threatened that if I ever came near you or talked to you from now on, that she would do the unthinkable.” She said this without looking Siham in the face and faced with Siham’s silence, which surprised her; she too came to a realization: “Are you that backward in Lebanon? You say that your mother is educated and mature; what kind of maturity and education is this? I can accept her calling me a lesbian but for her to describe me as diseased and dirty, to accuse me of contaminating her daughter--- I can’t accept that at all! Don’t worry I gave it back to her. I didn’t keep quiet. I let her know that this was none of her business and that she was despicable. I even warned her that if she rang me again that I would call the police or take her to court. My life is none of her concern; doesn’t she know that? And as for you Siham, you should either stand up to your mother and defend your rights, or get out of my life. Get out of our movement that fights for our rights!”

Siham realised that her mother had worked it all out and so she immediately began to think of ways to convince her that this was all a misunderstanding. By doing this she would be easing her mother’s mortification while also sparing herself from the violent repudiation that was to be expected. She momentarily forgot about Claire and was preoccupied with the problem she had to face at home.

The silence continued between them until Claire said: “You have nothing to say? If I were you I would go to my house this minute and explain to my mother that she has behaved badly, and that she has to apologize to me, and you. You’re a coward; you don’t have the guts to confront her, even when she has overstepped her boundary, when the matter concerns your personal life...”

Siham did not let her continue on in her rant because she painfully realized that they thought in two different ways. She was thinking about convincing her mother that there was a misunderstanding whereas Claire wanted her to confirm the truth behind her mother’s accusations, by asking the latter to mind her own business. Her reply came with a degree of hesitation, as though she was looking for the most appropriate words, so as to convey her situation to Claire, without being accused of cowardice: “Look, Claire, the matter isn’t easy and I can’t confront my mother about this subject because she rejects it totally and utterly. We have to understand her; that she comes from a culture that is completely different from Parisian culture. Where we come from, in Lebanon, the lesbian is an outcast, she can’t reveal who she is; she tries to hide herself, so much so that those who observe our society are incapable of finding any evidence to suggest that she exists. And if you were to find relationships of this kind, and they do indeed exist, you’ll see that they are pursued with the utmost secrecy, without the emergence of any visible traces. Even the feminist movement in Lebanon isn’t brave enough to broach the subject. It’s prohibited, it’s seen as shameful and a sign of decadence, and illness and... Besides, my mother won’t be staying here long. Can’t you forget the subject for a little while and let things go back to the way they were after she leaves? We can be friends for now, and afterwards...”

“Friends?! I don’t want your friendship. I love you and love is different from friendship. Either things stay as they were between us before she came or just get out of my life, okay? I can be with someone else. It will hurt to forget you, but I’ll do it. I refuse this kind of humiliation and I refuse to be enamoured of a coward.”

It was time for her second class and Siham was forced to leave. When the period ended she couldn’t find Claire anywhere. Siham felt saddened by Claire’s sudden departure but she also felt relieved because she needed time to prepare for her confrontation with her mother. What was she going to do? What was walking through that door going to be like? How was her mother behave and what responses would she have if the subject is brought up? These were the questions that plagued Siham, who finally decided that she was not going to respond to anything. She was going to keep quiet and to let her mother say whatever she liked. She was going to let her exhaust all that she had to say, and in the end she was going to attempt to diffuse her suspicions and to reinforce the idea that she was an obedient and ideal child. She did not wish to be on a collision course with her mother, particularly about this issue, because she knew with certainty that she would be the loser. Therefore, her strategy was going to be as follows: a) negating her mother’s suspicions and eradicating them and b) behaving in a manner that would restore the trust between them, at least until Siham became independent and able to live her life as she wanted.

At the apartment Siham’s mother was in a state of wrathful frenzy. She found it difficult to believe that her daughter was like that. There were intermittent outbursts of: “For shame! For shame!” After some time she managed to calm

down. She thought that by being calm and rational she would be better at extracting Siham from the filth that she was in. She decided that at first she was going to ignore the whole thing, leaving Siham to initiate the discussion. For every possible thing she imagined Siham would say she envisioned a calculated response. But as soon as she arrived at this calm and temperate solution she jerked up from her seat and cried out: “No, I’m going to bring up the subject and end it once and for all. What’s the point of circulating and circumventing? A case of this kind can’t bear delays or treatment with allusions. It’s an emergency and I have to confront it head on!” As she thought of all this nevertheless wished that Siham would reproach her for her misunderstanding. All this would be easier for her to handle than for reality to be really what she suspected it to be. “I would accept it if she scorned me, I would accept anything if she is not what I think she is. If she proves her innocence, she can do whatever she likes with me.”

She was in the midst of these thoughts when Siham entered the room and all she could do was walk into the kitchen to call out: “I’ll prepare your dinner, it’s ready but it needs some reheating.” Siham did not reply and placed her books on her desk, looked at Claire’s photograph, which was in its rightful place and then headed towards her mother, kissing her as usual and anticipating the explosion at any moment. Similarly her mother was expecting Siham’s question about her conversation with Claire. Neither of them spoke and the silence continued and the food was ready and they sat at the table to eat.

A heavy silence brooded over the dinner table which was only interrupted by the occasional clanging of spoons, and knives. Siham ate with her eyes fixed on the

plate. She did not want to look at her mother who in turn had fixed her gaze on Siham's face attempting to ascertain her feelings. The silence grew long and the mother impatient. She drew a long breath and then spoke: "Siham, I know everything and you know what happened." Siham shook her head without saying a word and continued: "Finish your food and after that we'll talk."

"Talk about what? You're in the wrong. I didn't expect you at all to do what you did. You should have asked me first. If you had done that, then all your fears would have been allayed and you would have spared us this humiliation." Siham spoke calmly to reassure her mother of the astuteness of her remark. The mother was in raptures over her daughter's response but was, as yet, not completely convinced. She said:

"I know you're a good girl but that insolent child confessed to being a lesbian and she was proud of it. That's what infuriated me and I found myself saying those things I said. She provoked me even more when she said that ii had no business in your life. Who does she think she is to say such things?!"

"Maybe she said those things because you surprised her with your phone call. She's just a friend, no more, no less. She could be a lesbian like she said to you, but I have nothing to do with that. Either way she's free to be whoever and do whatever she wants."

"Yes, she is free and we have nothing to do with her, but if you continue to be her friend she might influence you into that lifestyle. I've decided to extend my holiday to stay with you until you finish your exams, I don't want to take any chances. We can go back to Lebanon together then and you can continue your education there—we can endure the war just like everybody else. To tell you the

truth, I prefer war and its dangers to the cesspools of Paris and its depraved world. I don't want to lose you and I don't want you to befriend people of this perverted kind. We still preserve in Lebanon a certain degree of morals and good behavior, I don't want your education, regardless of its importance, to deprive you of these high morals that we have inherited from our forbears."

Siham wanted to tell her mother that the subject had nothing to do with morals, and that morals, as they were in Lebanon, were nothing but an outer shell. She decided to remain silent instead and accommodate her mother's way of thinking. Foremost she wanted to bring discussion to an end without too strong a disagreement with her mother was going to stay with her until the end of the year. She knew that this would end her relationship with Claire.

"There is no need for you to stay with me until the end of the year. I'm virtuous enough you know, and you can trust I'll do the right thing without you watching over me. My brothers are home alone, and they need you more than I do."

"No, your aunt is with them and I've decided to stay here, end of story."

"As you wish. I would love to have you around."

She got up from her place, drew closer to her mother and kissed her. The latter in turn, pulled her to her chest and said, crying:

"Siham, my daughter, understand me well, I love you more than you think. I can't let anything ruin your reputation. If you were, God forbid, like that low-life Claire, then kill me before you tell me you're one of them."

When Siham realized just how much her mother disdained this subject she became extremely sad, because her mother completely rejected who she really was. She suppressed her dejection and decided to wear a mask, not only on her face but on her entire personality—so as not to agitate her mother.

“Darling,” her mother continued, “I’m not ignorant and I am no stranger to these things. I know very well that it is a tendency apparent in some girls during a certain period in their lives. That tendency, which is perfectly normal during this particular period, becomes an illness if it continues. This is where the role of the parents, especially the mother, comes in—in realizing what’s going on and guiding their girls on and guiding their girls to the right path. If Claire’s mother had paid attention to her daughter, then Claire would not have deviated and would not have become this insolent and immoral.”

Siham wanted to tell her mother that the Women’s movement in France fought against this rhetoric, and that the subject was not looked upon in the same way as in Lebanon or other Arabic communities. But she had resolved that she was going to agree with her mother at any cost. But because she knew herself well, she felt that the words her mother used to describe Claire were words directed at her as well.

“And now I want you to get rid of Claire’s picture from this house. I was going to do it myself. But I prefer if you did. Get this photo out of my face, tear it up, do whatever you like with it, but get it out of the house.”

“I’ll do what you want. I’ll give it to Claire tomorrow.” She walked towards the photograph, removed it from its place and put it in her bag. There was nothing left for her mother to do but hurry towards the bag, to open it, to remove the

picture and destroy it herself. She said: "I'll do it myself if you can't I don't want you talking to Claire at all—she's an illness and a shame."

Siham became quiet and was tearing up over what her mother was doing and saying. Outwardly she appeared calm, driven by the realization that there was no room for discussion or reasonable talk. And at the same time she felt that she needed to do something to alleviate the eruption of anger, so she ran to the drawer in the desk, took out a file and removed a picture of her mother, placing it where Claire's picture had been, and she said with great nervousness: "This photo is beautiful, isn't it?" She burst into laughter, which was in fact a kind of weeping that helped her release the unbearable pressure she was feeling. Her mother then kissed her and said: "I would much prefer to see the photo of a handsome young man instead." She too exploded in laughter and kissed her daughter again, saying: "Now, let's end the subject here. You're my daughter and I trust you like I would trust myself. Why don't we go out and get dessert somewhere nice and forget the whole thing?"

When they went out Siham took her mother to a place that Claire visited often. Over dessert Siham was thinking about Claire and whether there was a new lover in her life already. She often threatened to replace Siham easily and quickly if she refused her certain requests. Siham humoured her mother by pretending to engage in a series of brief conversations that revolved around studying and her answers consisted of "yes," "of course" and "you're right."<sup>3</sup>

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The following day Claire did not come to school; Siham began to worry and called her. Her relatives replied that Claire had returned to the country. At this point Siham was about to collapse, but she asked about her address and telephone number and was given the information she sought. She wrote the information in a small book and sat at the same place where she saw Claire on the previous day. She placed her head in her hands and began to think.

She got out a piece of white paper from her bag and wrote:

Where are you? Why didn't you come to school? Did they frighten you? Do you know that they only emerge in order to frighten, to make the sun fall into continuous mourning, to scabbard the sword into the sky...? My friend I've lost you, I missed you and wished to talk to you. With childlike fear she cried: "Is it possible that I won't see you again, is it possible for our relationship to end in its beginning?"

With you my dreams turned to white, I begged God forgiveness for the first time, so that he might spare me the hurt you cause or spare me what I have built. I truly do love you because you are romance, you are love; there is no counsel except in your eyes and no hope without loving you. With you I fancied the world, with you all stories are different; with you all languages come together. I don't think, I won't think, and I find pleasure in death—because you are the sweetness of departure. I stay awake with my body whilst thought exults, whilst it permeates your fragrance, the corners of your hair.

The bell rang announcing the beginning of the following session, but Siham remained in her place, melancholic, to the point of tears and incapable of

continuing her classes. Without the courage to return home, she decided to remain seated in the same place that Claire had occupied a day earlier. She stayed there until the end of the day, writing down whatever coursed through her mind. She folded the pages and walked in the direction of the metro that took her back to the apartment. She entered, masking her sadness, threw her bag on the desk and herself on a chair. She said: "I'm very exhausted." Her mother gave her a light kiss and asked why she was so tired: "from too many lessons today." She said she needed to eat quickly so that she could complete all the required homework before going to bed. This way she intimated to her mother that she was not in the mood for conversation or discussion. Her mother accepted this and very quiet in all her actions until she went to bed leaving Siham alone at her desk, sitting before a pile of books and the photograph of her mother, whom she had come to hate. She did not know how she was going to pass the remaining time with her.

At her desk, Siham could do nothing related to her school work. She was considering the different methods available to her for contacting Claire. She would write a letter to express the whole story, or call her on the telephone to vindicate herself or... A considerable portion of the night was spent in these thoughts, aided by fact that the mother was asleep, leaving her to her own devices, but it was she who warned Siham of the importance of sleep, who, when the hour passed one thirty, said: "That's enough sweetheart, go to sleep, you can finish your work tomorrow."

The following day, at school, Siham was surprised by the arrival of Claire; she was happy but at the same time dreaded telling her about what happened

between her and her mother. She drew near her affectionately and asked her where she was the previous day. Claire told her that she had rented out a studio apartment, far from her relatives and her mother's annoying voice, and that she was now living by herself and that Siham had to decide whether she wanted to live with her or not. Siham became perplexed and told Claire that her mother was staying with her and it would be impossible to leave her mother to live with her girlfriend. There was nothing left for Claire to do but yell into Siham's face: "Coward! Don't talk to me anymore! From now on I'm free of you. I had a feeling about this and for that reason I decided to change my address; so that you won't know where I live. As of tonight I'm going to be with your replacement. You know full well that Sophie has been running after me, always vying for my attention. I used to avoid her for your sake because I thought you loved me, but now she's going to become my lover—you can go back to the devil and to your provincial mother for all I care!"

Siham was startled by Claire's immature behavior. Despite her pain over losing Claire she decided to meet her with something similar to her adulterousness and arrogance, so she cried out: "I am not a coward, but I still respect my mother and her will. And if you think that you're the only girl in the world, well then you're wrong! And I can quickly find someone else and fall in love with her and forget you—or rather, I've forgotten you already. You go to the devil and to Sophie! The matter is no longer relevant or of concern to me, and you'll know later that I'm not a coward and that I will live my life the way I want to and with whomever I want."

They separated. Siham felt two contradictory emotions: she was certainly at pains to lose Claire but at the same time she felt relieved. She was not entirely convinced of what she was doing with her. She always suffered from a guilty conscience, swinging between her inclination and desires, and her upbringing and all the moralism she was indoctrinated with at home and at the nuns' school in Lebanon. She always felt torn and at pains, practicing what she drew to naturally and blaming herself behavior that was in conflict with her rearing. She continuously asked whether she was like this because she sought revenge for what happened to her once, many years ago, or whether she was truly this way—but she was incapable of finding the answer.

Siham thought that after this separation her agony would come to an end and that she might be able to find her way back to the right path. For this reason she was considerably more cheerful when she returned home that night, and the mother whom she hated the previous night, became the shelter that she threw herself into, like a child into a lap. Her mother was impressed by this change of behavior and was delighted when Siham<sup>4</sup> tore down the posters of naked women from the walls. She began to spoil Siham and did whatever she was asked quite happily. As for Siham, she decided to socialize with young men and to escape from herself, and so she began to go out with the boys in her class and to invite them to her apartment. But she could not take a fancy to any of them. To her they were simply her colleagues, no more. From time to time she asked herself why she felt this way, but she reasoned that romantic love did not come about easily. Perhaps when she meets a certain man, later, and when she falls in love with him, as it usually happens with girls... But she knew full well that she had no inclination towards

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men. She ignored this fact and continued to try to socialize with young men until she returned to Lebanon with a certificate that would qualify her for entry into university.<sup>5</sup>

## 4

Summer passed and Siham was free to read in search for herself and the reality of her tendencies. She discovered Sappho, the Greek poet and was impressed with her personality and writings. She discovered the Frenchwoman George Sand and fell in love with her. She used to read and write poetry sometimes and occasionally read her poetry to her mother. Her mother encouraged her because she sensed a fine poetical talent in her daughter. Even though she realized the aesthetic value of the poems, she was incapable of unraveling their symbology. The enlightened reader could discover in Siham's poetry all the buried tendencies that she tried to hide without much success. Her writings were somewhat apostrophic to the female form in nature, or in the human or in things.

In her writings, Siham expressed her feelings without putting herself under the usual self-surveillance. For this reason, the buried inclinations that she was determined to eliminate leaked, and continued a new life. She used to say to herself that "the Paris period is over; I'm going to eliminate it from my life. I'm going to put it between parentheses forever. With it, I'll bury my unknown secret. I'm going to return to the moment I left Lebanon as though I never left it for one day. I am now a grown woman and I'm going to behave that way. From now on I will be the only person to tell my story. I won't have others talk about me or on my behalf."

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When the university opened its doors, Siham was ready to admit to herself the story of her desires. She tried to trace the roots of her interest in women and the picture of that primary school teacher appeared to her, and from that moment her confession began.

“Nothing in particular happened between us; all I remember that period is the mysterious feeling. It was not until I went to university that my story, my serious relationship rather, started. Through it I discovered the reality of my self, of my leanings and desires and even my psychological make-up.

“It started at the beginning of the scholastic year. We entered the lecture theatre waiting for doctor Nour. Carrying only a folder, Nour entered with seriousness on her face. She walked towards the podium without looking at anyone. She placed the folder on the desk, sat in her chair and raised her head surveying everyone with her eyes. As she was doing this, I found myself frozen in my seat, stalking her with my eyes. I did not become aware of my self again until a host of images intermixed before me: the image of Doctor Nour and that of the primary school teacher—between them, an image of my mother and then Claire’s image flashed like lightning and disappeared. Was she looking at me? Did she read the shock on my face? I don’t know. All I know is that she commanded all my attention, all my emotions and senses and I found myself saying: “That’s her. I’ve found what I desire.” And thus the hour passed, of which I remember nothing except my panicked voice as I pronounced my name when she asked me for it. She asked everyone else in turn and she wrote down all the names on a paper in front of her. I thought at the time that she did all this just to know my name. Did she really smile when she write my name down?

Yes, I think she did. What happened later on between us proves that she did.”

Here, Siham began to remember the details of Nour’s body and face, knowing that her description was neither plain nor neutral. Nour was in the fifth decade of her life, her eyes were blue. She had short hair tending toward a reddish blonde, her facial features were soft, no blemishes, her skin was slightly coated with freckles. “I know that I used to feel this attraction for every part of her physical constitution, maybe because I discovered later that the honey-coloured freckles were spread out all over her body—even in the sensitive places.” She returned to perusing her mental image of Nour—her elegant posture and her small stature.

“Was it her beauty that drew me to her? No, I don’t think so. I saw her beauty because she moved my entire being and represented for me my whole past and all the feelings I lived with that primary school teacher and with Claire—the thought of whom I cannot seem to eliminate no matter how hard I try. Nour awakened within me that conflicted feeling I had, whenever I sat near my mother, who softly rubbed my neck and back. I truly loved her. But how did my relationship with her begin and when? Should I suppose that is started when I went back to her house with her for the first time, when her hand touched mine as she served the coffee and nothing besides happened? Perhaps my relationship with her began when I saw her for the first time in the lecture theatre. Perhaps my relationship with her precedes hers with me. Anyhow, she was quick to reciprocate and thus our story began. And the story will continue until I exact my revenge on her, treacherous woman who left me for a pig. Why did she do that? Our relationship was at its best. Where did he come from to steal her from me? Wasn’t

her sister, his legal wife, enough for him? Did he want to possess both sisters together, at once? And how did she accept this arrangement? (He rented her an apartment in Beirut where they now meet.) Does she think that they can keep their relationship secret? I'm going to expose them in front of everyone.

She never once showed dis-ease with our relationship—quite the opposite; she was the one who asked me to do what satisfied her sexual appetites. Can that mere male, whom she has chosen, satisfy her? She said many times that she did not like men, so what happened to her, why did he interfere in her life? To save her from me, as he claims? She is not a minor! She's several decades older than I am! And she was the one who lulled me into her house and encouraged me to practice my desires with her. She encouraged me, yes, but I too was impressed by her, by her looks, her femininity, her softness, by the warmth of her lap and by her submission to my requests. Was she using me for some temporary reason? Why is she so weak before her brother-in-law? Is she afraid that he might expose her relationship with me to her parents and family? Did she exchange her relationship with for his silence? Doesn't she know that he's blackmailing her this way? No, I don't think that's the case. She said that she loved him, and that our relationship was an obstacle in the way of that love because he refused to share her with me. Yes, she said that with such coldness and insolence. I'm going to make her jealous. I'll replace her with someone more beautiful—someone whose beauty, femininity and intelligence everyone testifies to. Doctor Layal from the university is the natural choice. I'll call her and I'll ask to visit her under the pretence of needing her help with something or other. When that adulterer learns of my new relationship she'll die of jealousy because she's envious of Layal and dislikes her.



Will Layal respond as Nour did? But why did she abandon? I'm going to send her my final words."

Whatever was between us was at your command. The drought has lasted too long for you are the rain of my life. My roses have wilted for lack of roots. My days come before me without sun and yearn for the nights of whispering to the moon. I imagine how, in solitude, we stole soft murmurs. In solitude, we were lovers; in solitude we were the flowers and fragrance of love. You used to come carrying food in your eyes and water in your lips. When I looked, looking was insatiable and when I drank there was no end to my thirst, and reading is in your palms. From you, I learned the language of eyes and lashes. Our first meeting was a wedding carnival ornamented with mermaids and concubines. Our feet did not touch the ground and we were suspended between the imaginary and real worlds; we flew high, exceeded our dreams until pleasure filled us and we were satisfied.<sup>6</sup>

She stopped writing. "Why do I chase the past? Should I call Layal?"

## 5

Siham wasn't sure of the best way to approach Layal but she finally settled on meeting her at university. She had to consider how and why she was going to get someone who didn't know her at all speak to her. Layal would certainly return the greeting if Siham came up and said 'hello.' But the encounter couldn't get further than that. Suppose Siham approached her about an "important matter", would she be able to contain her nervousness? Layal might discover her ulterior motives and dismiss her.

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“Sometimes I see her students stop her for a social conversation and I see her smiling at them and talking very simply to them. I should do the same. But I’m not one of her students and she’ll find my friendliness unusual. I have to come up with a more convincing plan.

“Tomorrow I’ll go to one of Layal’s lectures and sit in the front row so that she notices me and remembers me for the questions I will ask. Afterwards, I doubt she will refuse to talk to me. Perhaps I can wait for her outside the lecture theatre and invite her for coffee. I’ll say that I want to propose a particular problem to her—make her feel important. She won’t refuse me, because, as I hear from her students, she treats them as equals, without a sense of superiority. Okay, and if I’m successful what will the problem I discuss with her be? God damn that traitor! I never needed to make such preparations with her and this is despite the fact that she was my teacher before she was my lover. Do I still miss her? No! I’m only kidding myself. I miss her! I miss her touches, her naked body under the translucent shirt, her kisses, the softness of her skin, o miss her submission to my desires—she who used to command and conquer in class. The tables turned when we walked into her apartment—I became the master and she the concubine. I used to come near her, touch her nipples while she prepared dinner but she always turned me away pleasantly after a kiss. “We have all the time in the world,” she would say. Usually I either left her be or helped her complete her task. We would then move along to the broad sofa in the lounge room. That sofa still holds witness to all what we did together; it is still imbued with the sweat of our bodies. No, I won’t wait until tomorrow, I’ll call Doctor Layal tonight.”

“Why am I hesitating to talk to her? I’ll pick up the telephone and dial her number right now.” She heard Layal’s voice through the receiver, “Hello... Hello, who’s there?” after a short pause Layal repeated: “Hello, who’s that?” Siham was petrified and did not speak a word and so Layal hung up, while Siham held on to the receiver, firmly pressing it to her ear. With a finger of the other hand she hung up the telephone and dialed Layal’s number a second time. The situation was repeated with Siham being able to speak and when she heard Layal say: “Troublemakers! Looking to entertain themselves!” She hung up the phone quick smart. She envisioned that Layal could see her and was swearing at her, and also felt she was going to get caught. Siham knew that she could not sleep before she managed to arrange a meeting with Layal. She waited for half an hour to conceal any connection Layal might make between her and the so called “troublemakers.”

The telephone rang unanswered for a while at Layal’s house. Siham was on the verge of losing patience and hope when Layal finally answered the phone. “May I speak to Dr. Layal please?”

“This is her,” she replied tersely, “who wants her?” Siham panicked. What am I going to say? Should I lie to her? Lying she said: “My name is Siham, I’m a student at the university, you don’t know me but I know you well and I admire you. Will you let me visit you at home so I can get to know you a bit better?” then she heard Layal ask: “Siham?” She did not let her think for long but quickly repeated that she was not known to Layal and that the matter was natural, given that teachers do not come to know all their students, while the students know all their teachers. Layal was quiet for a while, perhaps because she was evaluating just how peculiar a person would have to be to make such an odd request. During this

silence an idea occurred to Sihamand without much thought she said: “I work for Al- Hassna’ Magazine, I wanted to interview you and publish some quotes...” When Layal replied that she preferred to meet her at work, Siham realized that her lie may not have been believed. She wondered if Layal could see her red, blushing face. This always happened to Siham whenever she told a lie. What is this machine that moves my body? Every time I try to avoid blushing, my face gets more and more congested with redness. She soon recovered from the thought that Layal could see her and asked: “When would you like us to meet?” The time was set for the following day, at four o’clock.

## 6

After some reading Layal went to bed. The night was calm, unperturbed by anything other than the sound of distant, irregular gun fire which meant that there were no battles in the capital today and that people were allowed to sleep in their beds. Siham was having trouble sleeping because she was thinking about the meeting, her intentions and the questions she had to prepare herself to ask.

The following day came and Layal entered the lecture theatre as usual, without paying much attention to the faces of the students in front of her. At the university where she taught, the students did not attend all the classes because attendance was not compulsory. For this reason the faces were always changing and nothing stuck in the minds of the teachers other than the faces of those who continuously attended, and they were but few. She entered and began lecturing, then opened the space for discussion over a certain subject, when a young lady, whom Layal noticed for the first time, raised her hand. Layal, smiling looked at her

and said: “You’re attending for what I think is your first time, so how can you discuss a matter what we have spent more than a month proposing and explaining?” the young woman stood up and said: “If you don’t want me to ask then I’ll be quiet and listen, but I have some questions regarding the subject that was treated today, so will you permit me to propose them?”

Layal looked over at the other students and asked if any of them wanted to talk, no one did. After this brief silence (which means that students are in no mood for discussion) Layal directed her gaze at the young woman and asked her to continue. A conversation took place between them, during which Layal noticed that the young woman was trying to exhibit her knowledge without being specific to the topic, and she told her so and silenced her. The lesson was nearing its end so Layal said to her students: “You may leave, go to your houses now while the militants are having a break.” Everyone got up, gathered their books and things and hurried out before Layal could get her papers in order. When she was done with organizing herself she found the same young lady standing in front of her. She quickly asked her what she was waiting for. “I’m waiting for you. We agreed to meet. I’m Siham, will you join me for a coffee?”

Layal looked at the girl, then at her watch and said: “Half an hour only, I need to buy some things before going home.”

“As you wish. I would be satisfied even if you accepted for only one minute.”

Layal laughed and they headed to the university café—it was almost empty of students. Layal noticed this and commented “Everyone is gone, they got out of

here as fast as they could. I suppose there's a good chance that the shelling and warfare will resume shortly."

It's better this way, more quiet. What would you like to drink?"

"Coffee."

Siham called out for the waiter and asked for coffee and they sat facing each other.

"You're very beautiful, Doctor. Layal, do you know that?"

Layal smiled and the flattery pleased her, but she did reply. Siham panicked and looked at the floor with embarrassment as though she has committed an error, but Layal rescued her from this awkwardness by asking: "So what talk do you want for your magazine? Have you prepared your questions?"

Siham's face reddened and she felt that her lie was beginning to unravel. "I don't work for a magazine. I told you that because I wanted to sit with you and to be close to you... because I like you."

Layal smiled and was silent for a moment, during which she thought about a considerable number of things. She looked at Siham, peered into her face, finally sensing something unusual. As for Siham, she began to talk with difficulty: "Does that bother you?"

"No, but what do you want?"

"I want to be your friend, so will you accept me?"

"Yes, but what is it that you want from me?"

"That you let me visit you from time to time."

At first surprise, it occurred to Layal that Siham might be suffering from emotional emptiness, which she sought to fill by resorting to her, or, that she was a spy working for one of the political organizations, so she asked:

“Do you live alone?”

“No. I live with my mother and siblings” and she continued (thinking that Layal was responding to what she wanted, because her last question seemed to intimate this): “but I can leave the house whenever I want.”

“Don’t you have friends?”

“I had a friend who was my teacher. She left me suddenly and she doesn’t want to see me any more.”

“Why? What did you do to her?”

“Nothing. Even now I still don’t understand why she left me.” She became quiet as the pain overwhelmed her. Layal realized that she was suffering and asked:

“Does that hurt you?”

“More than you can imagine.” She said this looking at her cup of coffee and after a short silence raised the cup to her lips, murmuring: “Traitor, yes she left me.”

When Layal heard this remark the truth of the situation became clear. She wondered whether she could confront Siham with what she now realized or whether she should pretend to be ignorant of her discovery and just withdraw

politely. Siham asked: “Don’t you feel pain if a girl or boy friend betrayed you? Don’t you think about revenge?”

“Suppose I was feeling this pain (and I have in the past), I would not be thinking of revenge because I don’t consider the matter to be betrayal. If someone didn’t want my friendship, the he’s free because friendship can’t be forced and...” before she finished Siham said:

“I didn’t force myself on her. It’s true that I admired her, but she instigated everything. She took me to her house, she made me get attached to her and after she well and truly possessed and exploited me. Yes, dumped me, without considering what this would do to me. She’s a coward. I know very well that she still loves me, and if the matter was in her hands alone she would not have abandoned me. I’m sure that they exerted pressure on her, threatened her.”

At this point Layal no longer had any doubts about what her intuition was telling her and she decided to confront Siham with her usual honesty:

“Look at me carefully, Siham. I am not a subject for transference, and I am not like your teacher. What was between the two of you can’t be between us. I’m not one of them, you know what I mean. I say this without any moral evaluation because I consider it improper to treat a subject of this kind with morals.”

The blood in Siham’s veins froze. She did not expect to be caught out so easily, but she also felt that she could not run away—Layal caught her and did not humour her about it, she put her finger on the wound, and for this reason Siham decided to surrender and confess.



Her confession came in the form of justification for and vindication of her current actions, and that she did not intend transference but wanted friendship only, innocent friendship and help, if Layal was willing. “I came to you because I know from your students that you’re open-minded and capable of handling these things.”

Siham was hoping to attain her goal in an indirect way by asking for Layal’s help. It’s true that she was not attracted to her in the past, but she always felt that Layal was the kind of woman who excited her. After a long pause, Siham asked: “Do you refuse to help me?”

“No, but how can I help?”

“Help me to get out of what I’m in—I’m suffering here, and I want to talk to someone who can understand me. You are capable of that—I beg you not to leave me and to permit me to see you every now and then.”

“I don’t refuse to help but we should be absolutely clear about certain things from the beginning... Understand? I don’t want a second shock to you.”

“I want no more than that.”

“We’re agreed then.”

“Thank you for your hospitality, but how do I see you?”

“You know my hours at the university and if you need anything, I’ll be ready.”

“What about if I wanted to see you at your house?”

“I’d rather we didn’t for the present time.”

“You receive some students in your house, so you must be afraid of me.”

“I am the one who decides who comes into my home,” Layal replied, ignoring Siham’s comment regarding fear of her.

Siham was surprised by Layal’s firmness and was quiet, so there was nothing left for Layal to do other than stand up, bid farewell, and leave. As for the other, she remained alone in the café for a short time after, organizing her thoughts before moving on.

Layal drove home and on her way picked up the groceries she needed. She was thinking about what to make for dinner because she was hungry after many hours of teaching. She lived alone in an apartment building inhabited by families she knew next to nothing about.

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In one of those apartments Mimi lived with her husband and children. Mimi was a young woman who was unemployed, who looked after the family affairs, who visited some neighbours during her husband’s absence... Before Layal’s arrival to her apartment, Mimi was standing on her balcony, looking in the distance and thinking: “Why is it that every time I have sex with my husband I think of her? I don’t know her very well, but I’m sure she has a strong personality. Why would she live alone if she did not have to, or if she didn’t hate men? I heard that she lives with a boyfriend, but most of the time she’s by herself. She’s a beautiful woman, everyone agrees on that, but her personality turns me on much more than her outward appearance. If you ask me she takes care of her appearance much more than necessary sometimes. Her deep voice impresses me. Should I strike up a

conversation with her? Can I have her? My neighbour, the widow, she bores me—she has sex in the same way every time. She no longer holds my interest. Every time we're together I think of Layal and I wish that she was having sex with me. As for my neighbour, she's elderly now, and I don't understand why she is jealous of Layal and is annoyed every time I mention her name, after all, Layal is my neighbor too. I'll try to get her attention; I'll visit her and invite her over sometime. Calling on people is a social necessity between neighbours, no one would suspect my ulterior motives.

“I'll watch out for when she gets home and call her over from the balcony for a coffee or some thing. She'll drop by for sure, because I'll tell her that her visit encourages us to visit her in return. If she refuses, this means that she doesn't want to mix with her neighbours and that's inappropriate. I don't think she'll do that. She'll visit me even if only out of politeness. After that, I'll take care of things. That's her car, stopping in front of the building. She comes out carrying her things; she's heading for the entrance. She's wearing pants and a shirt, like men. Her hair is tied up as though it's been cut. Oh, how I like the way she looks! I don't like it when she lets her hair down on her shoulders and I don't like her when she wears dresses. Right now she is exactly how I imagine her in my dreams and in the waves of my desires. But she's walking quickly, looking at the ground as though she doesn't want to see anyone. Should I call out to her? No, I'm not her friend and I don't know her well enough—it will look contrived. Oh, the electricity's out<sup>23</sup> and she'll have to take the stairs. I'll open the door and try to be near by, coincidentally, and when she arrives I'll invite her in as is appropriate, so that she can rest a little before going up the rest of the flights of stairs.”

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Mimi closed the door after Layal declined the invitation, and returned to the balcony watching the children play in the front yard.

They say that she's arrogant and conceited but I don't think so, I didn't notice that, she was polite and promised to visit me. Will I get what I want from her? Is she the kind of woman I think she is? Does she find me attractive? Or does she see me in the way I see my neighbor the widower? Is she the widow's love of women in her nature, or does she find in me simple gratification of sexual appetites left unfulfilled by a deceased husband? Did she pick me because she wasn't able to establish a relationship with a man? But if that's the case how was she able to marry the first time? Does the presence of children with her in the house inhibit her from seeing other men? Does she need to be with me in order to preserve her reputation as a devoted widow in front of her children and others? Anyway, she's always showing off that she has not known a man since her husband, she whose husband died at the height of her youth! I'm also married and I too have children. I wonder if things with y husband changed because of my relationship with her? No. I never felt pleasure with him. So much so, that after I got used to her, my relationship with my husband ceased to be of any importance to me. I sleep with him out of a sense of duty, no more. Yes, I do enjoy it when he plays with my body and I find pleasure in his touches and kisses before he enters me, but after that, I feel nothing. She helped me discover my body, whereas my husband could not. Even if he tried, as he sometimes does, to delay his ejaculation as much as possible, he still can't make me reach, even once, the exhilaration that my neighbor can. I wonder if all married women are in my position? What do they do when their husbands don't satisfy the? Sometimes, I go to the bathroom after having sex with him and I satisfy myself because I feel that my body is awake and refuses to

relax and refuses to sleep. As for him, he turns his back to me and falls asleep, thinking that I went to the bathroom for a shower. Why don't I tell him the truth? Do feelings of this kind get expressed to the husband? Perhaps... but I couldn't; it's a matter that embarrasses me a great deal.<sup>9</sup>

## 8

The telephone rang. "It's her for sure." Mimi picked up receiver and heard the old hag say: "Mimi is your husband back?" When she said "no", the other replied that she was alone and waiting. Mimi apologized because she needed to look after her children's needs, and in order to make sure that she may not be visited that night, she said that she would see her tomorrow. She got off the phone, called out to the children and decided to see Layal that very night.

When the children returned home, she forgot about Layal. She went to them, supervised their bathing and eating, and urged them to finish up before their father came back. They did not disappoint her; they completed their tasks with more alacrity than expected and entered their room to study before bedtime. She began to think about Layal again.

"What could she be doing now? No doubt she's making dinner. I'll beat her to it. I'll bring her a plate of tabouli and she'll be too embarrassed to refuse it, I'm sure."

She knocked on Layal's door with the plate of tabouli in her hand. She waited a little before she heard movement near the door. She's looking from inside to see who's knocking on her door! Layal opened the door and smiling said:

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“Hello, why all this trouble? But to tell you the truth, I’ve been trying to make a concoction that resembles tabouli, so your intuition is pretty accurate.” Layal’s comment encouraged her. She felt that she was not imposing and after some token exclamatory remarks she heard Layal say: “Please come in.”

“I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Absolutely not. It’s time for a break now, before I start my evening work. Please come in.” She said this with her hand on Mimi’s shoulder, who before long found herself sitting in Layal’s house, across from the woman herself, not knowing what to say Layal was quick to enquire about her husband and children, which eased her confusion and awkwardness, so much so that she forgot that her children were alone in the house and that she couldn’t leave them for long. When she remembered this, she took leave of Layal, who insisted that she should stay coffee. As Mimi left Layal accompanied her to the door and thanked her for saving her the trouble of making dinner. Mimi was overwhelmed with enthusiasm and without thinking, proclaimed that she was ready to prepare for her whatever she wanted, and if there was a particular type of food that she liked, then Mimi, being always at home and having to cook for the family everyday exclaimed “it doesn’t bother me at all to take you into account!” When Layal replied that there was no need for this, as she paid little importance to food, Mimi felt a little embarrassed and went back home, wondering whether Layal had detected anything unusual.

“She is well and truly what I imagined her to be: polite, humble, forgiving—nothing like the way the old hag described her. She said to me, without any introductions, that I was beautiful. I wonder if this means that she likes me? But if she was interested in me she would have asked me my name. But is it possible that

she doesn't know it even after living here for three years? Is she as busy as she claims to be or is this a part of her determination to remain a recluse? Perhaps she has relationships that she doesn't want us to know about. In truth, her visitors are many, some men, some women, and the men come alone and stay there for a long time. Why isn't she married? She lacks nothing at all. She says she's comfortable this way despite having to do the work of both a man and a woman. She travels for work abroad like men and does the housework, so how can she say she's comfortable that way? She doesn't want anyone to interfere with her affairs. Is it true that she doesn't like men? She must reject them; otherwise she wouldn't live on her own. And her boyfriend, why doesn't she marry him? I doubt that he would accept a woman with a personality like a man's. I suspect that no man would choose a woman like her for a wife. Maybe her boyfriend just up and left after being with her for a while."<sup>10</sup>

Suddenly the door opened and her husband, Farid, walked in, sweeping Mimi into another world and causing her thoughts about Layal to cease momentarily. This interruption did not last and was cut short by another interruption when Mimi's neighbour, the widow, came to spend the evening with them. She had deliberately ignored Mimi's promise to see her the following day. Mimi did not welcome her as usual because her interest in Layal now preoccupied her thoughts. The neighbor noticed this change and asked if she felt any pain or if things were not going well with Farid. She wanted this to be the cause of Mimi's strangeness because she did not like him, or perhaps was jealous of him, since she considered him to be her rival when it came to Mimi's affections. As for him, he respected her and considered her to be like a mother to his wife because of her age

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and experience. He considered that their friendship was beneficial to Mimi, who could do with some guidance to keep her on the straight and narrow. The old hag fulfilled this role he expected of her by giving a great deal of advice to Mimi in his presence, and by insisting on teaching her all sorts of cooking styles in his absence. He also esteemed her for not remarrying after her husband's death and for having, throughout the years, maintained a clean reputation, neither compromised nor marred by hearsay or gossip, particularly in relation to men.

“I haven't done anything new, except I met Layal earlier,” Mimi said.

As soon as the old woman heard Layal's name, her tone of voice changed and she said:

“That arrogant woman?! Who talks to no one? Has she finally come down to earth to pay you a visit? Don't tell me you doubled her arrogance by going to see her yourself?”

“I visited her.”

The neighbor jerked in her seat and said: “What did you do that for? She has been living in the building for a long time now, and not once has she come down from her pedestal to visit anybody, she's...”

She did not complete her sentence but was shaking her head, searching for the correct adjective to describe her. Mimi did not leave her at this for long and said:

“She is, in fact, quite friendly and if you get to know her you'll change your mind. I'll introduce you to her if she visits me.”



“If she does? And who does she think she is? No! This is no concern of mine. And if she does visit I certainly don’t want to see her. And I don’t think your husband would be happy if you two become close friends. The sacred cow lives in a way that men disapprove of, and if you socialize with her she will sabotage your relationship with your husband. She’s against men you know, and she calls for the liberation of women. She is a woman with many complexes and she doesn’t know what she wants exactly. Haven’t you noticed that she receives visitors from all walks of life?”

As the neighbour continued to speak Mimi monitored her closely, while the former unsuccessfully tried to hide her jealousy. Mimi realized that the neighbor was speaking so harshly of Layal because she sensed Mimi’s ulterior motives. When she felt that Mimi was not convinced by what she said, she turned to the husband, asking him whether he knew Layal and what his opinion of her was. The husband was following the news on television and had not heard their earlier conversation and he replied that he knew that Layal taught at the university, that she was beautiful, that she was aloof and socialized with no one and he concluded:

“She’s free to do what she likes and to attend to her own work. Or maybe it’s the nature of her work that imposes this kind of lifestyle on her. We have nothing to do with her, she bothers no one and no one complains about her.”

The neighbor did not realize that he had no interest in this conversation and so repeated her question:

“Do you like this kind of women?” His reply came in the direction that she desired:

“In all honesty, no! She’s beautiful, really, and it’s possible that men might like her, but personally speaking, I don’t like strong women-manly women. Anyhow, every man has his own way of life and inclinations and he’s free to do what he wants.”

The neighbour’s face broke out in a wide grin and she took over the conversation. She too saw that Layal was man-like (she liked that description) and continued on in order to support this view with material evidence, reminding Farid of Layal’s behaviour during discussions concerning the building, in the last building-management meeting.<sup>11</sup>

“Even you and the other men failed to convince her on some things. She is very tough, insolent even.” And so that she would not continue talking for too long, the husband said:

“Despite my respect for her personality, I don’t like women to be like her. I prefer a woman to be soft, silent and...: smiling, he looked over to Mimi, “and a cutie like my sweetheart Mimi.”

The neighbor turned toward Mimi, who was sitting near her. Mimi read that conflicted feeling in her face, which consisted of a gloating smile on the one hand, and tense cheek muscles on the other, which indicated that she was suppressing her jealousy of the husband.

“See?” continued the old hag turning to Farid, “I too prefer Mimi’s personality. She is well and truly soft, a lady in every sense of the word. Everyone who sees her falls in love with her and admires her.” She was patting Mimi’s hair

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as she spoke when the husband surprised her with “No!” which he said with a loud exclamation, continuing jokingly: “It would be catastrophic if everyone loved her!” The old woman jerked in her seat as if bitten by a snake and replied:

“No, you misunderstand me, I love Mimi like a daughter, no more.” But what the neighbor suspected did not at all occur to Farid, who said that he was at ease with her relationship with his wife, because she was a great cook now, “after a long time of eating fried eggs and burnt steak.” At this point he burst into roaring laughter, as though he had told a novel joke and so they laughed with him and he certainly thought that they were laughing about the same thing. And thus the evening ended, during which no one understood the other.<sup>12</sup>

Before she left, the neighbor kissed Mimi, repeating “I’ll see you tomorrow.” But Mimi did not reply, and heard her husband say that he would like his wife to learn how to cook Mnokhiyah, which he liked very much and his dear neighbor replied: “Your wish is my command. Tomorrow you’ll be eating the best Mnokhiyah. Tomorrow for sure.”

The neighbor left and Mimi went to the bedroom, tired. She lied on the marital bed and slept without lending any interest to her husband who came to lie next to her, attempting to caress her body. After a brief effort on his part, he got the message, turned his back to Mimi and fell asleep.

## 9

Layal woke up the following day to the sound of the telephone. She rose from her bed cursing the annoying intruder responsible for waking her. But as soon as she

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looked at her watch, she noticed that it wasn't particularly early and that she had overslept. She picked up the telephone and Siham's voice came through the line, asking if she was disturbing her at such an hour. Layal was genuinely irritated but controlled herself and said: "No. What do you want?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to hear your voice before my day began."

"No problem, I'm happy about that. Have a nice day."

"Can't I see you today?"

"Is there anything new?"

"No, but I'm suffering"

"I'm sorry but I'm busy today, maybe another day."

"When?"

"Don't nag me. As soon as possible."

"Should I ring tomorrow?"

"I prefer the following week."

"And you're happy to leave me all this time to suffer alone?"

"Make it easy on yourself; I'm very busy this week and you have to respect my schedule so we can stay friends, understood?"

"Understood. But can I talk to you on the phone?"

"Yes, but I don't like waking up to the telephone ringing."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to annoy you. Is it better if I call in the evening?"

"Absolutely, and now, have a nice day." Layal said before hanging up.

Siham hung up the phone in turn and began cursing Nour and her new boyfriend. At about this time Nour used to receive her at her house with warm greetings and reproaches for being late. She used to be the mistress, dictating their meeting times and what she desired, while Nour accepted her as she was, complying with her every command.

“What did I do? Why did she leave me? I need to know. It’s not right for our relationship to end without a reason like that. I’ll call her. I’ll keep bothering her until I get to the truth.” She picked up the telephone and dialed Nour’s number. The voice that stirred her emotions came through; she was silent for a moment and then said: “I want to see you, even if for the last time. Can I?” Nour replied that she did not want to see her but Siham insisted: “I won’t bother you at home. I’ll see you at university. All I want is for you to explain your reasons to me, I just want to know.”

“I don’t want to see you and if you behave unusually in class, then you’ll be sorry.”

“Is this how it is then? Have you forgotten everything between us?”

The reply to this came from a coarse voice:

“If you call her again I’ll shut you up for good, do you understand? And...”

Siham hung up before the voice completed his sentence. “He’s at her place. Traitor! Now I understand her refusals, but I’ll see her today at university. I’ll threaten her with exposing her secret in front of all the students. I don’t care about myself any more-I’ll expose her even if I am discovered in the process. I won’t let her rest with him. I’ll start by threatening her and if she continues to evade me I’ll

destroy us all. I have nothing to lose. Layal refuses to see me, worse, she has told me that she's not one of us and Nour has a man now. Is this possible? And me? What am I going to do?"

Rapid thoughts continued to swim in Siham's mind throughout the morning until it was time for the first class. She was ready for all possibilities. She arrived at university and paced outside the right building waiting to confront Nour before class, but Nour never showed up. She waited a little longer, looking periodically at her watch, then she ran into the building saying to herself: "Maybe she came early and I missed her."

Before she arrived to the classroom door she heard the voices of the students and realized that Nour was not inside. When she verified this, she rushed to the cafeteria and then straight to the telephone and without thinking, she dialed her number. The telephone rang many times without answer. She hung up the telephone, sat on a chair, ordered a cup of coffee and wandered in thought, planning for the hours to come.

She drank her coffee and tried the telephone again. It was busy but when she tried again she heard her voice and so hung up without speaking. She ran down the stairs and caught a taxi to Nour's house. She was in a state of extreme agitation. She knocked on the door and when it opened, she found herself face to face with the pig.

"I want to see her, she said, "is she sick?"

"No, she's not sick, but I'm the one who wants to see you. Come in."

Siham hesitated a little, and then entered. Nour was sitting on that sofa, she looked at Siham and asked: “Why did you come?”

The reply came:

“It’s good that she did because I want to make clear to her what she doesn’t seem to quite understand. Sit down Siham, I want to talk to you.”

At this point Siham did not know what to do. She sat down on a small stool, looking at the ground. He drew near her and said:

“I’m telling you for the last time to get away from Nour and if you don’t, I’ll make you, do you understand?”

Here Nour intervened: “As for me, I’ll call your mother and tell her about you-you know what I mean.” Nour knew the extent of Siham’s respect for her mother and the extent of her fear of being found out-she who had succeeded in erasing all suspicion from her mother’s mind.

“And I have my own weapons” Siham said: “I too can expose your story at the university, even get you fired, and tell your sister and...”

“You won’t have time for that miss” said he, “I’ll shut you up before you can say a word. You won’t cost me any more than one bullet. After that I’ll throw you on the street for the dogs to devour you. The world is at war and in chaos and no one will know about you.”

Siham realized the extent of the danger but did not surrender and replied:

“Do what you want! I’m not afraid of anything any more. You can kill me but you can’t erase what I lived with Nour for years.”

Here Nour intervened, signaling to him with her hand and said: “We’re not criminals, I know that Siham is a good girl and she’ll behave herself with maturity and responsibility. She is a good student; she’ll forget the matter completely and concentrate on her studies and won’t disappoint her mother, who has pinned great hopes on her.”

Siham shook her head and did not reply, as for him, he drew closer to her after having relaxed a little and said: “I have a suggestion that will be good for everyone. If Siham is a successful abroad and if I can’t get her the scholarship then I’ll send her there on my account.”

“No thanks, I can go abroad on my own if I want to, but I don’t want to.” She stood up and walked toward the door saying that she wanted to leave, so he accompanied her to the door.

“I hope that you’ve understood that we don’t want to be bothered again,” and he closed the door after her.

## 10

Siham stood out on the street not knowing what to do. “What am I going to do now?” She began to walk, talking to herself. “Kill him? But how? She’s the one who deserves killing. But maybe she will spend some time with him and then come back to me. Will I accept it if she came back to me? Of course I will, I’ll go back to her embrace, to her touches and tenderness, to the radiance of her countenance. Ah, if only his wife had found out about what he was doing, she would have taken care of him.” In a moment she realized that there was no one else in the street; that people had gone to their homes early, as one came to expect during that filthy war.



When she realized this, she became frightened and hoped to signal a passing taxi to take her home. She was not in luck and so began to walk at a fast pace, trying to ignore the presence of armed men in the backstreets and building entrances, until finally she arrived at her house, exhausted. She spoke to no one, entered her room and stretched out on her bed, without taking off her clothes or even her shoes. When her mother came to ask her why she was late and why she was tired Siham justified that the classes ran late and that she had to walk home. At this point the mother criticized the university for its poor timing of classes, which failed to take the issue of civilian safety into consideration. Siham reassured her mother that the timing for these classes was the exception, not the rule. Siham's mother insisted that Siham eat something before going to sleep.

“Let me rest now and don't worry about my food, I'll take care of it when I'm hungry. I want to sleep for a little while now.”

When the mother left, Siham returned to her problems, trying to avoid an imminent nervous breakdown. She revolved around herself for a long time before she lifted the handset and dialled Layal's number.

“Hello, good evening, am I disturbing you now?”

“No, not at all. What's new?”

Siham was silent a little, then informed Layal of what happened continuing:

“Don't get mad at me. I know I behaved irrationally but I just can't forget about her. Can you help me through this? I trust you and I need your guidance.”  
And she began to sob.

Layal thought about the subject and said to herself before replying: “If I tell her to forget the story and to get hold of herself, she might explain this to mean that I want her to myself, which will speed up the transference that she is unconsciously in the midst of, and this way she’ll be subjected to another disappointment.” When she realized that her silence had grown too long she said:

“Siham, my dear, if you want me to be your mentor then you have to listen to me carefully. I know that your situation is normal; every one of us reacts this way, we all get upset when we lose a friend or end a relationship, but we can also overcome these situations and you have to try. I’m not telling you to forget her as though it’s an easy thing to do—it is a difficult situation. But I suggest that you try another relationship, this time with a young man, do as she did, try...”

“I don’t like them, you know that and I am not interested in any of them at all.”

“I know, but try and if you don’t succeed then we’ll look into other options.”

Layal knew very well that her advice was not very useful but she could not think of anything else besides. Siham’s reply reinforced her realization when she said: “Is this all the advice you have for me?” The doorbell, which rang at that moment, rescued Layal from her discomfort and so she said: “Siham, someone’s at the door, I’m sorry to interrupt you now, but we’ll continue this conversation later.”<sup>13</sup>

Layal opened the door. It was Mimi: “Madam Layal, someone rang my husband and told him that tonight is going to be intense, so we have to be cautious and we have to go down to the bomb shelter. I came to tell you, so that it doesn’t startle you and so that you don’t stay up here on your own.”

“Thanks, but how does this “someone” know that tonight is going to be intense?”

“I don’t know, but he always calls my husband and his predictions are always right. I’ll prepare what we need in the shelter and I’ll take you into account. Don’t take anything with you. Don’t stay up here on your own either, just come down when you hear the first gun shot.”

Layal closed the door when Mimi left and was trying to figure out the reasons for the war but wasn’t sure she had found any. Her thoughts were quickly interrupted by the sound of a distant explosion coming from the front line; this is what they used to call the line that divided the two sections of the capital. “Have the battles started already? Should I go down now? I’ll wait a little while, maybe what I heard was a normal explosion and that will be the end of it.”

In the above passage there is a small hint that indicates at which stage of the Lebanese civil war the novel is taking place. Research the Lebanese civil war and its various stages and indicate a) what you took to be the hint stated above and b) in what years (approximately) might the story be taking place.

*Zzzz...Booom!!!*

“Oh God that one was very close!” Layal picked up a bag which contained all her important belonging: certificates, jewellery and such things. She ran toward

the door, opened it and scurried down the stairs until she reached the car park level, which was the second floor below ground. She found all the inhabitants of the building there and each family took up a corner, when out of no where Mimi appeared: “Why did you take so long? I was worried about you. I was going to go up to get you but my husband wouldn’t let me. He said that you would come down for sure, that there won’t be any one staying in their apartments tonight.”

Layal sat with Mimi and her family. They were all piled on the floor where Mimi had spread out an old carpet and some cushions as well as having prepared bags that contained water, food and the like. The bombing became more violent and drew nearer. In times like this Layal became a lump of terror, petrified in her place, gritting her teeth and incapable of being aware of others. As for Mimi, she was much more insensitive to the noise; she moved around, attending to her children and to Layal’s needs who refused all offers of food and drink. Mimi tried to ease her terror:

“Don’t be scared, we’re safe here, this place in particular is safer than others. My husband chose it in the beginning of the war and even now, thank God, nothing has happened to it. Take this, eat, it might be a long night.”

“Please look after your husband and children and leave me be. I’ll ask you for what I want when I feel hungry or thirsty or...”

“My husband can look after himself” and she murmured in a low voice as though she wanted only Layal to hear: “I hope he gets off my back, I’m not in the mood for him anymore.” Layal ignored what she said and made no reply.

BOOOM!! A series of loud explosions. Mimi placed her head on Layal's shoulder and said: "Don't be afraid." In her terror, Layal embraced her, unconsciously squeezing her so tightly that she nearly crushed her. This was because she was afraid, but Mimi was happy with the situation and embraced her in return. This continued until the shelling, which did not last longer than several seconds, ended, after which, the hands parted and Mimi lifted her head from Layal's shoulder saying: "I feel a kind of arousal when the bombing is over, especially when it's been strong."

The husband's telephone rang and it was Mimi's neighbour, the old hag, ringing from her building's shelter to see if they were well. "We're all well and you? Of course Mimi's here and Layal has joined us tonight. I'll pass the phone to her: Mimi take the phone, she wants to talk to you." Mimi knew very well who it was who wanted to talk to her when she took the phone.

"Yes, how's the situation at your end? She's with us...She doesn't know anyone else here. Don't go out at a time like this, we're very well. And your children? No! No! Please don't do that, I'll see you tomorrow." She hung up the phone and walked back toward Layal and her husband.

"Imagine that she wants to come to our shelter! She's crazy!"

"She can do whatever she wants; she's old enough and free to do whatever she wants." The husband said this as he placed the radio to his ear, listening to the news flashes and the continuous updates. After a short time he continued: "It seems that they're working toward a ceasefire, we should wait a while, maybe they'll agree on something and then we can go back to our houses and sleep in our beds."

Mimi did not want for there to be a ceasefire, as for Layal, she smiled and said: “I hope they do reach a ceasefire agreement, this bombing terrorizes me and I completely lose my mind. I find myself incapable of holding it together.”

“We’re safe here,” Mimi said, “and if they keep fighting we can sleep here. I’ve prepared for this, and you, Layal, you can sleep next to me. I’ll set up a place for you.”

“You want me to sleep if the bombing continues? That’s impossible! I won’t be able to shut my eyes so long as there’s the sound of even just one shot!”

The old hag entered, running, and headed directly towards where the family, Mimi and Layal were sitting.

“I have such good luck” she said, “they stopped the bombing when I decided to come over and now they can do whatever they want.”

Layal looked at her without replying, as for Mimi, she said: “You’re really crazy! Who else would take a risk like this and leave their shelter?”

“Seeing you is worth the world Mimi, don’t you know that?”

Mimi drew closer to Layal and murmured in her ear: “She’s jealous of you, this is why she came despite the risk.” Layal did not understand what Mimi meant and at the same time she did not lend the matter any importance, all that preoccupied her at that moment was that the gunfire should cease.

The artillery exploded anew and this time with violence so great that everyone ran to the corners and huddled one on top of the other until the bombing stopped, after going on for longer than usual.

“Is this a ceasefire?” Layal said, shivering.

“I think so. Maybe they’re just emptying the ammunition as they’re in the habit of doing before making an agreement,” the husband added “and the news broadcast says that they have arrived at some sort of an agreement, so let’s wait a little longer and see.”

They waited another quarter of an hour after the last explosion until Farid decided that it was time to return to the house. Layal suggested that they should wait longer, so that she may be completely assured of the safety of the situation and expressed this desire, but Farid looked at Mimi and said: “Come on sweetheart, let’s go home.”

Mimi picked up their things that were chaotically dispersed on the floor and accompanied her husband saying to Layal: “If you’re afraid, you can sleep at our house, don’t be shy.”

“Layal is tough, I’m sure,” the old hag said.

“I’m tough in the face of anything except blind bombing.”

“In any case you should stay up with us until you put your mind at ease and then you can go home if you want,” Mimi said.

Layal wanted to stay at Mimi’s apartment on the third floor because her own apartment was higher up and much more exposed and unprotected. She accepted Mimi’s invitation and when they reached the apartment Mimi turned to her and said: “Excuse me for a few minutes I have to get the children to their bedroom so that they can get some sleep.”

“And I’ll prepare a drink that will calm our nerves.” The old hag added.

Mimi disappeared with her children, the old hag entered the kitchen and shortly re-emerged carrying a tray with four steaming cups on it, and she said:

“If you had a man, Miss Layal, you would not be so afraid. Marriage is necessary for a woman. If you were married you would have been at home with your husband now, without being afraid.”

“Maybe, but what is my husband going to do for me during the bombing? He is as exposed as I am and nobody can protect anybody in these situations.”

“True but the presence of another person with us can give us heart.”

“And for this reason it is not necessary for that person to be a husband.”

“Marriage is sutra<sup>24</sup> and completion for the woman, if you permit me to say this without questioning the soundness of your understanding, Layal. Here you go; would you like sugar with your tea?”

“No thanks.” Layal took the cup from the old hag’s hands and drank without replying to her comments. She had no desire to discuss the subject with her.

Mimi returned: “If marriage is sutra and completion, for the woman then why didn’t you marry?”

“I did marry, I tried my luck, but God took him from me and now I have my children, they are my completion. Isn’t this true Mister Farid?”

“Yes, yes, as you wish, you know best.”

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Mimi drew near Layal offering her a cigarette and said in a low voice: “Don’t hang on what she says. She always loves distributing her opinions, besides she’s just trying to provoke you.”

Layal drank the last of her cup and excused herself: “It appears that they’ve really reached an agreement on a ceasefire, going to my house, goodnight everyone.”

“Goodnight,” everyone else replied and the husband continued: “I want to sleep, I have to get up early tomorrow.”<sup>15</sup>

The husband went into the bedroom and the old hag was left alone with Mimi. She insisted on staying so that she may ask Mimi why Layal was sitting with them in the shelter this time.

“I invited her to sit with us, she’s alone and were neighbours, you know that and she didn’t mind, that’s all there is to it. She gets terribly frightened during the bombing and she held on to me and pulled me towards her every time a bomb exploded.”

“True? And you loved that, you traitor!” The old hag replied laughing and then continued:

“Are you attracted to her?”

“What do you mean? Are you jealous?”

“What do you mean? Why should I be jealous of her, why do you ask, did she say anything to you, did she...?”

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Mimi laughed and in order to provoke the old hag, replied: I don't know yet, maybe... why not?"

"Why not? Do you see yourself with this coward? She trembles during the bombing like a child!"

"I like her personality, that's all."

"If you ask me, I don't like it one bit. I'm going now. Meet me tomorrow at my house, I'll be alone as usual."

## 12

Siham was in her room thinking about Layal and Nour when the bombing began. She refused to accompany her mother and brothers to the shelter, but then her mother insisted and forced her to go down with them. Siham preferred death over life that night; she wanted the bombing to intensify in its violence and to reach all the people and all the houses and in particular to obliterate the pig. Once in the shelter, she sat in one of the corners and spoke to no one. When the battle ended, she returned to her room and nothing crossed her mind other than the idea of ringing Layal to enquire after her well-being. Because she was not capable of ringing Nour she turned herself toward Layal, who, when she entered her house, heard the ringing of the telephone. She rushed to the telephone harbouring a thousand fears for her family and friends... it was Siham's voice at the other end of the line.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, and you?"

"Thanks be to God"

“It was a violent night...I’m exhausted, I want to sleep. Is everyone else okay?”

“Yes. I’ll leave you to it then.”

“Thank you for ringing me, good night.” She hung up the receiver and went to her bed.

Siham remained on the line for a few seconds before she exploded in tears. “Why am I rejected like this? Why aren’t I like the other the girls who are madly in love with men and live normal lives? Why does my life have to remain a secret, why didn’t God make me normal? Is it possible that it was that bastard who ruined my whole life? He’s dead now and I hope everyone like him dies. Everyone thinks he died of a heart attack but I’m sure he committed suicide after committing his monstrous act. Yes, so what if he was drunk and didn’t know what he was doing, does that mean that it was just the excessive drinking that made him unable to differentiate between my mother and me? Did things get so mixed up for him, as he tried to argue, or did he subconsciously crave me? How long will I hold on to this secret that almost annihilates me and everything I dream of achieving? Maybe it would be better for me to tell my story to a psychologist... I can’t handle their rejection of me...I reject men and women reject me. Where did that pig spring from to steal Nour from me? She used to accept me, and herself, so what happened to change her and why haven’t I changed? Why do I try to compensate for her loss with someone like her? Why did Layal take a liking to me and not a man? I’ll tell my story to Layal first, maybe she can help me, maybe she will feel sorry for me and through this, love me. In this way I might be able to achieve what I want and mangle the heart of that traitor who struts around as if she’s superior somehow. I can’t call Layal now. I’ll leave it until tomorrow. When will that tomorrow come—

hours pass like the ages. Layal will be at university tomorrow, I'll talk to her. I'll force her to take an interest in me and when she hears my story I don't think that she'll refuse to help. Tomorrow I'm going to throw my secret at her and put her before a grave responsibility. She'll share that secret with me and this way I can get some relief, as Bergson says, the criminal confesses to his crime so that he may re-enter society.<sup>25</sup> I'll confess my secret so that I can enter anew into the society that reviles me. I'll certainly enter Layal's heart."

After this decision she tried to sleep without success and so she took a blank sheet of paper and began to write:

...I used to have a heart and you were its mistress. You possessed the romance and the eyes were mine, I closed them whenever I wanted and I hid them in the evening and the body carried the intoxicants and the Phoenician seashells. Lips and troubles I lived for and days and nights passed on the vessel of time.

Now that the narcissist kingdom has fallen like the falling of light, the birds and flowers have left me and the clouds hover over the music. And the evening's entertainment becomes passing nostalgia and the departure becomes insomniac memories and a heart is destroyed by bloody glass and the blood becomes the glass of a shattered heart, the romance becomes the infidel's miracle, becomes the miracle of sacred love...<sup>17</sup>

Siham reread what she wrote. The night continued to envelop the place and it possessed secrets and the inkling of beginnings.

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The night takes us back to a crisis we have buried, freed ourselves from and sometimes he abuses his sovereignty and finds pleasure in our vanquishment and sits beside us, observing how we submerge ourselves into what furrows our days. Thus the night stood witness to Siham's return to Paris, dreaming of Claire and their evenings together, and Siham, feeling delicate, remembered this in the mode of poetry, or rather, poetically:

Claire who is taintless,  
makes the Arabian Jasmine wonder at her purity  
and the sea foam asks after how she melts.  
Claire and the sun  
she does not see her so as not to close her eyes  
and the moon,  
if he saw her strutting and jangling in her bangles,  
is put to shame.  
Claire the beautiful the prettiest,  
dances and shakes the foundations beneath her  
and she sways  
flirtatious  
the lilies envy her.  
Claire unveils the treasures of her body  
and the sun intermixes with the waves  
and the berries emerge deliciously  
and it's time to eat,  
Claire devours passion and finds pleasure,  
she knows the secrets of love and its ways  
and she flirts,  
Claire  
and freedom is in her dress,  
she undresses,  
she does not want to remain a prisoner,  
and she blows her cigarettes in a blonde cup,  
so who is Claire drinking and who is drinking her?  
And in a white bed she fell rambling,  
suicidal,

telling her body of her victories.  
Claire looks and does not speak,  
she eats and drinks with her eyes  
and sighs with her lips  
and so she feeds the deviations and satisfies the prohibitions  
and Claire turns like a pelican coming from the clouds,  
happy she is and sensitive,  
gathering feelings from the heads of poems  
and reacts as calmly as the river flux  
and relaxes like a Siamese cat,  
satisfied with letting down her hair,  
like grape vines proportionate to their red fruit  
and I am her trellis!<sup>18</sup>

Siham realized herself after her poetical wandering and she thought to herself: I know that my relationship with Claire wasn't serious, it was the beginning of the road, that's all. As for Nour, doctor Nour, she was the one I was enamoured of, she was the true beginning. And Layal. Is she just a part of my reaction or am I enamoured of her too? Why do I wait with, the utmost patience to see her? Oh God, how her presence affects me! Tomorrow I'll bring her into my world and she won't be able to leave.

### 13

Dawn came at last; Siham prepared her coffee, drank it hurriedly and left early for the university in order to wait for Layal. She waited for a while, hoping that the other would arrive before waited for a while, hoping that the other would arrive before class time, even if for a few minutes, so that she could talk to her and arrange an appointment to see her. But Layal was late in coming in and she ran to the lecture theatre quickly, while Siham watched her from a distance, not daring to approach her. It occurred to her to walk into the hall and sit through the class but

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she did not want to disturb Layal and so she stayed outside, pacing, until the end of the hour. She didn't know what to do, she was panicking. Should she go in and wait? But Layal appeared before she could make a decision. When Layal saw her, she smiled and asked: "What's up? Anything new?" and Siham was quick to reply.

"Yes, and I want to tell you. Do you have time?"

"Come on, let's have coffee."

Siham was elated, not entirely believing what she had heard.

She followed Layal to the first floor where the café was.

"What's new?" Layal asked.

Siham stuttered and murmured: "A very dangerous thing and I don't know where to begin."

"Begin wherever you want, I'm listening."

Siham thought that Layal was undermining her and taking her troubles lightly so she stiffened and was quiet until prodded:

"Come on, what's the matter, and why are you so tense?"

"It's a more dangerous situation than you realize, it's the reason for everything I do now; it is the reason for what they call my "deviation." I think that it changed my whole life and..." She was silent once more and Layal was silent with her, waiting to hear this "dangerous" story. After several moments Siham burst into tears and began to tell Layal the story with her father. She told her with difficulty and Layal did not enquire about the details but was satisfied with listening and nodding. She was aware of such things taking place because she had researched the subject.<sup>19</sup>

"Don't you think that he's the reason?"

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“I don’t know, maybe, but if you know the reason then you should be strong. All psychology does is bring out the repressed to the conscious self and you are conscious of your situation perfectly well, so there is nothing left for you to do but to treat yourself by yourself.”<sup>20</sup>

Siham wandered inwardly into her past, she stopped at the primary school period and the image of that teacher whose touches reminded her of her mother’s on her back.

“But even before that happened I didn’t feel inclined toward the boys.”

“What do you mean?”

Siham told her about her early childhood and about the feelings that she experienced. Layal was quiet because at first she had imagined that the first story she was told, was the reason for Siham’s hatred of men, but when she heard the rest of what Siham said she was perplexed and did not know how to direct her.

“Do you mean that this is a natural inclination that you have?”

“I think so. From the beginning I never liked males and after the incident I started to hate them.”<sup>21</sup>

“But you can’t talk about liking boys during such an early time in your life. You were young and a lack of interest in boys at that age is very natural.”

“But I used to find myself inclined to women and I still do, women alone can move my being and my feelings and my senses.”

“In the phase that you speak of, we all lean to the warm lap, even the boys lean to that, it’s very natural.”

“I still lean to them, that s the problem.”

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It was really the problem that Layal wanted to douse in order to help Siham. She knew a lot of lesbians, and some of her readings that revolved around the subject suggested that the matter was directly related to human genetics, and a human being was born this way and had no choice in the matter. Should she advise Siham to accept herself for who she was, or should she try to extricate her from her condition? But how? She very well knew the extent of the danger caused by this subject in society, for, those people are scorned and no one understands them. Siham now placed before her a grave responsibility, and while she understood her suffering, was she at all capable of helping her? She came closer to her, drew her to her chest and said:

“I understand you perfectly but we have to try. My advice to you is the same as before. Even if the matter is difficult at first, try to socialize with young men. You might get attached to one of them and if that happens then that will be the end of it. Think of marriage and childbearing, forget yourself and follow suit from the other girls. Try, even if this requires that you lie to yourself in the beginning. Listen to me and try then...we can cross that bridge when we come to it, as they say.”<sup>22</sup>

Siham was waiting for a different reply; she had hoped that Layal might draw nearer, might feel greater intimacy between them, but her hopes were disappointed.

“Is this all you have to say to me Doctor Layal?”

“There is no other solution at present. If you trust me, and it appears that you do, then listen to my advice and tell me everything new that happens. And now it’s late and you have to get home, as I do, but if you need anything in the meantime then call me. Try writing because very often, when we empty out what we have on

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paper, we feel relieved of our burdens and we see things more clearly. See you later then.”

“Won’t you stay a little? I have more to say.”

“Is there another story?”

“After the death of my father I became attached to my eldest brother but God took him soon after. He died in a car accident. With him I lost all hope and after he died I became the man of the house, that is, until my mother regained her health and overcame the shock that nearly destroyed her. She took my father’s place. I used to sleep with her in the bed. I used to feel the warmth of her body. I used to surround her with my arms until she fell asleep like a little girl.”

“Are you the only child as a result of your brother’s death?”

“No, I have two other brothers but they’re younger than I am. After I lost my eldest brother I felt that I had no luck with men, I began to distance them from my life. I wanted to be in their place so that I could look after the woman, as it happened, and as she deserves. And that was the outlet for my natural inclinations in the beginning. I love women so what can I do? Change my nature?”

“Maybe this isn’t your nature, maybe the circumstances transformed you to this nature. Try, like I told you, maybe the circumstances will change.”

“And if they don’t?”

“We’ll see. Try first and don’t put failure before the attempt. And now, it’s very late. We’ll continue this discussion later.”

## 14

Layal entered her house thinking of Siham and her story and of the responsibility that was thrust upon her. She was sad and wished that Siham had lived in a different society, in Europe for example, where she would not have suffered what she was suffering now. She would have accepted herself and fought for her rights

as they do there. Should she suggest emigration and living abroad? But would this be a way of progression or regression for her? A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

“Will you receive me like this?” Mimi was using her hands to keep her long, unbuttoned shirt from revealing her body. “My children are asleep and my husband is listening to the news so I felt like visiting you, can I come in?”

Layal hesitated a little to let her know that she did not like these kinds of relations but she said: “Please, come in...but I’m waiting for some friends.”

“I won’t stay long. Have you had dinner, should I bring you...?”

“No thanks, I’ve had dinner.”

Mimi sat on the armchair facing Layal, releasing her shirt, which revealed transparent sleepwear underneath. She asked Layal about how she passed her day and if she was tired out by the day’s teaching...and Layal was asking herself: “Why is Mimi putting her charms on display for me?” But she ignored the matter and answered her questions with brief responses, looking at her watch every now and then. This situation did not last long for there was a knock on the door and Mimi’s husband came to fetch his wife because their neighbor, the old hag, had come to visit her.

Layal felt relieved after Mimi left and forgot her completely and returned to Siham’s case, trying to find alternative solutions to her problem.

When Mimi entered her house the old hag received her with reproach:

“You were visiting Layal in those clothes?”

“And why shouldn’t I?” Mimi replied, smiling.

“Did you hear?” Directing her speech to the husband. “Did you hear this?”

“Layal is alone at home and she is a woman just like Mimi, after all doesn’t Mimi receive you in the same clothes?”

The old hag said nothing. Poor Farid, he's in another world.<sup>23</sup>

Everyone sat around in the lounge room, as it was usual for evenings that were unmarred by the shelling. And as usual too, Mimi's husband left the lounge room after some time and entered the bedroom wanting the neighbor to leave so that he might be alone with his wife. As for the neighbor, she was annoyed and took to reprimanding Mimi for what she had done and for her visit to Layal. In the meantime, Mimi began to invent stories that had nothing to do with what actually happened; she was trying to arouse the old hag's jealousy and to delude her into thinking that Layal was interested in her too. She was speaking from her own wishes and transforming those wishes into facts that she delighted in describing: "She kissed me and squeezed me...she sat next to me and stroked my face and my hair...Ah how splendid she was!"

The old hag was no longer capable of suppressing her anger but she was neither capable of raising her voice or doing what came over to do, so she jerked up from her seat and said: "I'll see you tomorrow" and she left.

Shortly after Mimi's departure the telephone rang at Layal's house and Siham's voice came, irregular and coy: "Don't hang up, I want to hear your voice, let me speak. I'm hopeless, tell me you accept my friendship, I don't want more than that, be my friend, you share my secret, you are my savior if you want to be."

Layal tried to calm her down and was pleasant to her and the conversation between them ended when she said: "I will be your friend, don't be afraid, and now try to sleep, you need to rest, okay?" But Siham was awake, she could not sleep and as usual during such times she began to write.

That night did not end peacefully. People woke to the sound of artillery being fired. They rushed in their sleepwear to the shelters while the screaming of children filled the air. Layal was among the first people to reach the shelter where she sat inside car, wrapped around herself. Several minutes later, Mimi surprised her.

“Why are you sitting here alone? Come and sit in our corner, it’s safer.”

Layal did not say anything; she alighted from her car, locked it and walked with Mimi to where her children and husband were sitting. She sat with them in silence, thinking of nothing other than the violence and about how long it was going to last.

“No university today.” Mimi said.

“Certainly not. Who would dare go outside in these crazy conditions? Life is more important than education,” the husband said, “there’s plenty of time for learning later.”

Layal shook her head and did not answer. After a short period the shelling became more and more sparse: “I’m going up to the house to get some food for the children, and I’ll make us a pot of coffee.” Mimi said.

“No!” Her husband replied. “I’ll go up, you stay here with the kids.”

Mimi sat beside Layal and attempted to start a conversation with her. “Men are useless except in situations such as these. If it wasn’t for some difficult tasks then we would not need them.”

“Don’t you think that the woman is capable of living on her own without a man?”

“Of course, and the man too. But this is the circle of life, or humanity would perish. Why do you live on your own?”

“Circumstances. I’m not the rule and since it is only a small number of people who are in my situation, we don’t change anything and we don’t stop the life cycle.”

“Don’t you like children?”

“The matter is not that simple. I like and dislike them at the same time.”

“Do you refuse to marry?”

“I’m not thinking about it at present.”

“Aren’t you in need of a male or female friend?”

“I have many friends, thanks be to God.”

“I know, but do you have a particular boy friend. You know what I mean.”

“I have a boyfriend but I don’t want to talk about him now, it’s something that concerns me alone.

Mimi was surprised by this reply and she continued, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry into your personal life but I was only asking out of...”

“I’m sorry too. Look, during the bombing I become extremely nervous and I can’t be engaged by subjects of this sort.”

“Everyone has their life and their freedom. But I don’t like men, I prefer women. It’s easier to communicate with them and relationships with them are more pleasurable.”

As if out of nowhere the old hag appeared before them.

“You two alone here? Where’s your husband?”

“He went to the house to get food and coffee. It’s good that you came, you can read the coffee cups for us.”

After they drank the coffee Mimi overturned her cup and shortly afterwards she gave it to the old hag who took it and began to stare into it.

“You have a large meeting. Some kind of party or night out. There’s going to be a big gathering but you’re going to be the star. All the women will be jealous of you, after that you will be in a close sitting with one of them. She has all your love and esteem. You have a new acquaintance, it won’t last because you will realize that this person, maybe a woman, is haughty and conceited and...you’ll get away from him and this will be good for you.”

Mimi understood what the old hag meant and laughed, then took Layal’s cup and gave it to her. The old hag looked into it with a kind of disgust and turned it between her fingers, was silent for a few moments and said:

“Madam Layal you have a trip, you’ll travel abroad.”

“Is that true?” Mimi asked.

Layal turned her lower lip but did not say anything, so the old hag continued:

“I’m certain. The road is open and clear. Look Mimi don’t you see a plane here?”

“I don’t see anything, but go on.”

“Maybe you’ll meet someone there and you’ll come back with him.” Then she looked at Layal and continued: “You are married...?”

“No! She lives alone,” Mimi said laughing, “and you know that, so why ask?”

“To make sure, because she will marry, God willing, soon.”

She returned the cup to its place and so Mimi said:

“Is that all? No! We won’t let her travel, we’re used to her and we’ve begun to love her.” Then she drew near Layal and kissed her on the cheek saying: “She’s an unsurpassable, self-reliant neighbour!”

Layal was in one place and they were in another. She was thinking about the dreadfulness of the conditions and they were in the midst of a minefield of verbal

skirmish that she did not comprehend. After some time the old hag drew closer to Mimi and they began to talk in a low voice and so Layal excused herself:

“I want to lie down a little in the car, thanks for everything.”

“I can put a cushion for you here.” Mimi said.

“Leave her be.” The old hag replied. Layal walked away and left them.

## 16

After several days Layal returned to the university. In class, her eyes fell on Siham sitting amongst the students. After the lecture she accompanied her to the café and asked her about any recent developments but Siham remained virtually silent and when she left her she was still very sad. And in the following meeting Siham did not emerge from her silence but when Layal barraged her with questions, she drew out some papers from her bag and placed them before her, saying: “You can read them now, if you want.” Layal unfolded the papers and saw a text entitled “The miracle of your sittings.” She folded the pages again and said “I’ll read them later.”

“As you wish, but I would like to know what you think of them. I can’t speak as well as I write. In writing there are no lies as there is in direct speech. I am before myself there.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you my opinion with the utmost liberty, objectivity and impartiality.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of. I don’t like objectivity in the matters that touch the human heart. How can we be impartial before a person who is suffering and...” She became silent again.

Layal shared this opinion with her but she said: “I’m going to be objective in relation to the structure, but in relation to the import then I’m going to be biased, does this please you?” She rose wanting to leave.



Siham smiled, stood in her turn, and walked her to her car and Layal said:  
 “See you later.”

“Why don’t you farewell me with a kiss as friends do, aren’t I your friend?”

“Yes, and here, you can have two kisses instead of one.” And they parted.

At home Layal opened the papers that she took from Siham. She understood from the title of the poem that it was about her and this nourished her narcissism.

Do you know now why I have nothing left to say?  
 Because you have relieved me from the load of life  
 and shaken off the remnants of the age  
 and cleansed me from the laws of peoples.  
 A seashell I’ve become,  
 enclosed unto herself,  
 the cold night I’ve become  
 after you discovered, after you enquired  
 about my queer relationship  
 and queried the conclusiveness with which it is forbidden.  
 I resolved to doubt myself.  
 I was this and that  
 but my eagerness to soar  
 and to transform anew  
 was in proportion to that doubt  
 and whosoever grows familiar  
 with that forbidden carnality, changes...  
 Forbidden... Permissible... I hate these words.  
 “Whoever sees the faults in others will be judged,”  
 and we every day see the faults of all people  
 and as yet have not been judged.

It was not this which frightened me from the forbidden relationship, as they call it,  
 but the reason is that I am very lazy in making love

I am a lover of soul, without body.

## PART II

### 17

The spring break drew closer and Mimi's husband was preparing to go abroad on a business trip. When Farid left, Mimi took her children to the mountain where her parents lived. She left them there and went back to her house alone. She knew that Layal was also preparing for the upcoming break and she decided that she would spend this time with her. It became a question of how. How was she going to free herself from the old hag whose jealousy became more and more obvious? "No matter what I do, she won't be able to say anything about me to anyone. Whatever she says will affect her just as adversely—and she values her reputation greatly. Do I have to stay with her? I don't love her any more and I can only think about Layal..."

Layal had decided to spend the spring break at home in order to produce some personal writings that she had put on hold during the semester. She placed everything related to the university aside, spread out all her personal papers on the desk and began to read what she had written earlier. She was trying to re-familiarise herself, to re-acquaint herself with a work she had begun months earlier. She very well knew how difficult it was to return to a work from the past, particularly after a period of discontinuation: we sit there before our pages, wishing that something would happen to distract us, hoping that somehow we might escape

from this whole operation of re-entry, anything to hold on to, anything to justify our postponement of beginning again! To justify our postponement of beginning again!

Layal was lost in thought when she heard knocking on her door. This time she did not express her usual irritation and instead abandoned her work and ran for the door, for the first time, she received Mimi cheerfully and invited her in.

“I have some spare time now. Come in, we can have coffee together.”

Mimi was delighted by this reception and felt as though she might succeed in her endeavour to win Layal over, and in order to disguise her excitement she said:

“I won’t stay long. I don’t want to bother you. If you’re busy then I’ll come back later.”

“No, no, come in—you’re not bothering me at all.”

Mimi welcomed this insistence thinking it was an indication of Layal’s interest in her.

“The beginnings are always difficult,” Layal said. She was still thinking about her work and the difficulty in resuming it, but Mimi did not realize that this was what Layal meant.

“When we love, the beginning ceases to be difficult; we’re dragged to what we love, without choice or hesitation; was Mimi’s reply.

“True. But the world of writing is different. Anyway, enough about that subject for now! How are you going to spend the holidays, have you planned anything for the children?”

“My husband is abroad, and the children are with my parents in the mountain, and I’m on my own here for a while. I’d like some time to relax a little. My husband’s continuous presence is irritating and the children are a grave responsibility,

especially during the bombing, that's why I sent them to their grandfather's house. Things are easier for me this way; they're safe and I can move around much more easily and freely."

"You're right. So what will you get up to on your own?"

"I'm going to devote time to myself, I'll visit my friends and whomever I like—I deserve to live freely, even if for a little while."

"Certainly, certainty—we all need our solitude from time to time."

"You're always alone; don't you get bored of that solitude?"

"Sometimes, but I love my solitude and I have so many things to do that I don't get a chance to be bored."

"I envy you your circumstances. I wish that I was in your place. If I was going to do it all over again I wouldn't marry or have children or..."

"Well then, why did you?"

"Luck. A girl has to get married in our society, otherwise a lot of things are said about her and then she would have to continue living with her parents and under their mercy. I would have really liked to complete my studies. But there's no luck."

"Complete them now. You have enough time on your hands."

"My husband would be against it. As far as he's concerned the woman is for the house. Anyhow, I don't like his opinions. I don't love him anymore. He was something and became something else after marriage."

Loyal smiled and said:

"Love always wanes a little after marriage and the relationship takes on different meanings; it becomes about sharing responsibility and transforms into an understanding over particulars related to the domestic home and the children."

“No understanding and no love, I swear to you. All that he cares about is that he finds his food prepared and me ready for him in bed to satisfy him.”

“That’s an indication of love—if he’s always desiring you.”

“You think? The man desires nothing except unloading. He doesn’t pay attention to the woman’s needs at all and when the operation is over he becomes like a piece of rock that means nothing to me, but oftentimes I hate him.”

“And why don’t you be honest with him? Tell him your feelings and your needs, maybe he’ll change and your relationship might improve.”

“I’m too embarrassed to discuss this with him, because the woman, he thinks, is for childbearing and for running the house and raising children—that’s all. I’m telling you, most men are like that. All my friends tell me about their husbands and I see no difference between any of them.” She was silent a little, then continued: “To tell you the truth I don’t like men, I don’t like that kind of people, I don’t know how I married and got caught up. If I didn’t have any children I would have divorced him and then lived my life as I wanted.”

Before Layal’s silence Mimi asked: “What’s your opinion? It’s clear anyway considering that you’re not married.”

“I’m not married because I want to be free. I’m not against men at all, but I’m against the commitment that imposes obligations and duties. I am all for liberal relationships based on agreement and love, because these continue so long as they successful, and once they fail, every one goes his own way without ceremonies or demands.”

“Have you tried that?”

“Of course, and I realized that for every relationship there is an end. A relationship can’t be lifelong because it involves two people, each of whom has his own way of development which is different to the other’s--very rarely do these

patterns of development complement each other so that the relationship can continue. For this reason we see most marital and non-marital relationships come to an end.”

“And what do they do when it’s over? Do they divorce?”

“In marriage, where children and other responsibilities abound, the relationship continues. When it’s really over, it continues in the shape of routine and that’s only for achieving results. Both the man and the woman are genuinely depressed in a situation like that and the man looks for another relationship that would help him continue his ended relationship with his wife, and the woman, very often, does the same as he does—all this in absolute secrecy.”

“They lie to each other then?”

“And what’s laughable is that sometimes they know that and ignore it. A play, no more, no less. As for the liberal relationships —there’s no need for fooling yourself or the other person you’re involved with.”

“So you’re against marriage. But how is society to continue, and where would you go with the children?”

“I’m not against marriage completely. I’m all for it, for those who want it—and against it, for those who don’t want it I don’t judge and I make no evaluations on the subject. And just as I don’t judge someone who wants to marry and to be integrated into society and who wants to play the multiplication game, I ask them not to judge those who don’t want to marry and prefer the liberal life.”

“If we went by your opinion then humanity would perish.”

“Don’t worry about that. Those of whom I talk are a minority and pose no threat to society and its number inflation. Do you think that a lot of people can bear

solitude and freedom? No, it's a difficult thing to bear. More often than not we prefer an irritating partnership to the difficult solitariness of being by oneself."<sup>24</sup>

Layal was speaking while Mimi thought of her predicament. She too was trying to compensate for her loneliness with a relationship with the old hag, since her relationship with her husband had become hollow. Should she propose to Layal the very question that was forming in her mind? She fumbled a little, stuttered and then said as though she had just taken a gulp of stimulants:

"Madam Layal," she paused as though she was looking for the words to express her thoughts allusively, "Madam Layal," she repeated, "are partnerships always between man and woman?"

"What do you mean? Marriage, custom, is between man and woman--that's the general rule and that's what we're talking about."

Mimi was too frightened to continue her question and was silent but Layal did not do the same and followed with:

"We're talking, of course, about marriage and not romantic relationships or otherwise." She was quiet in turn. She did not want to speak in excess because she did not know Mimi, or her way of thinking very well.

Mimi, however, was encouraged by Layal's words because she sensed some kind of openness in them and as though she wanted to lull Layal into continuing, she said: "A romantic relationship is always between a man and a woman and that leads to marriage and if it doesn't lead to it then it becomes a free relationship, as you call it. But sometimes..." She was quiet.

"Sometimes what?"

Mimi averted her eyes and fixed them on the ground and with a kind of embarrassment she said, "what do you think of homosexuality?"

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“Ah, I see what you mean. These are situations that occur in nature and in society. Sometimes a man falls in love with a man and a woman with a woman. These relationships aren’t part of the norm, but they exist.”

And Mimi rushed to the question: “And what’s your opinion on this?”

“I don’t have an opinion, in the sense that I don’t judge these relationships morally. I notice their presence and I accept them because they’re present. Neither acceptance or rejection could negate the reality of their existence.”

“Does that mean you endorse these kinds of relationships?”

“How did you understand that? I told you that if they are present and whosoever wants to practice this or live in this way is free to do so. I have nothing to do with that person or their private affairs. Every one has their own desires and inclinations and fulfils them as they wish.”

“Are such relationships deviances, as they are called?”

“Yes, they’re deviant, from the norm that is, because heterosexual relationships form the general rule while homosexual ones are deviations and for this reason they’re labelled as abnormal.”

“Does this abnormality imply illness?”

Loyal laughed and said: “That’s the general opinion, but I don’t see it as an illness—I see deviation from the familiar norm, that’s all.”

“And is such a deviation from the familiar norm shameful?”

“Shame is a moral evaluation and I am, as I told you, against moral evaluation when it comes to this subject-- I am all for individual freedom and as long as that freedom harms no one, then it’s legitimate, in my opinion.”

Mimi was eased by Loyal’s remark but was uncertain as to whether it was appropriate to continue pursuing the subject, or whether it was better to bring the discussion to an end. After some thought she said: “The others don’t think like you, you’re forgiving.”



What do you teach at university?"

"I don't ask anyone to think like me, that's just my opinion and everyone is free to have their own. As for the university, I teach anthropology."

Mimi did not understand what it was that Layal taught but she understood intuitively that continuing the discussion would not suffice. She felt that Layal's interest in her was neither difficult nor impossible to attain, as long as she was this open-minded, and for this reason she said:

"I have to excuse myself now. The subject is exciting and we can continue it later if you like. I'll leave you to your work now and please don't hesitate to ask me for anything. I'm all on my own at the moment and I'll be very happy to call you over for lunch or dinner—I'll let you choose which time best suits you."

"Thanks for looking after me, we'll see."

"I could leave it up to you to decide but you might be too embarrassed to invite yourself so let's decide on a time now. What do you think of having dinner with me tomorrow? It'll be very simple."

"We'll see, we'll see." Layal said coyly.

"No. I want an answer so I can make some preparations."

"There's no need for that. If I have time I'll visit you and I'll eat whatever you have there. Don't bother yourself with preparing anything in particular."

"So we're agreed about tomorrow?"

Layal thought for a little while as though she was recalling her prior engagements and then accepted Mimi's suggestion. They farewelled each other with Mimi repeating: "Until tomorrow, don't forget, I'll be waiting for you."

After Layal locked her door she returned to her desk and tried to resume her work. And because her thoughts were scattered she ran away once more, this time to the kitchen, preoccupying herself with making more coffee. As for Mimi, she returned to her house and started to think about ways to distance herself from the old hag. She knew very well that the widow intended to keep her company for the entire duration of Farid's absence. She probably thought that Mimi sent her children away in order to free herself entirely for her pleasure. This was, truly, what the old hag had thought and for this reason it was no more than several minutes after Mimi's return that her telephone rang.

“Hello. Where were you? I called you so many times and I got no answer.”

“I went to buy some things.”

“And now you're back. I'll be there as soon as I can.” The old hag said and hung up the telephone.

Mimi hung up the receiver in turn, irritated by the old hag's hot pursuit and decided to be rid of her; decided to make her understand that she no longer wished to continue their relationship. Her thoughts were interrupted shortly afterwards when the old hag arrived. She surrounded Mimi with her arms and began to kiss her and said: “I missed you. How are your parents?” to kiss her and said: “I missed you. How are your parents?”

“Well.” Mimi said, politely pushing the old hag away from her.

“You're alone now, don't worry, I can sleep here; my children are all grown up and don't need me around.”

“No thanks, there's no need to bother you.”

“What are you saying? You! Bother me? Mimi, sweetheart!”

“I’m thinking of spending this time alone, I need to rest and I took the kids to the mountain for this reason—I need time for myself without anyone bothering me.”

“And do I bother you? I don’t think so. I need a break sometimes too, but I get upset when I don’t see you. If you want to rest tonight I can come back tomorrow, I can make you enjoy yourself however you like; the coast is clear now and there’s no need for us to worry.”

“I’m thinking of going to the mountain to see the kids, I miss them. It’s likely that I won’t be here tomorrow, I might tidy up the house and leave in the afternoon.”

“Whatever you want. Will you stay there long?”

“I don’t know. You know that Farid comes back in a week and I’m in no hurry to return.”

“You’ll leave me for a whole week?” The old hag said with some kind of panic. “I have been waiting for this kind of opportunity so that I could have you to myself and so that we can live the most pleasurable times together. I’m not at all happy with how you’ve been acting lately. Or has that arrogant woman begun to take interest in you? Don’t get delusional about it, I’m sure that she won’t respond to you, my sense tells me that she’s not who you think she is.”

“You’re imagining things! I’m not thinking what you think I’m thinking! I’m bored with us and I want to go back to my husband.”

“And what stops you from doing that? You’re his alone, and what’s between us doesn’t change your relationship with him.”

“Do you really think so? I don’t enjoy myself with him, I’m beginning to reject him and don’t tell me that our relationship has no effect on the subject.”

“You mean that you want to get away from me? Don’t you know how much I love you and how I want to help you?”

Before she continued Mimi replied: “If you really want to help me, then we should end our relationship.”

“No, absolutely not! And if you do, I’ll tell your husband everything.”

Mimi laughed and said calmly: “No, you won’t. You care about your reputation too much and I don’t think that you would want to ruin your reputation, after all, you try the impossible to keep it intact.”

“When I’m certain that you want to leave me then I won’t care anymore. I’ll expose you even if it entails my own exposure.”

“Do whatever you want I’ll say that you’re crazy and that you hallucinate things and my husband will believe me over you any day.”

“You don’t want to go back to your husband, I’m sure that you don’t like men. I’m certain of it and my intuition always hits the mark. You’re trying to seduce Layal and that’s what irritates the mark. You’re trying to seduce Layal and that’s what irritates the mark. You’re trying to seduce Layal and that’s what irritates me. You’re free to go back to your husband but if you want to gain favour with Layal and become her lover then I won’t be quiet at all, even if it costs me my life.”

“I’m going to the mountain and I’ll stay with the children until my husband comes back. This will give me some time to think about things.”

“I accept that. Go to your children, I’m prepared to make the sacrifice, as long as you’re not running after another woman, especially that damned Layal.”

“Well then, I’ll call you when I come back. Goodbye.”

The old hag left Mimi’s house while the latter began planning for her dinner with Layal the following evening.

As for Layal, she continued to wrestle with her ideas. She drank her coffee calmly, flipping through her pages, reading a little and brooding over her work. But the situation soon changed when the telephone, which was sitting on her desk, rang. She hesitated a little before answering: "It's her, I have no doubt." Siham's voice came through, quivering: "I'm not bothering you because it's no longer early. I've missed you and I've spent more than an hour hesitating before I rang. Should I hang up?"

"Don't hang up. Tell me, what's new?"

"Nothing new except that I miss you. The university is closed for now, so where will I see you? Will you let me visit you or should I invite you to a café on the beach? I want to talk to you, I have a lot to say, I've written many things and I want your opinion on them."

"You write beautifully, keep it up. I've read the composition that you gave me in the café, it's very pretty. Don't worry, I'll read everything that you write."

"But how do I see you? Will you accept my invitation to lunch tomorrow?"

"No thanks, but I'll be at Café Hamra at five o'clock. I'll see you there."

"The café is full of your friends and I'm shy. You won't pay me any attention if you're with your friends. How about we meet at Café Rowda, because it's virtually deserted at about five o'clock. I'll see you for an hour and then you can leave or do as you wish."

"I don't mind, my friends go from Hamra to Rowda usually, so I'll see them there eventually."

Siham was delighted by Layal's acceptance, because she expected Nour to be at Rowda around that time. It would mortify her to see Siham with Layal, and in

this form of superficial revenge, Siham hoped to find some satisfaction. As for Layal, she began to wonder about Siham's motives for wanting to see her alone and in a public place. Did she want to embarrass her or to insinuate to the others that she was her girlfriend? "But the matter doesn't concern me and the others can think what they like. I know myself and I don't pay any attention to rumours."

In the afternoon Layal entered Café Rowda, which was free of patrons, as she expected. She looked around the room and found Siham sitting at a table in the corner, looking at her and smiling. She came closer and shook her hand, but Siham was not impressed at all by this and completed the greeting with a kiss on each of Layal's cheeks. They sat down.

"How are you Siham? What 's new?" Layal asked, looking at several papers Siham held in front of her.

"These are poems I wrote you."

Layal extended her hand in order to take the papers so Siham said: "I hope you don't want to read them now. There's a lot there and if you read them now the time will pass without a conversation. They're for you, take them with you. I always keep a copy, read it at home, please."

"As you wish." Layal took the papers, read the titles and then folded them and placed them in her bag.

After the beer arrived, which Siham suggested they should have, silence prevailed between them. Siham was looking at the ground, submitting to Layal, while Layal looked at Siham waiting for her to say something. "Siham, you asked me to a café so that we could talk, so what do you have to say, come on?"

"I don't know why I lose the words when I'm in your presence. When I'm alone I find myself full of beautiful words directed at you and when I see you I forget everything. You repress me."

“If I wanted to repress you I never would have accepted your invitation. Come on, say what you have to.”

Siham fixed her gaze on the inside of the beer glass and said: I’ve begun to hate her.” She was silent, waiting for Layal’s reaction which did not eventuate. “I’ve begun to hate her,” she repeated “and you’re not helping.”

“How am I supposed to help you? Your feelings are yours alone, you alone can help yourself, and besides hate is the other face of love, which means that you’re not over her yet.”

“And how can I get over her when she has destroyed my life? I feel the need to destroy her before I can begin to live again.”

“Begin your life and she’ll be destroyed by herself.”

“My life? Begin my life? How can I when she has rejected me, and you reject even my friendship!”

“I don’t reject your friendship. Either way, aren’t there others besides her and I in the world? Isn’t the world full of nice people your age that you can be friends with? You just have to want to...”

“Let me be straight forward with you. You know exactly what I want. I say it clear as day: I don’t like men, I need a woman—only Eve’s kind interests me. So what should I do? Commit suicide?”

“No, there’s no need for suicide.”

“Society rejects me and you reject me and she cast me off like a dirty robe. What do I have left? Tell me, tell me...” She said in a loud voice.

“Problems aren’t solved in this way.” Layal said, drawing near her and embracing her. “I don’t reject you, on the contrary, I understand what you’re in and I want to help you. You are a beautiful young woman and a thousand young men would love to get to know you and to fall in love with you. Why don’t you try?”

“I don’t like them. I tried recently and it was disgusting.”

“Of course it’s going to be disgusting if you don’t truly love the person you try this with.”

“Does love come with the press of a button? Is it a matter of will? Not at all! I love you not because I want to, but because I see clearly inside myself that I love you and that I want to be your girlfriend.”

“We are friends, we agreed on this from the beginning.”

“You call us friends and you don’t even permit me to visit at home? What kind of friendship is that?”

“That will happen when I see that the time is right, which is when you accept friendship as I want it to be. At the moment you’re incapable of doing that and if I haven’t received you in my home yet, it’s precisely because I want us to stay friends. You understand what I mean?”

“I understand. You’re afraid of me and what I might do. But look, I promise, if you let me visit you, then I’ll behave myself. I’ll see.” She was silent for a little while and then continued: “I’m envious of Roula, my friend at university. She and her history teacher are friends and they go everywhere together, including the teacher’s house.”

Siham was hoping that Layal would enquire after the name of the teacher and about her predicament and her story with Roula, but Layal made no such enquiries, and before Siham’s own silence she said:

“Each of us has his own life that he conducts however he wishes. Don’t look at the other, live your life according to your own convictions.”

“The convictions that I have developed in this damned society go against my tormenting desires, so what do I do?”



“I’ll be frank with you: maybe what happened with your father was what developed your repulsion from men. You have to overcome that crash. You’re a conscientious and intelligent girl, capable of your own salvation.”

Siham thought a little and then said: “You want the truth? I don’t remember precisely whether that accident took place or not. I often think that I might have just imagined the whole thing, as though I invented it in order to justify my real inclinations. In truth, I no longer know whether what happened really did happen or whether it was a vision that occurred to me when I was somewhere between sleep and waking. I saw him come into my room and I was lying in bed, he slept next to me and his member was erect. I screamed at him and he scurried out and disappeared. Did he really come in? Was I dreaming? I can’t be conclusive. All that I remember now is that I was jealous of him when it came to my mother. I wanted her to myself. It irritated me a great deal when they locked the door to their bedroom behind them. Maybe I wanted him to do that with me so that my mother would hate him.”<sup>25</sup>

“Why did you tell me the story as though it was real and as though you didn’t have any reservations about its accuracy?”

“That’s the truth. I wanted in the beginning to place the blame on someone else, on an external reason, but I’ve discovered the truth of my being. I don’t like men, I don’t love them, and I’m not at all drawn to them. I have a friend who had an active relationship with her father, who never hated men, who married, and that was the end of that. And I ask myself: “why am I like this?” If that had really happened and I was a normal person then I would have been able to overcome it in the same way my friend did, but from my very early years I’ve hated males.”

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“Layal? Hello!”

When Layal turned around she saw one of her friends standing behind her. She shook his hand and asked him to join them. He did. But only after apologizing for intruding, but Layal quickly responded that he was doing no such thing. She introduced him to Siham saying that she was a student at the university who was discussing study matters with her. Then another friend arrived and another until the place was full of friends. Shortly afterwards, Siham excused herself and said as she was leaving: “I’ll talk to you later.” She was genuinely indignant.

“What’s up Layal? You, entertaining the young girls? Leave the matter to us—or is it that...?” One of them said and laughed.

“God damn you,” Layal replied, “if I sit with a girl student, you start to think I’m a lesbian and if I sit with a boy student you start to think...”

“But then the matter would be natural! If a student fell in love with his lady teacher then that’s not unusual, but for a girl to fall in love with her lady teacher!”

Layal laughed and with this the atmosphere changed and the discussion turned over to many other subjects. Shortly after sunset Layal excused herself and went home. After a short rest she opened her bag and took Siham’s papers from it. She wanted to read them so that she could familiarize herself more with the personality of her pursuant. She looked over the titles and then chose one called “The Sea’s Jealousy and began to read:

I asked the sea,  
would I be wronging it  
If I tried to frame the accusation of giving, in her eyes,  
Would I be a killer through my departure  
in the opposite direction?  
I despaired of the past and the past’s bread,  
I hated the black wine and the past sittings

and I tried to hang my thoughts higher...  
I've placed you amongst my dangerous epistemes  
And I've lost my voice hoping to find it  
But it was captured...

Layal folded the first collection of papers and muttered: "She's a talented young woman. It's true that she doesn't talk a lot but she's very apt at expressing herself in writing." But before she had begun to read the second poem, the telephone rang:

"Did you stay out late with your friends?"

"Siham, what's the matter dear?"

"What did they say about me?"

Layal laughed and said: "They accused me of being with you. Do you like that?"

"Of course. What did you say to them?"

"I neither denied nor confirmed; I left their curiosity intact."

"Good. That pleases me. If only it were true. Have you read what I've written to you?"

"I read a section."

"What do you think?"

"Keep going, you're a good writer. Purge everything you have."

"Sure, I write and you satisfy your narcissism! What did you read?"

"The Sea's Jealousy."

"Please continue and you'll tell me what you think later, okay? I'll let you go now, good night."

Layal opened the second poem, which was entitled: "Realism of the Imagination":

I imagine her golden fingernails  
And that I was born of Pharaohs  
Where the smell of Homeros emanates from her eyes...

Layal laughed and said to herself: "It's such blatant courtship. What does this poor girl expect? I hope that I won't be the cause of another disappointment for her."

Her silence and eloquence are twins  
and if the first is lost the other becomes master  
of confessing.  
I don't ask who you are  
but from what do you come,  
are you mixed like the rest of us, from dirt?  
You are a stranger  
and it's as though the world resembles you  
and you resemble no one.  
When you were born you believed that immortality  
was your body's  
before it was your soul's,  
and if knowledge knew that you were to become  
pregnant with it,  
then it would have shriven itself from fornication.  
When you return the greeting,  
even with silence,  
millions of poems turn about in my mind  
and all the devils and demons appear before me  
carrying Aladdin's lamp,  
but I do not wish to behold the sceptre or subtract  
all the pains of the past.  
No, I do not ask to turn everything I touch to gold  
I humbly ask to remain satisfied with the return of the greeting,  
with your silence and with a laugh from you through the wires.<sup>26</sup>

Layal folded the second collection and began to wonder about whether she should continue her relationship with Siham and in which way. She needed to be very cautious in this relationship because, even though she was confident of herself, she was nevertheless afraid of the effects of her unconscious behaviours on Siham. "She is really doing what I warned her of in the beginning; she's transferring on me. I'll try to prove this to her and I'll try to make her see what's inside her and in the end, if she is really the lesbian she thinks she is, then I'll help her accept herself

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and reconcile with herself. But I don't think reconciling with herself will necessarily solve the problem. Reconciliation will put her on a collision course with our society, with all its traditions and understandings and values.

“Our society, which has been infected to the bone with many illnesses of which nothing seeps to the surface, is full of dark labyrinths, and lesbianism is nothing but one of them—practiced and unsaid. In the west this matter has gained great visibility because it has been turned into a speech act and it has become a subject open for research and discussion. But here, for us, homosexuality is muffled because we are still living a kind of magical realism. We think that being silent about a reality of some sort enables us to eliminate it. We think if we eliminate it from our thoughts it ceases to exist, but instead it nests in our bodies and our unconscious and it begins to reflect itself throughout all our behaviours, without our knowledge. Siham experienced life in the West and she now lives a genuine schism between her actual self and her social self. I will help her even if she falls in love with me, I'll find a way to rescue her from that love.”<sup>27</sup>

Layal was deeply engrossed in these thoughts for some time but eventually emerged from them and returned to Siham's papers. The last composition began: “I beg God's forgiveness for my blasphemy.” Layal could not help but notice the irony that Siham was an infidel as far as all the destructive and demeaning social values were concerned, but when she read further, she realized that Siham was merely using the religious symbols as a metaphor for continuing her courtship.

“What is all this idolatry? And does the poor girl mean what she says? This is how infatuations start out. We always idolize in the beginning so that we may fall in love, because ordinary things and people aren't very conducive to love.

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Maybe I can use this idolatry to my advantage; it might help me because she's willing to listen to everything I say."

## 21

Layal put the papers aside and went to bed early. She was hoping to get up reinvigorated the next morning so she could get her work done after a night unperturbed by the sound of artillery explosions. She slept well but woke up to the ringing of the telephone. She unplugged it from the wall knowing full well that it was Siham who was calling. She did not return her call. She was not ready to talk to her again, and she decided to leave the phone off the hook all day. After all, she deserved to live alone in her own world for one day. She drank her coffee and spent a whole day without any unwelcome disruptions. She felt more relaxed as a result and was not annoyed by Mimi when she came to remind her of the invitation to dinner.

"Of course, I didn't forget and I won't be late. I'll put on my clothes and follow you."

Mimi opened the door and Layal entered. The house was practically dark and so she asked: "Is the electricity out?"

"No, come in and I'll tell you later."

Layal sat in the lounge room and Mimi opened a packet of cigarettes and placed it on a coffee table near Layal who was now becoming aware of her surroundings: the closed windows, the drawn curtains, and a single red candle sitting on the dinner which made it appear to be something out of a carnivalesque haunted house..

"Why don't you turn on the lights? What's this kind of ambience for?"

I don't want anyone to know that you are here, particularly that old hag you met. She is nosy and I told her that I was going to the mountain and that I didn't want to see her. If she finds out that I'm here then she'll invite herself over and will ruin our evening."

"And what are you afraid of? Would it bother your husband to know you had some lady friends over in his absence? Is this why you're being secretive?"

"No, no, but she's annoying," it was at that moment that the telephone began to ring. "That's her, checking on me. I won't answer."

"Maybe it's not her, maybe it's your husband or..."

"No. I'm sure."

The telephone continued to ring for a long time and Mimi did not answer it. She was pacing around the room in front of Layal, who, when she looked carefully at her, was puzzled by what she saw: Mimi was wearing a transparent dress underneath which she wore only very small briefs. She fixed her gaze on Mimi and was impressed by her well-proportioned, semi-naked body. Maybe she should leave. Should she ask Mimi why she was practically naked in this way? The telephone rang again, Mimi laughed and said: "She won't give up...that old hag, but I won't answer. Let's have some dinner, I don't want to waste time—do you prefer a particular drink? I brought white wine, do you like that?"

"White wine is good." Layal replied absent-mindedly.

"Sit here and I'll sit next to you so I can dish out your food—it's really very simple: Avocado salad with prawns, followed by grilled chilli sturgeon. What do you think of the menu?"

"It's an excellent choice," Layal replied. She did not like fish but wanted to be polite especially since Mimi had made such a great effort.

Mimi poured the wine in Layal's glass and then filled her own. She raised it saying: "To your health my dear neighbor."

"And to your health, most beautiful neighbor." Layal replied and silence prevailed. Layal had difficulty in finding a suitable topic for conversation, but found refuge in asking about the children, the husband and the parents.

"My parents live in the mountain. My mother is a very strong woman, she does everything. My father is now retired and is good for nothing. My mother was everything in our lives. I have two brothers, one of them is married and the other is a bachelor jumping from one girl to the next." She paused briefly, "What do you think of my dress?"

"It's very pretty. It shows off all the sensual features of your body, but..."

"I don't usually wear it like this. When I go out I wear a satin shirt underneath it. But tonight there's no need for that, we're alone, two women...did you notice that I'm not wearing a bra and that my chest is still firm and perked up?"

"Don't forget that I've been pregnant twice and despite that... Look, look!"

"Truly, I can see that." Layal said, extending her hand in order to touch...But she stopped suddenly and withdrew. What does Mimi want and what is this insistence on displaying her physical attributes?

There was a knock on the door. Mimi placed her finger on her mouth and said in a low voice: "Shh, it's her, so just be quiet for a few minutes until she gives up and leaves." There was a second knock followed by the old hag's voice: "Mimi, are you in there?" Several minutes later they heard the sound of the elevator door being opened and the sound of its movement, so Mimi breathed more easily and said: Thank God, she's gone."



“Why does she insist in this way?” Layal asked. If she was just being solicitous then you should have opened the door for her.”

“Open the door for her! While I’m wearing this, and with you?”

Layal did not reply and suspicions began to circulate in her mind. Is Mimi a second Siham? Oh God what are all these labyrinths and what is happening below the surface of the earth and beneath these exteriors! Despite her panic she decided to continue on with dinner, ignoring Mimi’s obvious insinuations.

“Now for the grilled fish.” She raised her wine glass to her mouth, emptied it and walked in Layal’s direction: “Drink! Drink! Why are you slowing down?”

“I only drink very little. Thanks.”

Mimi came back from the kitchen with the fish. She placed it on the table and drew so close to Layal that she was glued to her, pretending to be dishing out the food. Layal’s body quivered at this contact but she kindly pushed Mimi away from her and said: “There is no need for all that trouble; I can dish it out for myself.” Mimi returned to her place and said: “She doesn’t like you. She accuses me of liking you more than her.”

“Who?”

“That old hag.”

“What does she want from you and what is your relationship with her?”

“She is...she’s a Jesbian and tries to drag me into her world.”

“And you?”

“I humoured her for a little while but I’m bored with her now but she doesn’t get the message. She wants me all to herself. She’s even jealous of my husband and of you in particular.”

“Why me and what for?”

“Because I’m interested in you and I talk about you sometimes and about your personality in front of her—but never mind about her, let’s take our coffee in the lounge room.”

Layal stood. God, I hope we get through, this night in peace. Mimi is very beautiful. Mimi returned shortly with the coffee. She sat next to Layal and began to stroke her knee, “will you sleep here tonight? I get scared by myself.”

“No, No, I’m not comfortable except in my own bed. And if you’re genuinely afraid then you can stay at my house. I have a second room and a spare bed, but if you do that, I want you to leave early in the morning because I don’t like waking up to find anyone else in the house.” She said this preparing to leave. She was running away from herself, Mimi was very seductive and attractive.

“As you wish I’ll take my night shirt and go up with you.”

They were both silent in the elevator and silently they entered Layal’s house.

“This is the room, and that’s the bed and that’s the bathroom. Do as you wish.” Layal said.

“Thanks, but are you going to sleep now? It’s still early.”

“I’m going to my bedroom to look over some readings before sleep.”

“Won’t you sit with me for a little while? I’d like to talk to you.”

Layal sat with her. But Mimi didn’t say anything and started to look as though she was about to cry. Layal drew closer and asked her what was wrong. At this point, Mimi burst into tears, “the ones I don’t love, love me and the one I do love, doesn’t love me. I’m very tortured. No one understands me.” Did she expect that in this way she would succeed in attaining what she could not attain in another way?

“You drank a little too much.” Layal said simply. “I’ll make you a cup of black coffee and after that you can get some sleep and then your suffering will

come to an end.” She headed to the kitchen and shortly she returned with a cup of coffee. She placed it in front of Mimi and went to her bedroom. She locked her door and went to her bed. Minutes later she heard tapping on her door.

“What do you want?”

“I want to wish you good night, could you please open the door?”

Layal opened the door and Mimi surrounded her with her arms and pressed herself against her, saying: “Goodnight.”

“And goodnight to you too,” Layal said embracing her.

They adhered to each other in this fashion for some time. Layal felt the warmth of Mimi’s body, her senses awakened and she almost...but she withdrew from Mimi’s arms and said:

“Let’s get some sleep.”

“Do you want me to play with your hair until you sleep?”

“No thanks, I’m not used to this at all and I can sleep without any playing.”

“Then lie next to me and play with mine until I sleep, I love that.” Layal took her by the hand and they entered the other room. Mimi climbed on the bed saying: “Come sleep next to me, for five minutes, that’s all.”

Layal hesitated in doing what Mimi asked but then stretched out near her and began to play with her hair and to talk to her.

“Your touches are remarkably gentle and you are so soft. I really do hate men. Please don’t stop.”

“Why do you hate men? Your husband is a kind man and I think he loves you.”

“I know and I’m used to life with him, but I don’t like him in bed. I feel a kind of terror when he enters me. I become like a piece of leather. I lose all desire, whenever he does that I remember my mother’s warnings before marriage.”

“And what did she warn you about?”

“She used to say to me: “do whatever you want with a young man, but don’t let him have sex with you. It’s shameful and has grave consequences.””

“That’s for before marriage, because she worried about pregnancy, but now, the circumstances have changed.”

“She too didn’t like my father. She married him because he was rich and could provide for her. Would you believe that she had a friend who always visited us and my mother spent all her time with her?—they went out together and did everything together.”

“And this friend’s husband, where was he?”

“She was a spinster, she never desired marriage, as she told us whenever we asked. Anyhow the matter never bothered us because she took great interest in us and always brought us beautiful gifts.”

“And your father? Did he accept that situation?”

“My poor father, he very often gave her his place in the bed so that she could sleep with my mother, and he, in the other room.”

“And what did you think of this?”

“It meant nothing to me in the beginning, but now I have certain suspicions about that relationship. I have never dared ask my mother about it. But so what if she liked that sort of thing, what’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing wrong, but I’m starting to feel sleepy. We’ll continue later. Goodnight for now, I’m going to my room.”

Layal extricated herself from Mimi’s embrace and rose up from the bed. She kissed Mimi on the forehead and left.

As for Mimi, she spent a long time bemoaning her luck before she fell asleep, but she did what Layal asked of her and she returned to her house early the next morning before Layal got up.<sup>28</sup>

## 22

Mimi had barely closed the door to her house when the telephone rang.

“What! You’re here? When did you get back?”

“Just now. I went to the mountain yesterday and I just got back.”

“But your car was in the port last night.”

“True.” Mimi replied without panicking. “I went with my brother and he brought me back before going to work.”

“Anyhow, I’m coming to see you.”

Mimi looked around her at the dinner table and the condition of the house, panicked a little and said: “There is no need for you to come early, I’m a little busy. I’ll tidy the house and take advantage of the children’s absence for a big spring clean.”

“I’ll help you, don’t worry, I’m coming straight away.”

Mimi hung up the telephone and ran around carrying the dirty plates to the sink and attempting to tidy up as much as possible before her secret was exposed. But the old hag surprised her and came over very quickly, when she looked at the house and at the kitchen, she gave a yellowish kind of smile, shook her head as though she had caught Mimi in the act, then raised her hand looking at Mimi questioningly and so there was nothing left for the latter to do but to sigh and

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complain: “Huh! Young men are so intolerable these days. Can you imagine that my brother Issam asked me for the house keys yesterday? He wanted to invite some girl over for dinner? Take a good look at this mess that he’s left me with!” She said this with the utmost calmness and without so much as blinking that the old hag’s suspicions were dispelled, and she retorted: “Now I understand...When I saw your car in the port I worried about you and so I came up here and rang the doorbell last night. I sensed as though someone was inside, but I didn’t hear a sound. Ah! Now I understand.”

Mimi was happy that her lie succeeded in convincing the old hag and she began busying her with cleaning the house, as though the matter was irrelevant. During their break they drank coffee and the old hag said:

“What do you think of inviting all our friends over for a party? We can have it here while Farid is away.”

“I have no objection to that. How about the day after tomorrow? I’ll call the girls and you can invite anyone else you want.”

They agreed on the arrangements for that evening and the old hag left Mimi’s house feeling more at ease. Mimi had only accepted to host the party because she wanted to invite Layal and she could only do this if she was the host of the party. She began to concoct plans to get Layal to accept the invitation without feeling bothered. When Layal accepted without hesitation Mimi was surprised and she became certain that Layal was like them and that her outward behaviours were nothing more than a mask that hid her true personality. “Now I understand why she never married and why she lives alone. She must have a female lover and for this reason she refuses me. But if she is really like us, then I’ll seduce her no matter how much she resists.”

“What is the dress code for your party?” Layal asked.

“Every one wears whatever she likes, but I would love to see you in a pair of Jeans and your hair tied up. Just don’t leave it out and please don’t put too much make up on, you’re beautiful enough as it is.”

“Okay. When time is the party?”

“For you, there’s no particular time and you can come whenever you like, but the starting time has been set for five o’clock. You know that women don’t leave their houses at night, we’re used to meeting early and as the English say “it’s a five o’clock tea party,” well, as far as the husbands and parents are concerned anyway.”

Layal laughed and Mimi laughed with all her heart because she felt that Layal understood her perfectly.

## 23

Layal had forgotten the telephone unplugged throughout the second day. When she noticed this in the evening she put it back in place and only minutes later it began to ring. Not surprisingly it was Siham.

“Where have you been all day? I call you and no one answers.”

“I was out, and what are you being so insistent for?”

Siham was silent for a few moments and then apologized and asked whether Layal had completed reading all her compositions.”

“I read them all.”

“And what do you think of them?”

“They’re good.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“No, but I want to warn you, once more, that you’re in the process of transference and that you won’t get anything but disappointment out of it, so be careful, and if you’re incapable of that then I’ll take care of things.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know very well what I mean.”

“Are you going to forbid me from seeing or talking to you?”

“Maybe.”

“And this is friendship, is it? Does this mean that you refuse to help me?”

“I don’t refuse to help anyone but I don’t want my help to become a fresh wound.”

“No, no, don’t worry. Will I see you tomorrow? I have so many things I want to say to you.”

“You always say that and when we meet you get laconic.”

“No, this time I have a lot to say and I won’t be quiet.”

“Okay, okay. We’ll meet at dusk tomorrow at Café Hamra.”

“You always take me to the place where you meet your friends.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, but I would like to see you by yourself.”

“I prefer Café Hamra. See you later.” Layal hung up the telephone.

Siham sat motionless, not knowing what to do after Layal’s ultimatum, but as usual she turned to writing:

I love you and nothing can stop me from that;  
even if you reject me you cannot put out my heart.  
Fancying you is buried and cannot ascend with the  
knife,



No matter how you distance yourself and refuse me  
you'll remain the shadow that pursues me,  
the insomnia that awaits me  
and the moon that illuminates my papers and books.

I try to warm myself by your silence, and then I burn.

I try to live in your chest and then it closes.

I try to hide in my image of you and then I melt.

What is fancy like?

I love you and I try to find another meaning in the  
language

and a new description of what I suffer.

I am in a state of fear, accompanied by pain,  
a stranger to the supernatural and human.

I love you,  
understand it however you want.

I fancy you,  
and so tell it however you like.

I love you,  
only understand it the way I mean it.

After a brief interlude, she continued to write, this time imagining that Layal had read her latest composition and that she was now addressing her directly.

Don't shut your smile in my face,  
bruise me if you want.

But don't say it, I can't handle  
... Say...  
I'll stay,  
laugh all you want at my writing and deride.  
I won't be in pain;  
I no longer care.

Siham folded her papers and began to think about her predicament and whether she was in fact undergoing the transference that Layal had warned her about. Nour's image appeared before her. She perused it carefully: "You don't mean anything to me any more, blissful with your new lover, you're finished, get away from me, I don't want to remember you and I don't remember you. Layal is the only one who understands me, the only one who has said to me that I should live my life the way I am. Maybe I love her because she accepts me.

Why do I think so much of you?  
Why do I miss you when the night comes  
when the sun sinks beneath the clouds?  
Something is driving me.  
A strange feeling attracts me.  
Do I fancy love?  
I am refreshed when I see you  
and I can breathe when I see you  
and the whole world shimmers because you  
are its pearl.

## 24

When they met at dusk the following day Siham was depressed and wretched. As usual she did not look at Layal.

“What’s wrong Siham and what’s upsetting you?”

“Nothing.” She pulled out her papers from her bag and gave them to Layal: “Read them now before your friends get here.”

Layal took the papers and read them, she smiled the whole time and when she finished she tried to give them back to Siham who said: “they’re yours, do whatever you like with them.”

“To tell you the truth I don’t know whether they’re really for me. In any case they’re a problem. If they are for me, then you know where I stand on this, and if they are for your old girlfriend, and that’s the more accurate assumption—because it’s just not possible for you to fall in love with me so quickly—then this means that you’re not over her.”

“Is this how you explain things? The poems are for you. As for her she means nothing to me, she’s finished, she’s out of my life.” Siham stared silently at the table and when Layal did not speak, she added: “I want to travel abroad, no one understands me here. I can’t keep living like this. Even my own mother doesn’t understand me; the poor woman thinks that I’m done with the subject. She rejected me before and now you reject me...I should go overseas or commit suicide.”

Layal did not comment on the subject of suicide, she ignored it and said: “I accept you and I don’t judge you, but I can’t be the person you want me to be. I try to help you as much as possible but you have to help yourself more.”

“And how do I help myself when the whole society rejects me?”

Layal was quiet—she didn't know how to reply to Siham. It was true that society rejected her, that she rejected her, that her mother and her lover rejected her-while she in turn rejected men and the relationships that are seen as normal and acceptable in our society. What could she say to her even when she knew that the subject was prevalent in all societies and all civilizations? She thought about the names of great authors and artists were gays and lesbians and recalled all her sources regarding the matter and Plato's remarks on same sex love. Siham looked at her as though she was saying "do you see now that you are incapable of helping me?"

"You don't need to worry or to be this depressed. This is who you are and you have to accept yourself on those terms. Don't blame yourself, just try to look into your very depths, because if you really can't be anything else, then so be it and live your life as you like."

"But who will I live with?"

"There are many others like you and there is no doubt that you will meet someone who can share your feelings and inclinations, and love."

"And you?"

"I will help you. As you can see I'm not taking a negative stance on your predicament, and I think it's a great help for you to have someone who understands you. Understanding and sympathy is a kind of acceptance, and sometimes that's all a person needs—acceptance by another person, feeling less alienated in society."

"Do you really believe what you're saying? Do you really accept me as I am? They told me that you were open-minded and it seems they were right. What's your star sign, you're very practical?"

"Taurus."

"Meaning April/ May?"

“The twenty-fifth of April.”

“It’s not far. Will you invite me to celebrate your birthday?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the war will get in the way. We’ll see. We ‘re living day by day and we can’t plan beyond the present moment—god damn this war! Actually, we should be getting home, it’s late.”

“What are you doing tomorrow? Will I see you?”

“I have been invited to a party in my building tomorrow, one of the neighbours invited me, it appears to be a women’s only gathering.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s the impression I got from my neighbor.”

“Is she pretty?”

“She’s young and beautiful but she’s an ordinary woman, married with children.”

“What’s your relationship with her then?”

“We meet sometimes in the shelter and she pays great attention to me.”

“Pays attention to you? And do you go along with it then? Is she...?”

“I don’t know, maybe, anyhow things will be clearer tomorrow. I’ll tell you about it, don’t worry. Let’s go now.”

## 25

When Siham left she felt jealous of Layal’s neighbour. In the taxi on the way home, Siham felt an irresistible urge to write, and so she did.

What is it that you possess,

is it magic that makes me walk to you or is it love?

and in either case I become yours  
and I take pleasure in the murmurs of your voice,  
in your movements and your pride.

My blonde gypsy,  
now I know why nature is coloured  
and why the beach is golden  
and why the horizon is impossible.

Your eyes—the trees are a part of them  
and the blueness of the sea,  
your forehead—the moon's sun  
and your hair is departure and travel  
and your mouth is heaven.

The evening's conversations, your words,  
musical scores and poetry,  
and how poor I am,  
I possess nothing but a pen and a string.

“Here we are my lady,” the driver said pulling over.

Siham emerged from her daze and left the car after paying the driver his fare and went to her house. She spoke to her mother a little and hid in her room, thinking about what Layal had said.

Why am I scared of you?  
I fear you despite the security you provide.  
I try to embrace myself in you without question,  
and to embrace you in yourself.  
I don't know how to be close, stuck, a part of you.  
Forgive me, I can't handle any more silence  
help me understand.

Your undeclared attack or your fear of my repeated  
presence stops me.  
I won't take from you woman's learning,  
nor her fragrances, nor things,  
because they mean nothing to me.  
What I need is a sanctuary.

## 26

The following day Layal waited until six o'clock and went to Mimi's house where the party had been in full swing for an hour. She was trying to be fashionably late, letting the party get on without her. In the meantime, Mimi was tense and constantly checking her wrist watch, listening out for a knock on the door. The old hag became irritated with her behavior and asked her if she was waiting for someone. The rest of the guests, however, took no notice of her; each woman was busy paying attention to her companion. When Layal knocked on the door everyone became silent and remained this way until Mimi said: "I present to you my dearest neighbor, Layal, she will be joining our party." Then she headed

towards Layal: “Welcome, this is Madam-and Miss--.” When she was done with introducing the guests present, Layal replied: “I’m honoured, I’m sorry for being late but I was waiting for my friend to join me, but she’s very sick and had to cancel.”

This eased the old hag’s fears, whereas Mimi began to wonder whether Layal had a girlfriend or not. Is she like us or is she saying this for other reasons? The truth was that Layal wanted to assure everyone that she was like them, so that she might spare them any panic, and in order to inconspicuously infiltrate these new, and as yet unexplored territories.

Mimi brought Layal a drink and proceeded to sit near her. “Is it true that you have a girlfriend?” was Mimi’s first question.

“I have many girl friends. But I just said that to make your guests comfortable with me, besides I didn’t want them to get upset with you for bringing in an outsider.” Mimi embraced Layal and kissed her saying:

“Thank you, you did well. Here comes the old hag.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We’re talking about her sick girlfriend.” Mimi replied.

“You shouldn’t have come,” the old hag said, “because you’re going to be alone amongst us.”

She won’t be alone,” Mimi replied, “because I’m here and I’m the mistress of the house.”

“You’re mine.” As she said this she wrenched Mimi from Layal and sat her on her knee. Shortly afterwards she began to play with her hair and certain parts of her body.

Layal left them to their devices and began observing what was taking place around her: beautiful women, some wearing pants, others in dresses...long hair,



very short hair...No outward features to differentiate them from normal women at normal parties, but their behavior was different. It was clear that the playfulness was reciprocal. At first Layal took note of how some of them took on a man's role and how the others took on the woman's role, as it was generally understood of these relationships—that is, in terms of what takes place between the normal woman and man. After some surveillance she noticed that the difference was only in outward appearance, because the actions were the same in the sense that whoever took on the man's role in one instant, soon took on the woman's in another. The foreplay was between two who were alike and not two who were different. She wanted to know more and drew near one who was stroking her girlfriend and said: "I miss my girlfriend. I can do whatever I like with her, she's very passive. It's like through her I can sense my masculinity."<sup>29</sup>

That woman jerked up in her seat and said: "I'm not like that, I'm a woman and I don't want to be a male, if I am doing now whatever I like with her," and she pointed at her girlfriend "that does not mean that I'm her man. We're alike and she often desires to do with me what I do with her now, we have no roles in our relationship. We're lovers and that 's more important."<sup>30</sup>

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound like that, but I miss my girlfriend. I wish she was here."

"You shouldn't have come without her. I understand how you feel...No one will pay any attention to you and you'll feel lonely."

"I won't stay long. I came so that I wouldn't offend my gorgeous neighbor Mimi."

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Mimi returned to her after extricating herself from the old hag, who was distracted for several minutes. Mimi surrounded Layal's hips with her arm and dragged her to her corner of the lounge room. Layal was obedient without hesitation. She sat in an armchair and Mimi sat in her lap and began to stroke Layal's hair. Mimi began to feel aroused and the old hag appeared, reproaching her: "You whore! You brought Layal here so you could betray me, before my very eyes? She cannot have you, I won't let her!" She pulled Mimi out of Layal's lap, while Layal said nothing but contented herself by lighting a cigarette as though nothing happened. Shortly afterwards Mimi declared that it was time for everyone to dance, and she turned up the music.

The guests rose up and began to dance and Mimi excused herself from the old hag saying: "I'll dance with Layal first because she's my guest and then I'll have all the time for you darling." She drew near Layal, took her by the hand and pressed her body against hers and they began to dance. Layal's body awakened, she embraced Mimi intensely and kissed her. Mimi had begun to relax in her arms when the old hag came to drag her away again. Layal returned to her seat indignantly but when she sat down she began to observe the scene before her: kisses and performances that were quite arousing, and moments later the number of those present in the lounge room began to dwindle, every couple went to a bedroom and sometimes more than two people went into the same bedroom and whoever remained, bedded themselves on the lounge room floor and the real action began...There was nothing left for Layal to do but withdraw quietly and to return to her house.

“I don’t want to understand,” Layal said to herself as she entered her house. She removed from her mind and memory everything that she saw moments earlier and tried to return to her writing and work. She missed her boyfriend, despite having been in conflict with him recently. “Should I call him? He’s abroad and won’t satisfy my alert body. No, I won’t call anyone.” She also threw this idea away. She silenced her feelings and went back to thinking about practical things about a night undisturbed by explosions or gunshots. “It’s true what Mimi said, about how her husband knows the peaceful periods. After Farid left, she said to me that “he wouldn’t go abroad if he knew that the situation was going to disintegrate.” How does he get access to this sort of information? I don’t want to know! The important thing is that the situation is calm and I have to take advantage of it.”

She went to her desk and began to look for books treating same-sex relationships. She pulled out a great many books from same-sex relationships. She pulled out a great many books from her library and began to review them. They were mostly about homosexuality amongst males, about its history and development, the change of opinion regarding it, and the recent movements that avowed its public declaration and the lobbying for legal rights concerning homosexuals. As for lesbianism, the studies treated the subject sparsely and very often said nothing more than that it existed. She returned the books to their place and remembered her friend, Doctor Raya. “She’s a good friend. Raya and I share a general agreement on things, we like each other, but our relationship has never crossed that boundary. She understands me well. I’ll call her—she teaches psychology and has a clinic for treating certain psychological problems.”

“Why are you taking such vested interest in this subject?”

“Because I’m noticing many things that I wasn’t aware of before and it’s more prevalent than I had ever expected.”

“It’s prevalent alright, I know that.”

“And how do you know?”

“From the clinic. If only you knew of the cases I treat, if only you heard some of the things I hear or the depressions that I try to treat, particularly the ones related to this subject! You would be stunned.”

“I see. I’d like to talk to you more about this; I’ll explain why when we meet. Meet me tomorrow? Come by my place in the morning and we’ll go to Café Hamra.”

After the telephone call, Layal got out of her clothes and stretched out on the bed. She soon remembered that she had a book about the island of Lesbos and about the poet Sappho, so she jumped out of bed and began looking for it. When she found it, she said to herself: “It’s still early; I can read this book tonight.”

Surprisingly, she could not find a description of Sappho’s practices with women in the book. It focused chiefly on her poetry, of which much was lost and which was directed to women. It talked about the difficulty of parting, and the writer commented that Sappho, who had (female) students, used to write a love poem for each one of them who left her, either for marriage or other reasons. The book concluded by saying that Sappho, who was ugly in appearance, had fallen in love at the end of her life, with one person who did not respond to her. As a result, she threw herself in the sea, committing suicide; she who was named “Woman’s Socrates or the Socratic woman.” There was a note at the end of the book that Marguerite Yourcenar was in the process of translating the poems after collecting

what was possible of manuscripts. But, generally speaking, nothing remained in people's minds other than the word 'lesbian' in relation to the island of "lesbos."<sup>31</sup>

After Layal closed the book Siham was the first to come to her mind, perhaps because she wrote poetry, and she wondered whether poetry was a compensation for those women. She remembered an analysis that she read on the subject, which suggested that most homosexuals (it was an article about men) chose professions that isolated them from people in order to escape their situation—that they chose careers in scholarship and science and writing, as though the study was attempting to say that all the great homosexual poets and writers and artists were great because they were homosexuals. This suggested that art, poetry and writing developed in them because they freed themselves for their work and that they did this because they were escaping from society and emancipating themselves from its customs and traditions, which neither suited nor complemented their inclinations.

"A likely analysis," Layal said to herself "but the question remains: Why are they like that? Perhaps the question is wrong. Since the subject has been present from the beginning of humanity itself and since it has been known throughout all civilizations, then this means that it is a natural fact precisely in the same way that heterosexuality is, so what's the problem?"<sup>32</sup>

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## 28

Siham could not sleep that night because of the sheer volume of thoughts coursing through her mind. She wondered whether Layal was in love with her neighbour and whether she rejected Siham for this reason. Perhaps, Siham thought, Layal really wasn't interested sexually in women. "How can I know, when she won't let me visit her or get to know her better? If she asks me to accept myself as I am, then that may mean that she's a lesbian and simply doesn't want me to know it. But if she was like that I would have noticed; these things can't be hidden from me. She accuses me of transference. She might want this to happen; might be waiting for me to get over Nour and profess my love for her and then become her partner! She tells me that I am a poet and encourages me as though she wants to familiarize herself with my innermost being through my writings. I'll write to her, I'll let her know that she's not the subject of transference. I'll express my love, maybe she wants to be sure before she exposes herself. As a university lecturer, maybe she doesn't want to have a relationship with a student. Why am I jealous of everyone she talks to? Why do I imagine that every one of those women is her lover? I love her and I love her every word and her every action." As usual, Siham took out a piece of paper and directed her written speech to Layal.

Inside me clamours the fermentation of writing,  
that I should be a thief of faces;  
how I hate that word, transference.

My friend, I am not a creator of fiction

they were for you and for you only, the letters.

I have not involved anyone else besides you,  
but the impression of past love continues to ring  
in your head.

I don't deny that I fancied her  
and that I damned the hours spent without her,  
but when the heart grows bigger it learns for whom  
it has grown.

I won't hide from you what she meant to me,  
and what I saw through her:

She was sustenance and water and time,  
but when my soul rose to the horizon

I began to be conscious of things,

I became free

you taught me what I needed to learn

so that I may begin my separation.

I am saying to you that she exploited me  
in the sense that the exploitation was mutual.

I discovered my errors and faults

and gathered everything I had left of her,

burnt it,

destroyed it,

but tried as much as possible to rescue the pens and  
papers

I was cleansed of her and through her  
when I came to you.

I do not so much express my defeat as I do my great  
victory.

Do not accuse me of making you a simulacrum of her,  
you are different--you are not like the others.

With you I always feel victory  
and that I am not made of clay.

Only you have given me without taking  
and this reason I write, to you, and so,  
will you accuse my feelings and execute them with  
a knife?

Siham wanted to call Layal before she fell asleep, but refrained from doing so because she knew that calling at such an hour would earn her a scolding. She waited until the morning.

“Did I wake you?”

“No,” Layal replied, “I woke up early.”

“Didn’t your party last long?”

“I don’t know—I left before it was over.”

“You didn’t like the atmosphere then? And your neighbour, did she pay attention to you?”

“Yes she did, but I didn’t want to intrude.”

“And what did they do?”

“We’ll talk later.”

“Today? At what time?”



“No, I have an appointment today with one of my friends. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“And is she more important to you than I am?”

“Siham, I don’t like you overstepping your boundary – I’m the one who decides who is important to me and who isn’t. We’ll meet tomorrow, end of discussion!”

“Sorry. Whatever you say.”

Siham was displeased with Layal’s tone of voice, and the idea that Layal had a girlfriend, whom she was trying to hide, began to assert itself in her mind. Maybe it was that neighbour. She tried to shake off her feelings and to convince herself that she didn’t really like Layal and that she had only wanted to use her to make Nour jealous. But she knew that this was not true and that she still hated Nour. “After all, she has destroyed me. If it wasn’t for Nour I wouldn’t have had to deal with Layal’s harshness and her inability to know the meaning of love or attachment. How does Layal manage to live on her own like this? Without any intimacy? Is she that hard?”

“What am I going to do today? Layal has closed the door, Nour is in the arms of her lover and I suffer alone. I’ll call Nour and I’ll abuse her and spoil her day. I’ll threaten her; I’ll terrorise her with exposing her secret. But she won’t be afraid of me, she knows me very well, and even if I threaten I won’t act, not for fear of her, but for my poor mother’s sake who thinks that her daughter is now “normal.” Is she convinced of that, or is she burying her head in the sand, so to speak? She may as well stay in her blindness or pretend blindness, the important thing is that she doesn’t interfere with my affairs.”

Siham left her room and sat in the lounge room with her mother when her mother began to talk to her about her future. During the conversation her mother

transmitted several messages to Siham about the necessity of marriage and procreation.

“It’s still early,” Siham replied. “I want to graduate first.”

“Of course, of course. We’re in no hurry but I want to see children before I’m too old to look after them. If you get married now and have children soon I’d be able to take care of them while you finished your degree. What do you think?”

“But where’s the groom?” Siham replied, laughing.

“There are many. You just need to pick one and say yes.”

“You know that it’s not as simple as that. I won’t marry someone I don’t love. Love first and then we can start talking marriage.”

“I realize that, but since you don’t have a social life how are you going to meet someone let alone fall in love and get married?”

“Don’t worry about that. I have a lot of boy friends at the university. I’ll start spending more time with them. There’s this one guy in particular...”

“Really? Invite him! And if he’s a good man, then I’ll help you financially; you can live with us here in the beginning and later I’ll buy you a house. You’re my only daughter and I want you to stay near me. Your brothers are all grown up and it’s only a matter of time now before they leave the house.”

Siham was frightened by this project and before she withdrew to her room under the pretext of studying, she reassured her mother that she was going to get her wish but that there was no reason for haste. In this way, Siham managed to put her mother at ease while still being able to go back to her room and to her turbulent world. She tried to read her lecture notes but she was scattered, thinking of nothing but Layal. She looked at her watch wondering what Layal might be doing when she realized that it was the first of April, so she laughed and said: “Is all that I told my mother an April fool’s joke? And I didn’t even notice!” She laughed at this

coincidence, but soon April began to mean another thing entirely: it was the month of Layal's birthday. "I'll write her something."

## 29

She wrote a beautiful passage and threw the pen down and realized that she actually knew where Layal usually met her friends. She decided to walk past the cafes and see who she was with. "But if she sees me what will I say to her? The street is for everyone, I have a right to be a pedestrian! But she might guess that I'm following her. She might be with her neighbour, but even if she was I wouldn't know it was her. I'll go there regardless. I want to know why she keeps turning me down all the time."

She saw her from afar, sitting with one of her university colleagues on the sidewalk tables of one of the Hamra strip cafés. Without realizing it and before she had made a decision about what to do next, Layal spotted her and called out: "Siham! Come on over, have a seat!" She could not believe her ears. She didn't hesitate and quickly walked up, shook hands with Layal and her colleague.

"I don't want to bother either of you. Maybe you were discussing a matter of some sort or..."

"Sit down, if the situation was of "some sort" then I wouldn't have called you over." Layal replied. "Besides, we've talked about what was needed and Doctor Raya's professional advice was very helpful. Do you know Raya?"

"I see her at university, but I don't know her. Pleasure to meet you Doctor Raya. You're in the psychology department, aren't you? Your students, especially the girls, are very fond of you."

"Thank you. What are you studying Siham?"

“I’m in the language department...”

“You’re not one of Layal’s students then?”

“No,” Layal replied, “she’s my friend without being one of my students.”

Siham was very happy about this introduction but she soon stiffened and wondered whether Layal had been speaking to Raya about her—whether they had been discussing her predicament. She didn’t say much but was intent on observing the conversation between the two of them, trying to seize on any sign that might confirm her suspicions, but she found nothing substantial.

“Siham is a fine poet,” Layal said “and I encourage her to write poetry, or to keep on writing in general.”

Siham was lost in the possibility that Layal and Raya were lovers. The conversation between them demonstrated that they were very close in their way of thinking. Does Layal prefer intimacy with those on her level as a teacher? Does she not want to get involved with a student?

“I’m sorry folks, I have to go home now; the kids are waiting for me.”

Raya left and Layal remained with Siham who quickly asked: “Is doctor Raya married?”

“Yes and she has children, as you just heard.”

“Is she your friend?”

“She has been my friend for a long time. She and I are on the same wavelength and that’s a compatibility that I don’t usually find with others.”

“Why don’t you get married?”

“I have tried that institution once and that was that. Thank God for getting me out of that experience! Marriage is only for procreation, and I refuse to breed children who don’t belong to me; who don’t even carry my name.”

“What do you mean?”

“Children in our society, as in all other societies, carry the father’s name as though the mother is a false witness, as though she’s merely the vessel that delivers the cargo. I reject that demeaning and unjust system.”

“And why is it demeaning?”

“Maybe ‘demeaning’ isn’t the right word but the way things are in our society is neither real nor a true reflection of facts. I mean that men make certainty out of doubt, by giving children birthed by their mothers their name, not the mother’s.”

“I don’t understand anything.”

«What don’t you understand? Is there any doubt of the maternity of the mother to her children?»

“No.”

“Then how come you don’t understand? The mother is the mother, there is no room for obscurity or doubt, as for the father—there are a hundred possibilities and the particular possibility that he is not the real father. So why do we elevate the possible to the level of the certain and erase or obscure the certain?”<sup>33</sup>

“You’d be turning society upside down by implementing that suggestion.”

“Nothing would be turned upside down. The child should take the mother’s name. That way, he would belong to that which is certain. You know, we wouldn’t need all these conferences, then they could use this demand as an example to symbolize all that they are fighting for. And it is easy enough to implement if they know how to handle it intelligently. Anyhow it’s a vast subject and we don’t have time to get into it right now. Tell me, have you written anything new?”

“No, I haven’t been able to. I was thinking about schoolwork.”

“Good.”

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“And thinking about your new neighbour.”

Layal laughed as though she was delighted by this display of jealousy and she said: “Are you jealous? Do you want me to abandon all my acquaintances and friends?”

“No, but I want you to know that no one loves you like I do.”

“Friendship is of different kinds and degrees and for every kind there’s a particular level of esteem and you know you’re important to me.”

“Am I really? You don’t make me feel like that: you won’t even let me visit you at home; and there’s your neighbour knocking on your door whenever she likes, visiting you and inviting you to her parties and looking after you, and all the while you don’t mind, as though you like the attention.”

“She’s a simple woman and is virtually illiterate; she doesn’t know what she’s doing. She reacts and gets carried away with herself. But she’s beautiful and a woman in every sense of the word. I think Mimi represents a large portion of women in this country.”

“When will I visit you?”

“Soon. We’ll set a time for that, there’s no rush.”

“My God what is all this procrastination for?! You know I’m dying to become a part of your world.”

“The time will come.”

They part, each to her house. Layal thinks of what she had discussed with Raya and plans for a series of readings around the subject of homosexuality, while

Siham thinks of what Layal said to her. Was Layal postponing her visit to her home just to escalate Siham's excitement? "Is this how normal women flirt? And would Layal resort to this kind of behavior, really?"

Siham decided that she would visit Layal on the twenty-fifth of April, the last Sunday of the month, even if she was uninvited.

"I wonder who her visitors are?"

I get lost amongst the shapes and the dead  
I see streets squeezing the pedestrians  
and something in my chest,  
between one and another step,  
is your house.

All the cars look like yours  
but they are not white.  
I try to visit,  
I wonder who your visitors are,  
what might the conversation be,  
are they women or men?  
Young or old,  
Do you miss them or not?  
I want to know everyone whom you love,  
so that I can be close to you.  
I want to learn the way they talk and how they are,  
how they laugh and make you laugh—  
what it is that they want and what they think of,

how they knock on your door

and whether they can read what is in your eyes, and how.

I wish I was like them, so that I may be closer.

Loyal was reading a discussion between Freud and Fleiss regarding homosexual and heterosexual relationships when Mimi came over.<sup>34</sup>

“Why did you leave early last night?”

“What did you want me to do when I was all alone and each of you was in the company of her girlfriend? It suited me to leave—don’t think that I blame you but I didn’t find a place for myself among you.”

“If you had stayed I would have disposed of the old hag and I would have been all yours.”

“Mimi, what are you saying? Didn’t you notice how incensed she was, how she surrounded you as though she possessed you? But this isn’t any of my concern, anyway. Look Mimi, I accepted your invitation because you’re my neighbour and you’re friendly and I didn’t want to disappoint you, but that’s all. I beg you understand this.”

“I like your personality, no, I love your personality and it’s not up to me. What I feel for you is stronger than I am and I’m getting attached to you and I want to see you every day. I confessed to my girlfriend and she’s absolutely furious. But you know, my feelings for you aren’t quite new; I have been thinking about and planning for this for a long time and...”

“Thank you for these feelings towards me, but Mimi, you don’t work and maybe your life has become some sort of oppressive routine you’re bored with.

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Why don't you fill your sense of emptiness with reading or something, I'm sure you'll benefit from the books."

"And what will I read?"

"I can help you choose the books."

"I don't like reading, especially the books Farid gets for me. I don't like him, and I don't like men, okay! The only time I sense my existence is when I'm with women, they understand each other. If I may be completely honest with you, sexual relationships with women are more pleasurable than they are with men.

There are no inflexible gender roles in such relationships, every one searches for her own pleasure with the other—there are no power relations and no disgusting ejaculation, as though the woman was no more than a receptacle for receiving their filth."

"Why you get married then?"

"It was already decided, what was I supposed to do? Remain a burden on my family? I'm freer this way. I sleep with my husband in order to please him and the rest of the time I live my life the way I want. Men are stupid, they don't suspect relationships between women; they're always reassured as long as no other man enters the picture—no conflict there since I don't like men. You see, this is why I'm content in my situation. There's no room for arousing my husband's jealousy and for being accused of adultery and all those other problems."

Layal smiled without comment.

"My God how beautiful your smile is! You can't imagine how much it moves me, as though I am before something I want to devour!" As she said this she circled Layal with her arms and kissed her. Layal kissed her in return and said:

"Mimi I've listened to what you have to say but there's nothing I can add to it. You're free in your feelings and your life and your behaviours, but please don't

involve me in your problems, I have no connection to them. You're a beautiful woman, and you live in a world that you've created for yourself..."

"Do you think I'm beautiful, really? Do you like me?"

"You're a beautiful woman and I don't deny that. But whether I like you or not isn't something I think about."

"Do you prefer men?"

"Simply, yes."

"But they're selfish. They love no one but themselves."

"And we love ourselves through them."

"They use us to satiate themselves, that's all we are to them."

"That depends on the quality of the relationship between the man and the woman. Sometimes there's exploitation and sometimes there's mutual love, without exploitation."

"I asked you before if you had a boyfriend and you shut me up."

"Yes, I have a boyfriend and I love him. Is your curiosity finally satisfied now?"

"No. I would have preferred it if you didn't have a boyfriend. I love you. I have little luck but I won't despair and I won't ask much of you, I just want us to remain friends."

"We will definitely stay friends; I don't mind that at all."

"I'm always thinking of you. I don't know what it is about you that captivates me. I wait for you to come home every day and I watch your every move. I dream sometimes that I am with you in a far away place where no one can see us and that you're holding me."

"When does your husband come back?"

"The day after tomorrow."

“Does that mean the bombing will be back the day after tomorrow?”

Mimi laughed and said: “No, God willing, no. We’ve had enough of that. Will you spend tomorrow with me?”

“With you? No, I have a lot to do.”

“Okay, how about lunch then? You don’t pay attention to these things.”

“No thanks, I should be inviting you to lunch after all your invitations and everything you have done for me.”

“Excellent! I know a good restaurant, are you inviting me to it?”

Layal felt embarrassed and in order to end the discussion she said: “Yes I am. And now goodbye, I’ll continue with my work and we’ll meet tomorrow,” but before Mimi left, the telephone rang.

“Hello Siham, what’s wrong?”

“Were you talking about me before I arrived?”

“What do you mean?”

“You and doctor Raya.”

“Siham, I’ll talk to you later, I have guests at the moment.”

“Is it your neighbour?”

“Yes.”

“And will she stay long?”

“No.”

“Alright, alright, I understand everything, I won’t bother you again after today.”

Layal bung up the telephone receiver and escorted Mimi to the door. As soon as she closed it after her, she cried out: “My God what’s wrong with these women! What do they want from me? I wish I could just get rid of both of them at once. But I want to learn more about their world, I’ll just have to put up with them in order to discover more about them.”

After she hung up the telephone, Siham said to herself: “I won’t call her after this, it’s certain that she and her neighbour are lovers, but I need to be sure.” She spent the whole night resisting her urge to call Layal and this resistance exploded, as usual, in writing:

I dreamt a great deal and drowned in great illusions and lived my life in madness, I cast myself away until I became reality’s prisoner. The dream betrayed me and I struggled, I counted you the princess of my kingdom, the solace of my solitude and the priestess of my mihrab. You weren’t...and you won’t be.

Everything I expected ended before birth, my thoughts were hallucinations. You’re like the sea gull who belongs to no one when he jails—he is for the sky and not for humankind...You are like light: whenever we draw near it, it burns us but we cannot live without it. You won’t be with anyone and you won’t be without anyone.

“I love her and I want her to myself. I want her as a lover, as a beloved.” And again she directed her words to Layal:

Beloved, if I do not fancy you, whom will I fancy?

If it was a temporary phase then how come I suffer?

If you weren’t a reality of my existence then how can I see the astonishing things?

Are you afraid or perhaps you don’t want to? Or I am a

thing

And it is easy to leave things? Beloved, how do you  
explain my anxiousness?

And my longing and your objection and your rejection  
and my insistence?

Beloved, expel me if you wish, it does not matter,  
because you won't obliterate your impression from my  
heart.

Torture me however you like  
because I won't forget the moments of pleasure with you.  
Cut me up into pieces and pieces because I won't forget  
that you gathered me up  
and joined my parts  
until I began to know the lost love.

### 32

In the morning Siham was still charged.

The morning wakes up  
and you're still in my head  
from last night and from the previous night.

I stay up with you,  
I write to the woman in my head,  
love letters that never end,  
words that do not cease

and imaginings that I furnish my bed with, and my pillow.

A miracle transpires  
and we are forever in one place,  
away from other people,  
the two of us alone near a deserted beach,  
without a hut,  
blanketed by the breeze and submerging in a deep sleep,  
an eternal sleep that I never wake from.  
And this way we remain together  
and I guarantee that nothing parts us  
and no one draws near you to romance you,  
except my death and my ashes.

She dropped the pen and said:

“I’ll see you today, there’s no question. You won’t call me, you won’t come down off your pedestal to ask for my telephone number, and I won’t call you but I will invade your house. You still accuse me of transference? I love you, enough! I don’t use you to compensate for someone else; I’m finished with Nour. I got over her when I realized that she eliminated me from her life. She’ll regret it, that faker, she’ll regret it when that pig leaves her when he’s satiated himself. She’ll be all alone soon and I’ll have nothing to do with her. But I have to win Layal over. Why does she evade me? She treats me nicely and shows that she understands me and I begin to think that she has softened and gotten closer and then she turns away from me, maybe to be with someone else. I won’t give up—she won’t be anyone else’s.”

## 33

In the afternoon Mimi dressed herself elegantly and went to Layal's house. She tricked the old hag and convinced her that she was visiting the doctor. The old hag offered to take her but the Mimi refused, which made her suspect the truth of her claim and her suspicions were confirmed when she saw Mimi and Layal in the latter's car. "Where are they going together? Is Layal really taking her to the doctor or are they going somewhere else? That monkey, I know how to discipline her when she comes back."

She suppressed her indignation but continued to be in a state of agitation, watching for their return from her balcony.

Mimi sat next to Layal in the car and began to direct her to the restaurant, which was in the heart of the capital. She kept chattering throughout the trip while Layal was lost in her own thoughts, wondering what she was doing, and why she had accepted to invite this woman, and why she humoured Siham and kept looking out for her. Was it just curiosity? Was it really because she wanted to discover what took place in the world of these lesbians, as she told herself whenever she was completely conscious? Or was there a Don Juanian inclination that spurred her on to doing what she was doing? She did not complete these thoughts because they arrived at the restaurant and Mimi said:

"You have to find a parking spot." Layal emerged from her absent-mindedness and started looking for an empty spot.

They alighted from the car and headed towards the restaurant. Mimi grabbed Layal's arm, in the way she often did with her husband. She took Layal window shopping and stopped occasionally to point out a dress or an elegant pair of shoes.

“How about we do a little bit of shopping before lunch, or maybe afterwards?” Mimi asked.

“No,” Layal replied, “I’m going straight home after lunch because I will need a nap then.”

“Before lunch then, anyhow it’s still early.”

They continued walking and Mimi dragged Layal into some shops where she tried on a dress or a pair of shoes, asking Layal’s opinion and Layal gave her opinion and chose whatever complemented the beauty and elegance of her body the most. She occasionally wondered why she was putting up with this woman and her freakish whims.

When they walked past a bookstore Layal was taken by surprise: Siham was leaving that particular store and they found themselves face to face. Siham didn’t know what to do and looked at Layal, shaking her head as though she had caught her in the act:

“Hello doctor Layal.” There was nothing left for Layal to do other than to return the greeting, she drew closer to Siham and said: “This is my neighbour Mimi.” Then closer to Mimi and said: “This is my friend Siham.”

Layal thought: “I don’t know with what sense they know each other Siham and Mimi both panicked as though each of them felt that the other was taking me from her.”

“We’re having lunch. Come along with us,” Layal said as she patted Siham on the shoulder.

“No thanks, I’m busy.”

Mimi said nothing and was pleased when Siham declined the invitation.

“No thanks,” Siham repeated after Layal’s second invitation.



When she left them, they proceeded to the restaurant and after they sat down on one of the tables Mimi said: “Did you really want your friend to come with us?”

“Of course, she’s an excellent student and my friend.”

“To be honest I was happy when she declined; I wanted to be alone with you. Is she really a friend of yours?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like her? I don’t think that her appearance. . . I didn’t think that you liked that kind. She’s the kind of woman that excites me, for example, I like that manly look in a woman. That’s probably why I only imagine you in your jeans and when your hair is tied up. My God how that image excites me! When I see you in a dress and with your hair on your shoulders and all made up, I can hardly recognize you.”

“What do you want to eat?”

“Order whatever you like, I’m just happy being with you.”

Layal ordered what she saw fit. “I would like a glass of whiskey” Mimi said and Layal ordered a glass of beer for herself.

“Are you busy after lunch?” Mimi asked.

“No, I told you that I sleep after lunch, it’s a habit of mine that I thoroughly enjoy and never miss.”

Mimi realized that she was not going to stay with Layal all afternoon and that she would not be able to carry out her plan immediately: I have time, the night is long, she thought. As for Layal she was humouring Mimi in all her requests and wishing that the time would pass quickly so that she could be done with an obligation that she herself voluntarily committed to.

After lunch I’ll end my relationship with her, I’ll make her understand that I’m busy and that I don’t have time for togethers and gossip. I’ll set some

boundaries. She's overdoing it and acts as though she's my lover. Is she a brilliant actress or is she really like this? She can go to her old hag or to the devil, it's not any of my business, but she's sweet and soft. I can't be harsh with her.

After they drank coffee, Layal patted Mimi's shoulder and said: "Come on, let's go now, I'm getting sleepy."

"I love it when you touch me."

Layal smiled and repeated: "Come on, come on, soon I won't be able to drive the car." They arrived to their residence where the old hag was waiting for them.

"I got worried about you, what did the doctor say?"

When Layal heard this she left them and went up to her apartment.

"He said that I needed to rest."

"And why did you go with Layal?"

"Because I don't want to drive my car, I asked her to take me and she did."

"You spent all that time at the doctor's?"

"He had a lot of patients and we had to wait for a long time."

"Not to worry, I'll come with you to the house."

"There's no need for that, I want to have a nap, I'm tired—I'll see you later."

"I'll see you after sleep." She's beginning to evade me; I won't let her do that.

### 34

After a short nap Layal was making herself a pot of coffee when she heard a knock on the door.

“I’m not expecting anyone...maybe it’s the doorman...” She opened the door and Mimi appeared carrying a tray with a coffee pot and two cups on it.

“I guess you haven’t had your coffee yet.” she entered. She was wearing her nightshirt and a light headscarf on top of it. She continued: “You prefer it without sugar, isn’t that right?”

She poured a cup and gave it to Laval, who took it from her, astonished at the rudeness that was considered, at the same time, the kind of social appropriateness that she was unable to reject.

Before she sat down, Mimi took on scan and remained in her transparent shirt facing Layal, who looked at the beauty of her body and was confused about what to do in order to make this woman understand that she wanted to be left alone.

“I’m waiting for a visitor now and it’s not appropriate that he should see you dressed this way.”

“When he knocks on the door I’ll put my robe on and leave. Don’t worry, and if your visitor should happen to be your friend Siham, then there’s no awkwardness, I can stay as I am.”

The telephone rang:

“I want to see you.” Siham said.

“Call me in half an hour, I have some guests.”

“Is she still with you?”

“We’ll talk later.”

“She’s with her and she says she’s not one of them.” I’m going to uncover her lies.

“Madam Mimi, we have drunk our coffee, thank you, and now excuse me but I have to ask you to leave, I have to get ready before my friends arrive.”

Mimi was indignant but she picked up her tray, pot and cups and returned to her house and to the embraces of the old hag, who appeared at the door shortly after Mimi's return. The old hag took to spoiling her because, as per the doctor's instructions, she needed to rest.

Siham, who was certain of Layal's lies and treachery, decided to avenge herself but her revenge fell on paper first:

I've decided not to write;  
I've decided to kill my poetry  
and cut the veins of my body.

You kick my writings gradually,  
you read them and laugh.  
and I twist like a snake that bit her body.  
Are you laughing, deriding?

You've killed the horizon in me,  
you take from me everything I hide,  
you steal from me everything I save—  
The mirage becomes my only concern.

I light the lamp but it does not burn,  
I write but your words come to burn what I write,  
I listen to the heart beat  
but you paralyse its movement

I've decided that I don't love you  
I don't love you,  
I don't love you,  
I've decided to search for the unlaughable.  
To search for whomever can read my poetry,  
And know that it is tragic.

She was done with writing and returned to the telephone: "Hello is she still there?"

"No, I'm alone, what's wrong? What's on your mind?"

"I want to see you; I can't take you avoiding me anymore."

"Understand me Siham, I'm not evading you, but I have my own matters, and friends don't treat each other this way, they reciprocate respect—if you want to be my friend then you have to respect my time or..."

"Or what? You're always threatening me. I'm going to act now."

"As you wish. Look, I know what's going on in your head and you're wrong. I won't talk for long, do whatever you believe to be appropriate in relation to yourself first; my mind is clear as far as I'm concerned."

"Will I see you today then? We can go to the beach and sit on the sand. I used to do this with Nour. We can talk, listen to the sound of the waves and watch the sunset."

"And what beach do you mean?"

"I know many places, don't you trust me? Or are you afraid of me?"

That last question provoked Layal and she replied without thinking: "Afraid? Why? And of whom? I'll see you at five o'clock at Corniche Al-Rowsheh, near the military swimming centre."

“I’ve succeeded” Siham said to herself. And before Layal’s acceptance of her invitation she forgot her anger and her mood turned.

I love you for the millionth time  
And every time my love is coloured differently  
Perhaps because you are life, and so I live  
And perhaps because you are suffering  
So I find my eternal pleasure  
And sometimes I love you because you are above love  
Because you look from a higher ground  
Because you are higher  
I love you because I can’t not  
I love you because you are the existence of love  
Because you are the portrait of love  
And its words and fingerprints  
And its guarantee  
And its surface and what is beneath  
I love you because you are beauty  
And romance and flirtatiousness  
Because you are the water and the air  
And reality and the memories.  
Every time I love you because of a different truth  
So how am I to cease  
When your love is the chain of life  
Where if one wrung were absent,  
Life is lost?

## 35

Siham reread what she wrote and wondered: “Do I love her to this extent? Of course, I do, the poetry proves this. She’s now in all my poems and her scent pervades the context of my poetry. She has become the altar of the word, its declared and hidden meanings. I say she is my lover, I say she is my blonde gypsy, wherever I turn I find her forcibly intervening in emptying my thoughts and the secrets of my secrets, and the beatings of my heart. But how can one reach the oyster when she does not intend to dive? I have intended it and she is my oxygen. She intends nothing and I intend everything. Will I get something? I don’t know.”

The time came and Siham was still lost in her thoughts, but she threw her papers in her bag and rushed to meet Layal. When she saw her waiting in the car, her hair was raised on end and she was struck with a kind of rigidity. She opened the car door and sat silently.

“Where to?” Layal asked.

“To Al-Ramlah Al-Baida’ – there’s a nice beach there and soft sand...”

She drove towards the beach and when she saw that it was deserted, she became frightened.

“Siham, what is this place? Look, there’s no one on the beach. I don’t dare...”

“And what are you afraid of? I come here on my own sometimes and I walk on the sand.”

“And if someone attacks us, what can we do? What if he killed us and no one knew about us? No, I have a bad feeling about this; the world is all war and chaos. No, no-what is this selection? Let’s go to a populated beach.”

She drove off without waiting for Siham's reply and without knowing where they should go. As for Siham, she was surprised by Layal's behavior and asked her with a kind of malice:

"Are you afraid to that extent? Or are you refusing because someone might see us on the beach and frame you with the accusation?"

"No. Accusations and hearsay don't bother me, but I don't want to die so cheaply and only to please madam Siham and her romantic notions."

"Then we should go to a women's only beach."

"I don't mind, but it's late now and we'll find it closed."

"Then let's go to your house."

"Not to worry, we will."

Siham was silent a little as though Layal's quick acceptance surprised her, she felt a discomfort, the meaning of which she did not comprehend, and without thinking for long she said:

"No I beg you, I'm not ready yet, I'm still afraid of myself. It's enough for me to know that you would let me visit you at home. No, no, let's go somewhere else."

Layal did not object and she took Siham to the usual café and some time later they parted in separate ways, Siham to her papers and Layal to her books and the whims of her neighbour Mimi.

"Are you going?" Mimi asked. "It's a nightclub on the beach in Ma'amaltaine. It appears to be mixed but in reality it's a gay nightclub. Men and women go in arm



in arm but once inside they separate where every sex carries on in its own atmosphere and practices.”

“Are there places like this in Lebanon?”

“Where do you live then?”

“Who are you going with?”

“With her of course, this is the last night before my husband comes back and she wants us to spend it together.”

“And why do you want me to go with you? What is my role? Don’t you realize that you are crossing the line? Do you think that you can impose yourself on me? These things are of no concern to me and the subject is none of my business, don’t you see that?”

Mimi thought that Layal was beginning to feel jealous of the old hag and in order to rectify the situation, she said:

“Don’t be annoyed, I understand your feelings, and if you want me to go with you and get rid of her, then I know what to do.”

“You don’t understand at all! I’m not prepared for any project of this kind. I wish you and your friend an enjoyable evening. Please leave me alone, I have other things to do.”

Mimi left without understanding Layal’s actions, while the latter thought that people came in all shapes and sizes and that some of them were intolerable and that they did not understand the meaning of appropriateness or politeness or boundaries, and so they understood things according to their own inclinations and the tangents of their imagination. “Maybe I’m the one at fault. I shouldn’t have humoured her for this long, nor allowed her to enter my world and home. But she’s simple-minded and doesn’t intend to be annoying, she only wants to satisfy her desires and thinks that I’m like her simply because I have not rejected her.” After

some time she thought of going to that nightclub, but she didn't want to go alone. Quickly, the idea of inviting her friend Raya came to her, so she called her and they agreed on going together.

They entered the place early, and after a short inspection of the place they sat at a table in the area where they found women. They ordered drinks and pretended that they were frequented patrons of the place. Minutes later Mimi entered in the company of a man, followed by the old hag with another man.

The hall was virtually divided in two sections without a prominent dividing line. Mimi and the old hag headed to the area where Layal and Raya were sitting, while the two men headed in the opposite direction. The owner, who greeted them and accompanied them to a table where they sat, seemed to know them well. Without them asking for anything the waiter came and placed two glasses of\_. Mimi drank from her glass and then panned the room with her eyes, which was half dark, and when she saw Layal with her friend she got angry and said to the old hag: "Look, she's here."

"Who?"

"Layal."

"Alone?"

"With another woman."

The old hag laughed and said: "She's devious, she wants to fool us into thinking that she's different from us and she treats us, especially you, with a kind of superiority. Her secret is out now." She was saying this as she looked in the direction of Layal's table, who, when she noticed that they were both looking at her, behaved as though she did not see them, instead, she tried to converse with Raya who also performed the required role well.

Women and men continued to arrive until the place was full, then the music got louder and the evening's entertainment got well underway. The old hag, who was certain that Layal was one of them, took to artfully fondling Mimi's body, while the latter kept looking over at Layal, perhaps wishing that she was in place of the old hag.

"Did you know of these kinds of places?" Layal asked.

"Of course I did. Those who come for therapy in my clinic tell me about them, but this is the first time that I've seen it for myself, I wouldn't have come if you weren't with me."

"And what do you think? And how far will their foreplay go?"

"To the point where there's maximum arousal, then they leave the hall and go somewhere where they can have sex."

"So nothing of this kind will happen here?"

"I don't think so."

"Doesn't our presence here, without joining them in their activities, bother them?"

"No one cares about us-every one is busy with her lover, so much so that they don't even notice us."

"Why don't we participate? Come on, let's dance with the others."

"I wouldn't mind, let's do it."

Mimi saw this because she had kept Layal under surveillance to see how she behaved with her friend. When she saw them heading to the dance floor her jealousy got fiercer, but she was still determined to succeed in having Layal to herself. She noticed that Layal neither embraced nor kissed Raya as the other women did with their dance partners. This pleased her because she explained it according to her fancy, assuming that Layal wanted her and for this reason

neglected her girlfriend. This encouraged her to extricate herself from the old hag for a moment where she hurried toward Layal attempting to snatch her from Raya, and at the point of Layal's refusal Mimi began to upbraid her: "What are you doing with her? What made you change your mind?" She was drunk and aroused. The old hag came and drew her to herself, reproachful, and then kissed her on the mouth to silence her. And when she pulled her away, Layal and Raya returned to their table and shortly after, they left.

In the car Layal said: "A strange world I never knew."

"And who was that young woman who tried to drag you away?"

"She's my neighbour. She's a lesbian and she was the one who told me about this place."

"She's infatuated with you. It's clear."

"And what should I do?"

"Siham too, she's infatuated, or so I think."

"But the difference between the two is great. Mimi is a stupid and normal woman, whereas Siham is fragile, intelligent and educated and for this reason I take care of her and I like to help her."

"And that will increase her attachment to you."

"How do you explain that? Mimi and Siham are completely different, except they both found one subject to link them."

"That's not strange, but the subject that links them is not one: each one of them is in love with one aspect of your personality; one is drawn to your femininity and the other to your masculinity."

"Maybe, but the situation is different for each of them. I think that the inclination Mimi has, is a kind of decadence, it does not present a problem for her because she doesn't really suffer, as for Siham, her problem is more difficult. Her

case is not a matter of decadence or a passing inclination, she suffers and is pained by a predicament she cannot alter.”

“It appears that Mimi is bisexual. She’s married and at the same time she practices her other inclinations without any questions, whereas Siham is, as it appears, well and truly a lesbian and this is what makes her feel estranged in society.”

“But how does attraction between two people take place. What are the criteria? Is it in difference? Is it similarity? Is it completeness?”

“Maybe completeness.”

“And what kind of completeness?”

“The completeness of the human being and for this reason see a general rule in the woman’s attraction to the man and vice versa.”

“But even in the regular attraction, what are the criteria? Is it the difference or the similarity?”

“It’s certainly the difference, I think.”

“I don’t think so. I believe that the like realizes the like, meaning that a woman is looking, in her relationship with a man, for what completes her femininity, in the same way, the man searches for what completes his masculinity in his relationship with a woman and...”

“Slow down! Slow down! What do you mean?”

“I guess that every human being is a mix of the two sexes, the feminine and the masculine, and this mix varies from one person to another and for this reason the man, for example, whose being is formed with a certain quantity of masculinity and another quantity of femininity, searches in the end for what his masculinity is missing, so that his masculinity may become a complete entity; and that means that what draws him to a woman is not so much what she has of femininity but what

she has that completes his masculinity and that's the way it is for the woman too. If this analysis is true then it explains that in homosexual relationships, the sex of the other is not as important as the complementarity of the like. This completeness can be within the same sex, as is the case with lesbians and gays, or between different sexes as we see in the general and governing rule.”

“Maybe that's the explanation but it's certainly not the only one. Take your situation for example, what kind of man attracts you?”

“I'm attracted to the feminine man, meaning he whose femininity is apparent. A masculine man searches for an extremely feminine woman, why? Because she possesses a small portion of masculinity and that small portion is what completes his masculinity. Then what attracts the man to this woman is not her femininity but her insubstantial masculinity and in this way, by bringing this man and woman together we come before a completeness in masculinity and femininity, meaning that he and she form a female who is virtually complete and a male who is also virtually complete. I say “virtually” because there is always potential for error. And because each party searches for its completeness love is always selfish—because in the end the like can only recognize the like, as Greek philosophy says.”<sup>35</sup>

‘You've begun philosophizing things. It's getting late, take me home and we'll talk more about this later, either way it's a point which, should be open for discussion.’”

That night Siham called Layal many times without an answer and when she despaired she returned to her papers and to her pen which acted as companions to her loneliness and saviours of her despondency.

Be sure my friend that when we love we are not in the mindset of waiting for reward or the reciprocity of emotions. The greatest love is that which is without results, in which the feelings are stronger and more truthful. And what use is love without torment? Every time I suffer in my love I am reborn into a new life. It is this worry that I live—that makes me feel my pulse and my life. And my happiness is never complete except in striving toward these things and not in attaining them, for how beautiful is the path through the forest? It is prettier than the forest itself. Whatever is produced about you, my friend, more often than not, pleases me more than your being pleases me. For it is what is behind the sky that makes us believers and what is behind the seas that makes us sail and what is behind the word that makes us write poems. And it is what is behind the nation and the city that makes us nominate ourselves for sacrifice and it is not the country that drives us to revolution.

Don't suppose that drawing closer to you means that I live in loneliness, yes I do live it, inside me, but not on the front of relationships and they have become many, and I refuse them and abstain from them, because I no longer desire exploitation one party or from both; there is no existence for love and exploitation in one place. Should you love the other, should you exploit him, should you love the other, should you kill him? In most of my relationships if I'm not the exploiter then I am murdered. I do not know love except through their climax and my silence, so much so that I am used to being their assistant only, so much so, that I have become addicted to hearing their moans only, as though I was distributing free services and I did not think that I owed my body something. My concern was

besieged by the thought that when they reached orgasm they would be able to hold me, and that was what I searched for. I searched for a body to protect me, not for a body to satiate me, for a breast overflowing with tenderness, not a breast waiting for touches and kisses, but I found nothing except burning bodies to which love means nothing, but to which sex was a concern. Imagine that I spent as long as seven or eight hours in bed with a crazy woman, who could not be satisfied by an armada of men, I was not allowed to rest, to eat...but I was allowed alcohol. And when I decided to sleep in her lap, like a child, hiding in her chest...she accused me of being unfit for holding, and she forbade me moments of yearning for her, so that I may feel secure, as though the human was forbidden from coming face to face with, the other and his body except in the condition of fuck. And there were many others like her. I would not blame men should they leave their wives after the sexual act because the women precede the men in this line.

When Layal read this composition she asked Siham:

“Do you have many relationships?”

“They are passing relationships that end usually after one meeting.”

“How does that happen? How do you know that the other woman is a lesbian?”

“My sense hasn't erred once, I know immediately.”

“And do you find pleasure in these passing relationships? But how stupid of me to ask such a question!”

“I will answer your question. When a woman possesses another woman's body, it's as though she is possessing her own body, filling it with energy and pleasure, contrary to what happens when a man possesses a woman's body, because he empties her of her femininity and attempts to rob her, even in bed. He strips her of her love for herself and takes her, consenting or forced, so that he



could empty what is inside her of energy. But with a woman the situation is different: a woman can give to herself as much as she can give to another woman. She gives and gives regardless of stances taken outside the sexual relationship. The woman's love for herself and her body appears through that warm relationship that joins one self with another where the boundaries of rape or robbery do not come between them. There is no rape in those kinds of relationships, the woman gives with all her consensus and all her consciousness, and is not merely on the receiving end as is the case in heterosexual relationships. The woman then thinks of an image opposite her, attempts to please it, and does not become disabled in the case of either of their satisfaction. As for the relationship that they call normal, it makes no difference to the majority if the woman is satisfied or not. That's our society, I don't blame anyone, because that's what we're in the habit of doing. Because I have loved myself and my femininity to the point of narcissism, I have satisfied the other without an other; because I know that I am, sooner or later, going to possess what is possible, but it is more difficult to possess myself through the other who is not like me. And for this reason the relationship would be deeper if it was with the self through the other, who is of the same sex. And because I have loved myself, I have loved to know her. And knowing is not complete except through undergoing a relationship with the sex itself. I am infatuated with knowing myself and knowing the woman I stand before. I see the mutilations and I see the contradictions and I see the positive elements and I see what I love and what I hate, without hatred, and I behave as though I would with myself. I do what I crave and crave what I do and I perform with the utmost liberty what I have been prohibited from performing with the male other, who has gotten used to being the maker of the decision. The difficulty is in challenging yourself, not in conquering the other and the difficulty is in knowing what we want and when we want it and where. On

the other hand, there's no difficulty in knowing what we don't want. My philosophy in love is that you love yourself through the similar Other and you love the Like on the basis that she is of you and for you and that she is in your image, in the reality of the Other. In the Other reality there are no fears or failings and no wars in order to declare the winning team and where there is joint winning and complete giving, without the challenges of the strong to the weak and the male to the female."<sup>36</sup>

Layal was listening to Siham recalling her conversation with Raya about the Like realizing the Like. And after Siham finished what she wanted to say, silence prevailed between them for a period that made her restless and she asked: "Am I bothering you with what I'm saying?"

"No, not at all. I was wondering about the type of woman you are attracted to."

"I am attracted to the feminine woman. A woman in whom there is nothing that reminds me of men."

"You reject your femininity and for this reason you search for her in the Other, for if you accepted your femininity the situation would change."

"Not quite. I feel that my femininity is lacking. What I find in the Other I do not find in myself. When I am attracted by such women I feel as though my femininity is complete."

Layal was silent and began to think about Siham's remarks, which were in complete accord with her own understanding of love, for she, and as she explained to Raya, believed that the Like can only realize the Like, and here were Siham's remarks proving the very thing. But she tried to ignore the matter.

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“The femininity of each of us is lacking, and every man’s masculinity is lacking too and if you’re right then all women are lesbians and all men are homosexuals.”

“Maybe in their depths they are all like that.”

“Maybe, but there’s the disagreement, that is, the Like occasionally realizes the Like in the Same, and at other times in his Contrary. So that in the first case the relationship is homosexual and in the other it is heterosexual and it appears that the general rule is in heterosexual relationships and for this there is an important reason, I think, and that is that arousal comes from finding likeness in contradictions: meaning that you find the complement to your femininity in a man and not a woman, precisely in the same way that the man is aroused when he finds the completeness of his masculinity in a woman. Meaning then, that the element of arousal is there, otherwise heterosexual relationships would have neither been the rule nor as ubiquitous.”

That’s possible because I only like men who are extremely feminine. But there remains the body. Nothing arouses me except the female form, for the female body has a great effect on me and it is what awakens desire within me. What am I guilty of exactly if I can only feel the pleasure of love with a woman, and does love change if its subject changes? It’s love, and the purpose of making love is attaining pleasure and satisfaction. What difference does it make if this is done with a man or with a woman? I assure you that it is better with a woman: purer, deeper.”

“I can’t follow this line of analysis because the subject is outside the scope of reason and proof. It enters the field of emotions and sensations, and desire, which is subjective, mercurial, and cannot be placed in equations that supervene on reasonable proof.”

“Precisely. We are always asking ‘how do we love or how is love possible?’ but we never ask ‘why do we love?’ We love because we love our own image in the Other. Love is the origin of selfishness: no one becomes infatuated except he who is selfish to the point of narcissism. I love the Other so that I may make him love me, so that I may attain self-approval and social acceptance. Instances of suicide are many in the cases where lovers are lost, because those who commit suicide for this reason cannot imagine life without a source for reinforcing their narcissism. They feel loneliness and estrangement and annihilation, simply because they failed at establishing an emotional relationship with the lover, therefore they feel that they do not deserve love. We rarely love a person for their sake or because they deserve love. We love him because we want him to reciprocate love so that we may get a sense of our own existence and self-worth through that love. That is what happens in gay cases and in the other cases. Originally it is love, and from there on that love takes on the quality of “gay,” but from the beginning it is love and I won’t name it as a kind of love, because love is one, there are no kinds in it.

“In the end it is a situation where various emotions enter, emotions that spring from old images and desires that are like timed bombs that explode when one sees the desired image, which carries certain symbols in her imagination or childhood or in our adolescence. Isn’t that true? Answer me, why are you silent?”

“I’m listening to you with the utmost attention, continue if you have more to say.”

“Yes, I have more and here’s the heart of the matter: why are we told that the images and symbols explode always in one direction? Meaning, towards the opposing side? Why are emotions permitted, even if uneasily, while acting upon them is permitted, even if uneasily, while acting upon them is prohibited? Why is it permitted that we become attached to the Same subject in our adolescence, as my

mother used to say to me, and it is prohibited throughout maturity? Why do shame and shamefulness and God come in, in their various aspects? We move to the rhythm of these things but we do not choose them: the girl wants to become her mother and the boy like his father. You see, it is parents, not their children, who create the cases of attachment and identification. The children are left no room for choice, and if they were left to choose, who knows where we would be today. When the girl identifies with her mother she is then in a state of love with her mother as well as her father, and she does not simply identify with the mother only to attain the father. Originally, the attachment is to the mother, and it would be a myth if I were to believe that attachment transforms into identification in order to attain the love of the father, because love does not transform into identification, rather, identification turns into attachment—because attachment makes the child feel that the subject is his possession solely, so he becomes a part of a monistic relationship and becomes attached to that image that he attains and there exists a dialectic relationship between narcissism and identification and...”<sup>37</sup>

“But this way, the child—either male or female becomes attached to his mother first, and according to your analysis the result is that later, only male love will certainly be heterosexual, whereas female love would be homosexual. Is that what you want to say?”<sup>38</sup>

“I don’t care for results—I’m trying to see reality with the utmost objectivity. Ignoring the gay subject requires us to think about why this subject is dangerous, and it is only dangerous because of ignorance and fear. They talk around it and hide behind their fingers. If truth be known, there hasn’t been a woman until now who has researched directly into this subject and in particular in

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relation to the female. Is the subject frightening to that extent? It is a present reality, even if in different rates among women. Occasionally they treat the subject in relation to the male, but when it comes to the female, then it is forbidden, because the woman is all prohibitions and taboos and she is all deficiencies, so how can we add another one to her deficiencies? Besides, the subject poses a great danger to our masculinist society because it underlines the inadequacy that the man suffers from in pleasing the woman, and for this reason, the subject in relation to the woman is obscured, while men's relationships are spoken of with a kind of embarrassment, but at least they propose the subject. Same sex relationships amongst women exist, so let us admit their existence because this is a matter of fact and there is no where to hide."

"They are present. Everyone knows that."

"Everyone knows that in relation to men because the subject has been proposed since old times and in all literatures, but insofar as women are concerned, the obfuscation continues, and here we have to understand reality, and that can only happen by talking about it, not making it disappear. So it should be known that a woman does not love Woman because she is gay, but loves her because she loves herself first and because the woman is qualified for love regardless of her sex; because she is human. Because I have loved my second emotional subject, after the mother, I became gay and not because I am gay that I have loved woman, and I focus here on the expression "emotional subject," meaning that the human being is not born gay or natural, if the word "natural" were appropriate, but becomes or does not become gay in accordance with the direction of his emotions and in relation to whomever provides him with security, tenderness, acceptance and love. There is no existence for a gay or a normal woman and most of the women I have had relationships with, did not belong to the gay world but became

like that because of my relationship with them; because a love took place that made them feel a kind of feeling that they had not known before.”<sup>39</sup>

“And that means that the case of gayness is not perpetual and that it is possible, then, and according to your analysis, for a shift in the subject of love to take place and in particular a shift from the homosexual to the heterosexual case and vice versa?”

“No. The heterosexual relationship changes to a homosexual one many times, but the opposite is unlikely and that is because of the physical relationship and that is what we were talking about before, in terms of a woman possessing another woman’s body. When a woman tastes this kind of relationship she ceases to accept a relationship with the man, even if she tries.”<sup>40</sup>

“Meaning that if she tried a homosexual relationship once then she can no longer accept a heterosexual relationship, is that what you want to say?”

“Absolutely.”

“And how do you explain cases of bisexuality? Because there are people who make love with both sexes, I know women who are married, who practice homosexuality.”

“It is certain that heterosexual relations among those people are a kind of decadence and are not real. All of those you are speaking of are in reality gay, they humour social rules and participate in the marriage game and practice their reality in the darkness of night. Their marriage is a mask that they wear in order to render their reality and inclinations invisible.”<sup>41</sup>

As Siham continued talking Layal began to think about Mimi, who was indeed married because marriage was forced upon her, and if she had been left to her inclinations she would not have done so. When she thought of Mimi she realized that it was very late, so she warned Siham of this. She took her home and returned hurriedly because the sound of explosions had begun to be heard on the outskirts of the capital and this was generally taken as an announcement that the battle was approaching. And the battle did indeed come, Layal was still on her way home, which caused her to speed and bypass some roadblocks that sprouted suddenly in the streets, all this, without being aware of the sound of bullets that sometimes pursued her. Exhausted, she arrived at the building where she lived. When she parked the car in the bomb shelter, she was still shaking and it took her a few minutes before she noticed that the shelter was brimming with people. Soon after, Mimi came over to the car window and said: "Thank God you're okay. Where have you been? I went to your apartment several times and I didn't find you, but you can relax now. Come to our corner, my husband is back and he's with the children now." She was silent a little and then continued, laughing: "Wouldn't it have been better if he had stayed abroad? When he was away we did not hear a shot, didn't you notice? We were walking around however we liked and we left our houses at night and nothing stopped us from spending the evening with friends, and now he's come back and has brought the bombing back with him, not to mention surveillance and obligations."

Layal was still preoccupied with herself and her fear, and it did not occur to her to comment on Mimi's remark, instead she walked with her until they reached the familiar corner "where, after greeting Mimi's husband, she sat on the floor without saying a word. The old hag, who was also with them, received her warmly, which was unusual. She was now reassured that Layal had a girlfriend and that she



was “one of them.” She felt as though between the three of them there was a silent conversation that no one besides them understood. She came closer to Layal and tried to start a conversation, but Layal, because of the uninterrupted continuity with which the battle was being fought, remained silent. This caused the old hag to move away from her and to attend to Mimi and her children and to observe the husband who was telling them about how he missed his children and wife during his last trip. With his stupidity, he explained Mimi’s smiles to mean that she was reciprocating his feelings of yearning, whereas in truth these were pernicious smiles that no one (besides her and the old hag) understood the meaning of.

“It was nice of them to give us last night without bombing, unfortunately Mimi was feeling tired and wasn’t up for anything. I was hoping to make up for it tonight, but there’s no luck...but maybe they’ll spare us and stop the bombing early.”

Layal emerged from her silence in order to say: “I hope they do, they’ve exhausted us.”

“But we’re safe here,” the old hag said, she was not happy about the husband’s remarks, and she continued: “If this goes on, and it appears that it will, we can sleep here, what’s the problem with that?”

“We women can sleep in one part and you and the children in the other part, it’s only one night and it will pass,” Mimi said.

“Don’t take me into account, I won’t sleep here. If I want to sleep I’ll go to my car, I won’t bother you.”

The bombing became so violent that it silenced everyone and planted terror in all the faces. “Does raising the flag or not raising it require all this violence?” The husband asked.

“What do you mean?” Layal asked.

“I’m telling the truth. All these battles are between \_\_\_and \_ because one of the parties wanted to raise the Lebanese flag above, and the other parties didn’t want to.”

“Trivialities. Surely the reasons are deeper than that and the raising of the flag is just an excuse. But my God where did they get all these weapons and bombs from? Who sustains the teams with these instruments of destruction and for the purposes of ending and destroying the country?”

No one answered her; the sound of bombs was the only reply to her questions. The bombing continued in its violence throughout the night and until the early hours of dawn, stripping sleepiness from all the eyes including those of the children. When it was announced that the battles had ended, everyone was struck with a kind of dizziness from exhaustion and fear. They went up to their homes consecutively, in order to discover the extent of the damage that the random bombs had caused, bombs that did not spare a single suburb in the capital. Nothing survived damage from these molten rocks, except houses that were very well protected, or those that were surrounded by tall buildings. Layal’s house survived with the exception of some broken glass and when she saw it, she said: “Thanks be to God if these are all the losses.” Before she threw herself on the bed, she pulled out the telephone cord from the wall, took a sedative and went sleep.

That night Siham was a mad woman. She felt great guilt because Layal had taken her home when the battle began and she did not know whether she made it home safely or not. When she called her in the morning and when no one answered, her fears were made more real and she decided to go over to her house immediately. It was a quick visit that left Siham at ease and reassured. She returned to her house, and to herself, wondering what motivated her to conduct such a visit.

My eyes walked ahead of my legs.  
When they told me you were there,  
in an address I did not memorise  
because of the intensity of my madness  
I flooded the town as though I was not looking for  
anything.

I passed by your door a million times  
and my eyes tricked me until I dared.  
I carried my weapons, and prayed before  
announcing my arrival.  
I carried the filth of the street,  
and feared that your altar might become dirty,  
as though my mistakes and sins were attached to me  
from my head to the nadir of my feet.  
I tried to perform the ritual ablution earlier,  
and for this reason you began the conversation.  
Don't despair, I said, and I almost asked you,  
do I distract you from your prayers?  
because the smell of incense was mixed with you.  
I almost returned to where I came from  
but something pulled me because I didn't shake  
your hand,  
and I came in without you saying it.  
Didn't I tell you earlier that I was curious,  
To the extent that I was lost in the street,

to the extent that I found myself hiding at your place?

You began with the question: drink coffee?

And I said to myself it is certain it will be an intoxicant,  
as long as angels make it,

yes

I drink and little drunkenness knows me.

With the bitterness of my days and my happiness

I met you,

I conversed you and discussed things with you,

and your paintings gazed at me,

rather they surrounded me with their canvasses,

with their lines and threads,

this was you and the other was you and this is your life.

I almost cried when I asked you about your buried  
sadness that you hid with a laugh, you rejected that,

but you confessed and evaded my curiosity

and I brought my papers and placed them, with

a temper,

so I could hear their sound and learned that it was

time to leave.

I was going to leave figuratively

But something from me will stay, my memory will stay.

I carried what was left of me and I excused my

self for departure.

Without saying a word you lowered your head,  
as though you were thinking of something in particular  
and at the end of the temple you were with me,  
guiding me along the path,  
I knew it,  
but I wanted to hear your voice, until the end of visions  
I walked in a dream.

I was in her apartment and I drank her coffee,  
I prayed in her church,  
I praised Allah in her mosque,  
I saw her personal things,  
and I learned that despite the hardness of her feelings,  
she is tender, good,  
and despite her afflictions  
she is a woman searching for forgiveness.

I did not see your tears before dawn,  
but I felt them because I feel you,  
excuse me for erring in expression  
but when a creature loves one of us,  
the art of enunciation ceases to be known,  
apologies...

In the afternoon, when Layal felt that she had regained her strength, she began gathering the broken glass. Mimi came visit her. She was looking pale and was, unusually, silent. When she asked Mimi what was the matter, Mimi did not look at her, instead she kept looking down at the ground and she said, at last: “Who was she who was with you that night? Is she your lover? Was that the reason you rejected my invitation—because you preferred to go with her?” Layal did answer and Mimi continued: “This means that I have no luck with you. But I love you.” She finally looked up at Layal, who remained rigid, not speaking a word. Mimi moved closer to her and put her hands on her cheeks and continued: “Don’t you believe it? I love you and dream about you, always. It doesn’t make sense for you to be with that woman! She has no femininity and her face is hard and I can’t imagine that she loves passionately, because her behavior towards you was, I mean, it did not indicate...”

“She’s not my lover and I don’t have women lovers. I told you earlier that I had a boyfriend and he’s all I need.”

“But don’t you know that I love you and that I’m jealous of those around you? I want you all to myself!”

“And I love you in my own way. But if you want us to remain friends and to meet every now and then, then you have to understand that I love you as a nice neighbour, that’s all, no more. And if you have other inclinations, then I beg you to direct them towards someone else, otherwise I can no longer accept your visits. I want to help you when you need help but I can do this only within the boundaries that I draw.”

“I don’t need any help! I want you to reciprocate love and you want me to direct mine in another direction—but it’s not possible to do that.”

“You’re free to do whatever you like. If you want to, then you can keep on loving me, but be very well aware that I won’t reciprocate it.”

“That’s it then?” Mimi asked and burst into tears, continuing: “What a filthy life! It’s always against us. I don’t love my husband but he loves me, my neighbour fell in love with me but I have fallen out of love with her, and now, for the first time I meet someone I truly do love.”

“Do you see? The old hag loves you and you don’t love her, as you claim.”

“But I loved her for a while. I don’t do things by force. I even loved my husband in the beginning but he disappointed me.”

“Me too, after a while you will cease to love me-- so save yourself another disappointment.”

“But you put the disappointment before the experience, try first and if our hopes are disappointed then that would be the end of the story.”

“Mimi I suspect that you don’t understand me, I have no inclination towards women. Understand me once and for all, I like men and I have a boyfriend and I live my life in peace, so let’s just end this subject once and for all.”

“You have a boyfriend! Where is he?! I haven’t seen him once. Are you just saying this to turn me away?”

I don’t need to make up lies to turn you away and I don’t want to be hard on you either. You are a young woman and the future is ahead of you and I don’t want you to get depressed.”

“It has already happened; I’m depressed to the bone!” As she said this, she placed her head on Layal’s shoulder and began to sob. “I don’t want to go home and I don’t want my neighbour. I want to stay with you, with you I feel safe and strong. With you...”

“Mimi,” Layal said embracing her, “sit down and calm down, I’ll bring you a cup of coffee.”

She left her and went to the kitchen, thinking of a way to bring an end to this whole affair. She pitied Mimi and genuinely wanted to help her, but how? Kicking her out plain and simple might prove too harsh for Mimi to bear, but if Layal kept being nice to her then she could never be rid of her. What can she say to her?

“Drink your coffee now and go back to your house. I think that looking after the children is much more important than I am; think of them first.”

“I look after them as required and I love them and I don’t deprive them of anything, but what about me? Where’s my life?”

“Problems aren’t solved in this way. If you respect my opinion then I suggest that you go home and think about the matter thoroughly, for a week, and then we can meet and talk about it with the utmost calmness and without tears or anger.”

“Fine, I’m leaving and you won’t see my face here ever again.”

“As you wish.”



### PART III

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The spring break finally came to an end and a new semester dawned on them. When Layal returned to her work Siham was the first to meet her there. She went over to her and kissed her warmly saying: “I’ll see more of you now.” She was happy, carrying the papers in her hand which she then presented to Layal.

“What’s new Siham? I’ve missed you.”

“Is that true that you missed me? It makes me happy to hear it. As for the news, you’ll know later, after the reading.”

Layal took the papers and put them in her bag; she entered the lecture hall after saying goodbye to Siham and they agreed on meeting up later. In the evening, before sleep, Layal took out the papers from her bag and read: The birth of an angel.

The eyes moved

cried

screamed

wheat stalks,

and April awaits the final embezzlement,

before five days of leaving

but

he leaves and she stays,

and every April comes,

but he cannot.

Mere trajectories in the throne of time.

Kul Am Wa Anti Be Khayer—Hope you are well every

year

Siham.

“If she calls tomorrow, and I’m sure she will; she knows I don’t have any classes tomorrow, I’ll invite her over. She’s very tender, but how should I behave with her? I think that she understands me well enough by now, and I won’t have to worry about her. It’s possible that she will accept being my friend and only that. She’s not stupid, like Mimi—dealing with that woman is so difficult! She refuses to get it into her head, she refuses to understand. Siham on the other hand is intelligent, she understands her boundaries.”

The following day Layal waited for a long time before the telephone rang in her house. It was noon when this happened. “Siham, thank you for your beautiful birthday present. I’m inviting you to dinner tonight.”

“I invite you, if you accept.”

“No, we’ll have dinner here at my house.”

“Do you really mean it?”

“Of course, aren’t we friends?”

“And what time should I come over?”

“After university, so around six o’clock. I don’t want you to be very late in going home at night.”

«Very well, very well, I’ll be at your house at six o’clock sharp.”

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Siham did not go to her classes that day. She was in a mixed state of happiness and sadness and in addition to these feelings she had to find a convincing excuse to furnish her mother with.

“I’ll be a little late tonight. We’ve invited the teachers to dinner in a restaurant. It’s a “getting acquainted” party and a meeting between them and the students, so don’t worry. Anyway, we won’t be very late.”

“And why this party, now, it’s not the beginning or the end of the year?”

“Because at the end of the year we’ll be busy with exams and after that every one of us goes his own way and we won’t be able to get everyone together, that’s why.”

Her mother did not argue with her for long but she said: “You will need some money, of course.” She took out a certain amount from her wallet, gave it to her daughter adding: “please don’t stay out late, there’s a war going on you know.” Siham took the money and said:

“Thanks. I have to go to do some work now before it’s time to go.”

Siham entered her room but was unable to read her lecture notes, instead, she was drawn to writing:

Every time I come to you I am hungry, and how you hate my hunger. Let us be honest, love is not in the habit of strangling any relationship, so imagine with me: I, as yet, do not know my place nor my actual situation. A friend am I, or a

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resemblance, or an idea from which you devour your masculine speech or your feminine? Am I a mouse for your experiments, and in the end we lose a beautiful project? We did not speak candidly except in relation to the others, but in relation to our predicament there is no frankness. Every time I open the door, you close it. Are you afraid that I will –want more than that and what’s more is not what I deserve, nor what you deserve? Our boundaries end at two seats that do not meet. Do you fear that my madness would leap suddenly and that I would imagine you one of them? No, my friend, desires are not met in this way. I could force my presence sometimes but I cannot force my feelings, and if I have spoken them one day that does not mean that I intend to achieve them in a negative one-sided relationship, for what struck me need not strike others. It is, after all, my problem and there is no need to make participants of others, in my hallucinations, unless these were joint hallucinations. Very often we are attracted to a particular person when we are not on their mind at all, and the reason would not be because we are less than others, or more, and neither does this attraction hinge on beauty or bodily magic, rather the subject hinges on different matters. What attracts us to the other are those projections that we load him with more than he has of them, those old images that we lived or those images that we are searching for, and by way of coincidence they are sometimes epitomized in one particular person.

When she stopped writing she asked herself: “Could this be the image that I’m looking for, or is this the positive version of the image, as opposed to all the negative ones that I lived in the past through my relationships? I don’t know. I won’t deny it. I find no embarrassment in confessing that this is the image that I

dream of being or possessing, but who am I to her? Am I an image that reminds her of something, or an adventure she wants to achieve and whose pros and cons she wants to examine? I don't know.

Part III

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“I don't understand the excuse she used in the past to reject me-- that Nour was an image of her, or that I was performing the same ritual with her. But, at the time I was in a circumstance that I could hardly be envied for. I was in a condition of death. But, motivated by selfishness, she refused to rescue me and she also refused to play any role with me, perhaps because she was not prepared to do this, or because she refuses to play the maternal role. Maybe she refused because of her narcissism, or her fear of failure? At any rate what is this refusal other than the very rejection of her actualizing her femininity? Suppose that I concede that she is the positive aspect of the image, how could that be harmful? Even the drug addict is treated with a substitute medication that is also a drug. I wish she could appreciate my frankness and not accuse me with her idea of compensation, an accusation I can see in her eyes.

“We all live our life searching for the replacement that we have lost. Our whole life is compensation. And the confession is much better than lying. The problem is over as far as I'm concerned, but will it end for her?

“With Nour I lived like a spoiled child, whose mother was prepared to go to any lengths to appease. With her I lived a spoiled-ness that I did not know with my real mother. I knew authority with her, or rather, she permitted me to be in control. I owned her as much as she owned me.” And you wait for me to confront another mother and to dream of another mother?

She emerged from her absent-mindedness. She got dressed, farewelled her mother and departed.

Layal opened the door; Siham was carrying roses as well as some bottles of beer.

“Happy birthday.” She presented the roses to Layal who took them and thanked her for her taste and continued on with several expressions of congeniality,

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while Siham headed towards the lounge room and sat down. When Layal arranged the roses in a vase she found an envelope among them, she opened it and read in a loud voice:

“All the presents, on a day like this, are in a state of nil. All the addresses disappear in the cavity and all the poems cease to have meanings. The hands tremble and fingers fall.

“My friend, unable I am, a poetic cripple I am, as though I never knew language nor ever had an angel knock on my door one day. In moments like these I fight with myself and so I collide with my body. I carry my pillow and my rosary and I ascend to where there is inspiration and salvation, and I see Adam looking for Eve, and the tree mocking them, and two big doors, one made of shells and the other of volcano, and all the religions pass through my mind, all the poems and the prayers, all the cities and countries, and I memorise the names of all people. I read all the modern poetry, I summon the spirits of poets and I ask them, what are the beloveds’ gifts made of? And what did they give to those they loved? They mock me and I walk without my shadow, embarrassed by it, and I close my eyes, and I say that she does not require perfumes, because all the perfumes in the world take their essence from her, and she does not need books as long as philosophers come to her to steal an audience. As for the colours, they steal rainbows from her, and poetry sleeps outside her door, its body like a beggar’s, and the suspended poems fear her. Should I give her the seas, even though I don’t own them? Should I send her the global earth even though I doubt its sphericity?

“Here are my eyes, but do not gouge them, here is the heart, provided that you don’t tear it up, and thought, and genius, provided that you don’t annihilate them, otherwise how can I see whom I love, and for the heart to beat when I love,

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and for genius and hallucinations to clamour in thought, and for poetry to be born, for one being, who knows what poetry is?

“Siham.”

Layal went over to Siham, kissed her and said: “What a beautiful verse! I don’t deserve all that. Let’s sit on the veranda, everything’s ready.”

There was a small table on the veranda with a simple dinner on it.

“You shouldn’t have prepared all this,” Siham said, “we would have had a glass of beer and that would have been the end of it, I don’t care much for food.”

“We drink beer and eat a little, what’s the problem with that? Please, sit down.”

Their sitting did not last long for they heard the sound of explosions at a distance. Siham became frightened and asked: “How will I get back home if things get worse?”

“We’ll see—if the bombing escalates then you should call your mother and stay here, we have a safe shelter in the building.”

“But I can’t, I said to my mother that we are in a restaurant with the teachers. I have to go back quickly.”

The bombing got worse and more violent and walking the streets ceased to be an option, so Layal asked Siham to call her mother and held the receiver to her ear.

“Madam, Siham is at my place, I’m doctor Layal. We have come here to my house because it’s close to the restaurant. Don’t worry one bit, Siham will stay with me until the bombing ends, and rest assured that our building is safe.”

“I beg you not to let her leave! I know how stubborn she is when she decides on something. Will you let me talk to her?”

“Of course,” Layal replied and gave the receiver to Siham.

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“Was your night out so necessary that you had to do it in times like these? Regardless, you stay where you are and don’t leave before talking to me, understood? And what is doctor Layal’s telephone number.”

“...that’s the number, don’t worry I’ll stay here.”

She hung up the telephone and the bombing began to intensify.

“Come on Siham, we’ll go to the shelter.”

“And what if my mother calls?”

“We’ll take the cordless phone receiver with us, but if the electric current goes out then we have no other trick.”

“Won’t you stay here? Your house is safe and is surrounded by tall buildings.”

“No, it isn’t safe. Either way I won’t stay another minute here, come on, come on.”

Once in the shelter they headed for Layal’s car and sat in it. Mimi and her family were in their usual corner. She saw her and Siham pass by them and this aroused great jealousy in her. She found it difficult to leave them be. She knew Siham and for this reason she started to worry about their being together. She forgot what she had said to Layal during her last visit and headed towards them.

“Hello, why are you sitting here?” She asked Layal, ignoring Siham.

“I’m with my friend and we’re doing okay.”



Mimi looked at Siham and shook her head implying that she knew what was going on between them: “Bring her, we’ll sit in the corner, don’t stay here by yourselves.”

“No thanks, take care of your husband and children, we’re comfortable here.”

### Part III

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Nervously, Mimi left them. That’s her girlfriend too. Does she have many women lovers? And if that’s the case why does she reject me? Does she disdain me? But I wouldn’t accept to share her with anyone: she is either all mine, or she can go to hell!

“That’s the neighbour who was with you in Hamra. She’s infatuated with you, I’m never wrong about these things, besides, it’s obvious. Did you turn her down because I’m with you? Do you love her?” Siham asked.

Layal laughed and replied: “She’s simple, I love her as a neighbour, and I pity her at the same time.”

“If you want to go to where she is, I’ll come with you—she’s quite good looking, and exciting.”

“But she’s married and her husband is here with us.”

“No, I prefer that we stay here.”

“As you wish,” Siham said. She was impressed by Layal’s response because she tried to explain it according to her fancies, because to her it seemed that Layal’s irresponsiveness to Mimi’s invitation meant that she preferred to be with her instead. Maybe Layal felt jealous “when I said that Mimi was exciting. The bombing did not last as long as usual, even so it was very late, for when the ceasefire was declared it was around midnight.

“What will I do now?” Siham asked.

“You will sleep here, at my house, call your mother and tell her, she will agree immediately, besides, I won’t let you leave at this time—it’s my responsibility.”

They walked up to the house; Siham wore one of Layal’s pyjamas and entered the room that she was directed into.

“Can I get some papers?”

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Layal brought her a bundle of papers, kissed her and said “goodnight.” Then she left and closed the door behind her.

“My God, this garment has touched Layal’s body.” She ran her fingers over it closely and fell into a kind of depression: Why is hers the city of saffron<sup>42</sup> and mine the city of mint? She is really in the city of saffron, where they leave everything full of tenderness for an unspecified something. My affection for the coincidence that the fragrance leaves behind. My affection for the sound that sleeps during silence at your dinner table, and so you satiate me with nothing. I drink from my cup and I vanish it, I don’t want any participants, it’s all mine, because I possess my intoxication, and I forget the city of mint –whose bitterness I know.

A bridge of some sort ties the two cities together.

I want to end it and I can’t,

I want to end in it but I don’t dare,

and on the way home the memories will strangle me

with their distortions, no,

not as you think, otherwise I would have ended

long ago.

My friend, I find love to be a human monster in my

thoughts.

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For inside every love there is a song or a hymn calling  
for killing.

And the problem, Oh queen of the saffron city,  
is in communicating with my kingdom  
and my boundaries and my madness.

Every time I see your house, my friend,

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it expands until I am lost in my seat  
and the nearby trees come closer from the horizon on  
the veranda.

we eat beneath their branches  
and their shade protects us,  
even from ourselves.

We drank our toast, you were happy and my happiness made me forget to drink,  
the toast immediately. I stopped a little in order to enjoy my wakefulness before  
the coma and in order to ascertain that when I entered your house I also lost the  
dream. And if we lose the dream it does not mean the departure of desires, rather it  
means the extent of reality's expansion in my eyes, and what is happiness but a  
word that we await and a touch we miss and a face we can forget? It appears  
suddenly to remind us of our presence.

And so know? My friend that love cannot be when the  
body is its subject,  
because love is outside the frame of materialisms,  
it is a world onto itself.

Where I am in the city of Mint,  
the women are controlling, deprived,  
they talk sadness to each other

and they consult each, other about the preys.

They leave at night

and they search for the bridge of promise

that ties between the two cities,

but they become hungry on the way

and so they eat each other,

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and so I see the world, small,

and I pray that my world may expand

until there is a flood that erases the two cities.

The children grow under water

and then they come up to the beach looking for a new

bridge,

for the clothes of the cannibalizing women

and for their embraces,

but stalks of dampness is all they can find

and they realize that death,

as in every instance,

has the decision of choice,

and so they start again.

Why can't there be one city,

so they can overcome the water and the fire?

This is how the human discovers the image of women's

being each time that a new city is built—even in the city

of mint.

But where you are in the city of saffron, all creations are sacred, children, they wander with the morning in order to catch butterflies and to build houses from clay, and then shortly the river bank eats these houses and so they rebuild them and then shortly the fire intensifies in the houses and erases them, so they rebuild with firestone and they plant saffron around the houses and in the people, and the city grows with prosperity and fragrance.

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Because my friend, we can't do without the two cities.

One gives us the taste of bitterness while we inhale life  
and the other gives us the taste of life  
while we inhale the taste of bitterness.

Tender I find you, on the inside,  
and you force upon your presence the language of  
carelessness,  
willfully or deliberately as though it were fear,  
as though it were to protect feelings of guilt.

Leave the subject be my friend,  
there is no need for you to fear.

Alone I remain with my sufferings and pursuit of your  
Story.

Perhaps because I am weaker and smaller  
and it should be that everything springs from me:  
the interest and the question and the request and the  
meeting:  
perhaps because I am not suitable for your ambitions  
and there is no business for me in your dreams;  
perhaps because I lack all that you have of charisma;

and perhaps because your city is better and your  
children are prettier  
but it would not injure me if you played the Queen with  
me,  
because I will be one of the shepherds.

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In the morning Siham's question was: "If you have a boyfriend then does it make sense that he's not with you on your birthday?"

"He's in Paris, he called and wished me a happy birthday. We'll meet up soon."

"Why don't you marry then?"

"Maybe we will this summer."

Layal's reply fell on Siham like lightning, she said: "Really? I think my mother is waiting for me. See you later."

Siham did not go home but called her mother from a telephone in one of the shops where she bought a notebook and a pen and headed to a beachside café. She sat alone admiring the sea and writing.

My friend, you know me more than I know myself and here you are today taking from me the solutions of the past and memories of the future. The relationship did not become clearer to you and you did not understand my closeness and my distance and my revolution, or my jealousy, or my loneliness.

All your worries were concentrated on whether I  
craved you or not,  
all so that you could know with which weapons  
to resist  
and which side to support,

despite this I came to you, feeble, empty of all feelings  
except those of pain.

I came to uncover the problem, and I did not come to  
fall into one.

I came to you in the last stages of my life,

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not intending even to carry my coffin,  
because I cannot be strong enough to walk  
whilst carrying my corpse,  
so how is it that I must carry the bodies of the living?

I came to you, dejected, hating men and women.

You are not one of them, and you won't be.

I do not like losing my pains,

because if I did that then I would lose my sufferings  
and they are my happiness and condolences in my  
loneliness,

and you would have ended as we ended after every  
incident.

If the thing had taken place, its defeat would have been  
declared.

We can lie a little to some people,  
but we can't lie a great deal to all people,  
and what applies to one group  
does not apply to all,

and that is what tortures me.

Because after you looked into the details of my private self, you uncovered evidence that made me liable in relation to you. I wrote my emotional tangents and my sexual filth on white papers so that I may increase its filthiness and the vision

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changed after this and the bullets headed towards me and instead of displaying my sexual decorations I began to display one wound after another.

And I fell on my other face, and in front of you only,

I fell contaminated with the smell of women.

I never stood in your way once

And I never ruffled any garment in your lap

And I never sighed before you once

and I never came near you to smell your perfume

or kiss your neck.

And I never imagined you naked once,

And I don't even know the shoe size of your foot,

And I don't intend to know the colour of your body

I love you, that's all, full stop.

No explanations and no meeting and no bodies

suspended on the crosses.

And for this reason you will find an explanation for my jealousy of your boyfriend and, contrary to what you might think, it is not because I want to retain a body whose fate is unknown, but because in "the presence of the other" I will lose the



opportunity to regain my dreams, and I will miss the opportunity to sit in front of you alone, listening to your subconscious while you listen to mine.

I will lose, with his presence, many things. Who will I read to and for whom will I write and to whom will I divulge my secrets? The time has passed my friend, and what consoles me in my loneliness is that I did not become addicted to burying my

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head in your lap and that I have not tried, and what consoles me is that you chose the love that suited you, and did not choose.<sup>43</sup>

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Many days passed without Layal seeing Siham at university and without Mimi knocking on her door. She did not worry about Mimi because if something terrible happened to her then she would have known about it, as for Siham, well, she could not imagine the reason for her absence. Should she call her at home? Should she ask about her at university? “Has she finally accepted my stance? Maybe she has, but if she understands my situation, then what is hers now?”

Layal’s questions did not remain unanswered, because when the civil situation deteriorated after a number of days, which compelled her to go down to the shelter, a new channel of communication was opened between her and Mimi. And what surprised Layal was that Mimi was sitting by herself in the shelter. “They went to the mountain, my husband’s parents missed the children and so he took them there,” Mimi said after Layal asked her why she was by herself.

“And why didn’t you go with them? Didn’t your husband know that matters were going to get worse? Has his informant made an error in his predictions this time?”

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“He doesn’t exactly predict but his friend is now out of the country. Farid insisted that I go with them, but I don’t like his parents. I didn’t tell him that of course; I used the excuse that some things in the house needed doing, and that it was best if I took advantage of the children’s absence to get them done. But where’s your beautiful friend?”

“Which friend?”

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“You pretend you don’t know but it’s obvious: Siham.”

“She’s at home, why do you want her to be with me here?”

Mimi smiled and said: “It’s clear that she’s...”

“Oh, please don’t give in to your wild imaginings!”

“Didn’t she sleep at your house that night?”

“Yes she did, but not like you did: she went into her room and slept until the morning.”

“She is really very pretty and exciting, I like her.”

Layal remembered that Siham had said a similar thing about Mimi the last time they were in the shelter, but she pushed that voice away and asked Mimi: “Where is your friend?”

“She broke her leg and she’s now stretched out on the bed, her niece is looking after her,” Mimi replied laughing, “I’m free from her, even if for a little while. I feel like I’m liberated from every manacle: no husband, no children, no widowed neighbour.” She paused and then asked: “Hasn’t she visited you since that night?”

“I don’t remember, maybe she did.” Layal replied with a kind of seriousness that Mimi thought was indicative of Layal’s discomfort at not having seen Siham for a while.

“Siham, a beautiful name, and what does your friend do?”

“She’s a university student.”

“I would have liked to go to university. I would have been able to meet up with whomever I liked. Siham is really lucky, she gets to study and befriend the doctors and...”

Mimi did not complete her sentence and Layal did not comment. They remained quiet until a rocket launcher’s load fell in very close proximity to the

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building and the screaming escalated from all directions and the children began to cry and everyone ran to the corner where Mimi and Layal were. They were in a state of terror, repeating generic implorations, calling out to God to help them, to stop this madness. A second rocket fell and shut everyone up for a moment, which was followed by the various sounds of calling on God and the holy men and the saints to rescue them from their hell.

The cordless telephone, which was with Mimi, rang.

“Mimi where are you? I heard on the news that the bombing is very near our suburb.”

“I’m in the shelter, the bombing is very close to us, don’t you worry I’m fine.”

“I asked you to come with us but you’re stubborn. Put up with it, I won’t say more, but please stay in the shelter. Are the neighbours with you?”

“And where do you want them to be? They’re all here and Layal is here too and you know how scared the poor thing gets.”

“Then stay with her, she definitely won’t leave the shelter, even if everyone else does.”

“Okay, okay, see you later.”

It was truly one of the most violent nights of the Beirut war, but it calmed shortly after midnight and the terrifying quiet prevailed, and people began to ascend to their houses in order to discover what the bombing had destroyed.

“Should we go up?” Mimi asked.

“We’ll wait a while to see.”

“Either way we’ll stay together, either at your place or mine.” “It doesn’t matter.” Layal replied; fear had paralysed her, “but I prefer if we go to my house.”

“As you wish, it makes no difference to me.”

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And finally they left the shelter and went to Layal’s apartment. On the way, they paid Mimi’s house a visit and were reassured that it was undamaged, Layal’s house was also undamaged, because shattered glass wasn’t something you counted amongst your losses in wars such as these. They gathered the glass quickly and entered—every one of them to a room where they slept until the morning and awoke to the sound of the telephone ringing.

“I didn’t sleep last night. Are you okay?”

“Siham, I’m fine and you?”

“Thanks be to God.”

“Where have you been all this time? And why haven’t I heard from you or seen you at university?”

“I was a little indisposed but I have many things to tell you, will I see you today?”

“Absolutely.”

“I’m coming over, I’ll see you before it’s time for my classes.”

Mimi heard what Layal said and got up quickly, farewelled her and returned to her house. She prepared herself and went out to the veranda waiting for Siham's arrival. When she saw her, she entered the kitchen, made coffee and went back up to Layal's house.

"I made you coffee, should I come in?"

"Thanks, but..."

"Take the coffee then, drink it with your friend and I'll see you later."

Layal panicked a little and then said: "No, no, please, come in."

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Mimi was waiting for that. She entered, placed the tray on the table, greeted Siham and then poured the coffee in the cups that Layal brought and they sat eating Oregano wraps that Siham brought and drinking Mimi's coffee until the sitting (where only remarks surrounding the night before were exchanged) ended with a knock on the door that heralded the arrival of Mimi's husband.

"Thank God you're okay. Come on sweetheart, I left the children at their grandfather's house and I've come to take you with me, there's a good chance the fighting will continue. Layal, you can come with us if you want."

"No thanks, I'll stay here."

"How she reminds me of Claire," Siham said when Mimi left with her husband. "She looks a lot like her; her moves and gestures and her smiles. I don't know what's happened to Claire and who she's living with now."

"Is it true that you were sick?"

"No, but I lived an intense period, I went through a lot of relationships. I wanted to get you out of me. They were passing relationships that ended quickly."

"Siham, I told you from the beginning about the boundaries of our relationship and I wanted only to help you, but if that hurts you then it's better if..."

“Don’t say it. It’s only a matter of weeks before we separate completely,” Siham began to speak as though she was reciting from her own writing, “and this will be a trip for you and me, and you’ll find in it what you want and I lose with it what I want. And with your departure I’ll discover that understanding other people’s feelings is much better than feelings of love towards others. I’ll remain solitary, as I was before our first conversation and meeting. You changed a lot of things in me, you reminded me of feelings I was trying to forget, and of a pain I hid within. I did not speak to the others about my suffering because it is a private

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diligence. I spoke it with you and I suffered with you and I saw my miserable face. Even I did not dare to see what was inside me, but you made me see it. And how miserable I am! And I can bear it for no other reason than wanting to remain between fantasy and reality.”

“What are you saying, Siham? You are a beautiful and intelligent young woman and you have everything you need to be happy, there are many people who would love to share life with you, so there is no reason for all this sadness and bitterness.”

“My sadness will begin at the same time that you forget,” continued Siham, seized by a spontaneous poetic speech. “I am not a child, but my miseries are more intense than children’s wounds. I no longer know what I want but I realize that I am the living dead. The days are alike and the events are slow and disgusting. I see women looking alike, they have the same hands and the same fragrances and the same bodies but somehow I am different. Sometimes I see them as I have done during this time, but they become predatory beasts when they are done with their prey, so much so, that they distribute its pieces to the vultures. Woman is greater devastation than cancer, on the basis that the latter is an illness, for which a cure

will be discovered one day, but who dares to discover the cure for being rid of the virus of woman?"

Layal no longer knew how to reply to Siham and her tangents, but in face of her overwhelming melancholy she tried to give her hope and to present things very simply to her.

"Siham,<sup>44</sup> don't make a big deal of things. Life doesn't deserve to be lived with all this seriousness, take every day as it comes, try not to suffer.

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If you're gay then accept yourself as you are. There's no better cure for this than love in this situation. Search for it wherever it is, with a woman or a man, don't care about the details, the important thing is for you to live your life without regrets or apologies."

"I'm not sorry about the past, but I am sorry for a spirit I placed in cheap embraces, a spirit I filled with dreams and hope, a spirit left with nightmares without expectations."

"I don't want to hear any more of this, you're stronger than this."

Siham was quiet for a little while and then said: "Do you know that Mimi reminds me of a period in my life where I lived without all this inner turmoil? I was in an environment that accepted me. With Claire I felt no guilt."

Layal knew that Siham had also gained Mimi's admiration, and wondered whether she should facilitate a meeting between them. Mimi is selfish, I won't throw Siham in a second relationship in order to detach her from me. No, I won't do that, let things happen by themselves, I won't try anything. Layal was also torn between what she was thinking of really, and what society does and what governs in the visible world.

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“I’m back” Mimi said when Layal opened the door. “My husband went to get some groceries and when he is finished, he’s coming back to pick me up so we can go together to his father’s house. Is Siham here?” She entered without an invitation from Layal.

Mimi was at her most elegant and beautiful, wearing tight clothes that showcased the contours of her slim body. Her hair flowed over her shoulders and she had it ornamented with a multi-coloured butterfly that suited the colours of her dress. Siham looked at her and smiled and was unable to hide her admiration: “You look beautiful, Mimi.”

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“You really think so? And you too are beautiful, and without being made up, I like that. Women who wear a lot of make-up don’t get my attention if you know what I mean. I prefer women who look like you. When the woman dresses up and decorates herself she arouses my jealousy not my admiration, I don’t know why.”

“That’s because you’re pure on the inside and you don’t like masks,” Siham replied.

“I don’t know what I am on the inside and I don’t try to find out. I live things as they come. I never regret anything I do that way, and I don’t judge myself. Other people are always in the wrong, not me.”

“I envy you your situation. I wish that I was like you.”

Suddenly the ringing of an explosion shook the entire capital and they heard the sound of shattering glass, and Layal ran to the radio looking for a station that would broadcast the news: “A car explosion in \_\_\_ . The streets were brimming with people and the number of dead and wounded exceeds one hundred.”

“My God that was very close, it’s certain to be in the suburb.”

Mimi’s telephone rang and she asked: “Where are you? Stay where you are, I’m fine and I’ll do something about this.” She hung up the telephone and said:



“That was my husband. He says that something is about to happen, he says that there are armed men everywhere all of a sudden.”

“Where is he?” Layal asked.

“He’s at his friend’s house, not far from here, he will stay at his place until things cool down. He told me to go to the shelter as soon as possible.” Mimi’s telephone rang again.

“I’m well and you? How is your leg? No, I’m alone. My husband is at his friend’s. Don’t be afraid, look after yourself, see you later.”

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Layal smiled as Mimi said to her: “You know who that was, she just doesn’t get it. She’ll keep on chasing me and nothing will stop her, not even a broken leg.” She looked at Siham and handed her the telephone: “Call your mother.”

“I’m at my friend’s house, don’t be afraid I won’t leave before...Why the screaming? I left! End of story! I won’t be late. I’ll come back if that’s possible. The telephone number?” She recounted Layal’s telephone number without thinking. “I came with my friend to visit her because she’s sick. Here, talk to my friend Mimi, why are you like that?”

Mimi took the receiver from Siham’s hand and with an intelligent light heartedness she said: “Hello madam, I’m Mimi. Don’t be afraid, Siham is with us here. We were paying doctor Layal a short visit and we’ll try to get back home as soon, as possible. But, you see, the explosion wasn’t very far from here and we have to wait a little before we can leave.” When she hung up the telephone she said: “Your mother is harsh, like my mother, why does she get so anxious like that? I mean it’s not like anyone could have foretold this was going to happen.”

“She panicked when she found out that I was with doctor Layal.”

“And why is that?” Mimi asked and smiled as she looked at Layal.

“Perhaps she thought this would be a bother to me. I know how mothers think.”

Before Layal could finish her sentence Mimi exploded in laughter and drew closer to Siham, surrounded her with her arms and kissed her, saying: “This time you’re at my place and not at doctor Layal’s.”

The sound of bullet sprays and the blare of ambulance sirens began to fill the air while the radio broadcast announced: the dead and wounded in the tens, and this is what made Mimi’s remark pass without commentary. But Siham, who was surprised by Mimi’s behavior, remained rigid, analyzing what Mimi was possibly

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thinking. Was she trying to make Layal jealous? Does she like me the way I like her? This is how Claire used to behave, but Mimi possesses a different kind of femininity, she lives her femininity with great comfort, contrary to Layal who hides this femininity behind a harsh mask, even though she certainly possesses it.

After a short time the gunfire ceased, the ambulance sirens became less frequent and the radio stations declared that the city had now gathered its wounded and that peace prevailed. Mimi’s husband came and reassured Siham that she could leave.

“We’ll take her to her house,” Mimi said but her husband did not answer.

“No thanks, I’ll go alone.”

“Call us when you arrive or I’ll call, what is your telephone number?”

“There’s no need for that.”

“It will make your mother feel better if I do.”

Siham gave her telephone number to Mimi, said goodbye and left.

“I don’t like these visits to doctor Layal, is she really your teacher at university or is she a friend like the one you had in Paris?”

“Mother! The story ended a long time ago.”

The telephone rang. It was Mimi.

“Has Siham arrived?”

“She’s here, she arrived safely, thanks sweetheart.”

“We left together from doctor Layal’s and I wanted to be sure she got home okay. Can I please talk to her?”

“I got here in one piece.”

“I’ll call you next week and we’ll meet up.”

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Siham was not able to decline or accept this invitation because her mother was standing next to her and so she said: “Until next week then, I’ll see you in class.”

In the beginning of the following week Mimi was at the university looking for Siham, she found, her and they sat in the café and they spoke for a long time about their condition and about Layal. Both of them found something of Layal in the other: Mimi was impressed by the strength of Siham’s personality and with her apparent masculinity and Siham was impressed by Mimi’s softness and her apparent femininity.

In this way they began to meet regularly and during the end-of-year exams Layal saw them but she pretended not to, but in the evening when Siham spoke to her, she confessed: “We’re together now.”

“Very good, the important thing is that the person acts according to the truth of himself, wherever he is.”

“The year is nearly over, when are you going abroad?”

“On the first day of the holiday.”

“I wish you every success.”

The scholastic year ended and the summer break began and Layal prepared herself for travel. On the evening of her departure, she went over to Mimi's house to say goodbye. "I'm leaving for France tomorrow, can I ask a favour of you?"

"Of course. What do you want?"

"I'll give you the key to my house, I don't want anything in particular from you. But if there's an emergency or if a fire starts in the apartment you will at least

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have access to the apartment and there won't be a need to smash the door down. Is that okay?"

"Sure, sure," Mimi said as she took the key from Layal.

"And now, goodbye." She drew close to her and kissed her and there was nothing left for Mimi to say except: "Good luck, I envy your boyfriend for having you. Lucky guy."

Layal did not reply but walked away and went back to her apartment. She found Siham standing in front of the door to her house, she was carrying a present in her hand. When she opened the package she found an ashtray and a closed envelope:

"What is this fine taste and what's the present for?" Layal said as she admired the ashtray.

"I beg that you take it with you in your travels, this way every time you smoke a cigarette you will remember me, and I know how often you smoke. As for the letter read it on the plane."

Layal laughed and promised Siham that she would take the ashtray with her and that she would open the letter after take off and then continued: “How are things with Mimi?”

“She’s very nice and she understands my inclinations very well, but even if I try to be frank with her, as I am with you, I imagine that she won’t be able to understand me. I imagine that even if she understood the internal emptiness that possesses me.. I imagine myself saying to her. “I don’t want to see you or to see any other creature today,” but she understands only the first part and pays no attention to the second part. But she’s sweet and bears the labour of getting to university, so it’s my duty to wait. Will you stay in Paris for the entire holidays?”

1 times until the t, I don’t know, either way I’ll call you when I get back.”

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“What is your telephone number in Paris?”

Layal gave her her telephone number, so she kissed her and left in utter silence.

Layal packed her things after placing the ashtray on the desk in her bedroom and left the following day, leaving Siham and Mimi to complete the story on their own. On the plane she opened Siham’s final letter:

How long will I wait for? After your departure I talk to walls and to the photographs and I read what I write to you a hundred times until the time passes quickly without any stops. I will talk to you every day with words I used to say to you and with words I said to you once, and I will call for you in my own way, and in secret you will come without a plane.

We sit in a deserted café, we drink two cups of refreshing breeze, we listen to the sound of the night, we talk and talk until the sun comes out of its chamber, yawning, and so I permit you to leave after you promise me another visit. And sometimes I will call you on your home phone in Beirut and allow it to ring in the

receiver, but it won't ring in my ear because I will hear your voice and your laughter. I will talk to the receiver for a long time, I'll talk like we used to and you won't answer except summarily because he is with you, and I will understand then that I am an important person and special, and talk with me must remain privileged and unannounced. Leave my friend, should I, with your departure, understand that loneliness and confinement are the closest way to knowing the self.

Layal folded the pages and said to herself: "It's good that I'm getting away from her, this trip was essential, maybe it will help Siham overcome her fantasies and feelings for me."

On the same day Mimi called Siham. "I hope she comes back safely to you."

"You too."

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"Where will we meet now that the university is closed, will you come to my house? Actually, what's the point, the children are in the house, but hold on, I'll come up with something, see you later."

When Farid came home Mimi received him warmly and after dinner she started a conversation about the children's holiday plans. She suggested that some time away at their grandfather's house would be good for their health. When Farid was convinced that this was a good idea, she said: "Take them there tomorrow. I'll surprise them at the end of the week, after I've had some time to get all the things they'll need up there together."

"And you want me to stay up there by myself? Or are you saying I should make the trip from the village to Beirut every day?"

"No, we'll stay here for the week and then we can go to the mountain together on the weekend."

"That's good. I'll take the kids over there tomorrow. They'll be very happy with them over there."

“Of course, but they will spend some time with your parents and some time with mine this time.”

“As you wish.”

The following day, when Mimi’s husband returned from work, he found everything ready for him to leave with, the children. He had lunch with his wife and said goodbye. She suggested that he stay at the village for the night and come back in the morning.

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They left and Mimi headed for the cupboard where she put the key to Layal’s house, she took it and called Siham.

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“I’m waiting for you.”

“Where?”

“Where you used to come—Layal’s house.”

“How? Hasn’t she left?”

“Yes, but she gave me the key to her house before leaving.”

“That’s inappropriate, no, no.”

“I’ll be at her house at five o’clock. I’ll be waiting for you.”

In Layal’s house? Is she crazy? I won’t go, she can wait all she wants. And Mimi, who sensed Siham’s reluctance and refusal, rang her at five o’clock precisely from Layal’s house:

“I’m waiting for you, don’t behave like a child, come. Is your mother home?”

“No, she’s not the reason.”

“Then come. I’m waiting for you.”

Siham was, despite her reluctance, longing for Mimi’s body, and without prolonged thinking she found herself putting on her clothes quickly and leaving the

house. Before she arrived she bought a bouquet of roses and carried it as she had once carried another like it to Layal on her birthday. She knocked on the door and when it opened Layal was in front of her and so she surrounded her with her arms and kissed her with great longing: “I brought some alcohol, we’ll sit on the balcony.” Mimi surrounded Siham’s waist with her arms and they went out on the balcony and began to drink. When the sun set, the sound of some distant explosions was heard and so they went inside. The alcohol had begun to take its effect on them, they embraced and the eroticism began to eat their bodies.

“Come to bed.” Mimi said as she headed towards Layal’s bedroom. They entered it and Siham saw the ashtray she had given Layal sitting on the desk. She lost her mind: “She didn’t take it with her! I’ll show her!”

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They threw themselves on the bed, which was still saturated with Layal’s fragrance. They took their clothes off and the bed transformed into a naked body between them, into Layal’s body, who, on her birthday, when Siham had to sleep at her house, took her by the hand and said to her: “You’ll sleep next to me on the bed.” And after their intercourse Layal felt an orgasm that she had never tasted before.

“What is this splendor?” Mimi said, “Where did you get all this experience from?”

“Be quiet, I don’t want to hear your voice, just let me feel my exhilaration through yours.”

She drank the white wine with her and she wore the transparent dress and they went up together to Layal’s house, who invited her to sleep at her house because her husband was away. “I won’t let you sleep by yourself,” Layal said, I’m going to make you very happy. I know what makes you happy.” She began to stroke Mimi’s body through her dress, in a manner which was very conducive to



her objective, and she too responded and played with Layal's body in the same manner, until they orgasmed and satiated their inflamed bodies.

They stretched out on the bed, Siham took Mimi's hand and said: "She was wonderful, wasn't she?"

"Who do you mean?"

"Layal."

"How did you know?"<sup>45</sup>

## NOTES AND EXERCISES

1. The "secret habit" is a common Arabic euphemism for masturbation.
  2. \* What might be the metaphorical significance of the novel opening with people emerging from their hiding places?  
\*\* What is the connection, if any, between the depiction of civilians living under conditions of civil war and the organization of social relations within the exclusive institution of heterosexual marriage?  
\*\*\* Comment on the use of narrative voice. To what extent is the third person narrator a reliable source of information? To what extent is Siham's direct speech "her own" and to what extent can we see it as representative of the female homosexual subject in this novel?
  3. \* What is the significance of these events taking place in Paris?  
\*\*What are the cultural and social differences between the French way of life that Claire represents and the Lebanese way of life as represented by Siham's mother? For example, between the individual and the community, parents and children, men and women, reactions to sexuality and personal liberties etc.
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\*\*\*Why does Claire react so harshly against Siham's unwillingness to confront her mother?

4. The name "Layal" appears here in the original, the author asserts that this is a misprint.
5. \*Why does Siham choose to obey her mother and not rebel?

\*\*Do you agree with Siham or Claire's actions more? Why do you think coming out is seen as an imperative part of Gay and Lesbian civil liberties movements? Consider the Stonewall riots of 1969 in your answer.

\*\*\*Conduct a small research task and make note of the various Middle Eastern/Arab GLBTIQ websites available online. Take note of the country of origin for each website. Are there websites based in Arab countries? What sort of content do

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these websites provide? How much do forum and blog participants reveal about themselves and who they are? Write a report on your findings.

6. Analyse the significance of the symbols Siham uses in the above piece of poetic prose. Does the piece contain an unusually orientalist quality or is it evidence of an authentic Arabic voice?
7. Explain what Layal means by "transference?" To which psycho-analyst(s) does this term belong and what are the mechanisms of this concept?
8. Ravaged by civil war, the Lebanese civil infrastructure practically collapsed. Water, electricity and basic food ingredients such as flour became scarce and tightly regulated. Homes were cut off from alternate current electricity for days on end, but were usually given erratic rations of electrical currents, these were unpredictable and would cut out as suddenly as they appeared. With the electricity being out, the elevator ceases to be an option.
9. \*Perform a close reading of Mimi's internal monologue. What are the issues raised in regards to women's sexual relations with men in this context? What does this tell us about the prevailing societal attitudes towards sexuality? How might this

heterosexual conservatism help account for the homophobia that is prevalent in the Arab world?

\*\*What is the relationship between Islamic feminist theories and what Mimi discusses above in regards to female sexuality and its connection to patriarchy? Theorists to consider include Fatma Mernissi (aka Fatna A. Sabbah) and Nawal Sadawi, among others.

10. \*What is the difference between gender and biological sex? Consider Mimi's above statements regarding Layal's manliness in relation to queer theory and post structural considerations of gender.

\*\*Mimi continues to exhibit and participate in a traditional and patriarchal mode of gender dichotomy. Describe what this is and why you think this is the case. Consider cultural, religious and social factors in your answer.

#### Notes and Exercise

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11. Consider the above discussion regarding Layal's "manliness" in relation to Fatna A Sabbah's "Ominisexual Woman" in *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*. Relate this to the previous discussion of gender dichotomies and conflation of gender with biological sex.

12. Why do you think Farid is so unsuspecting? How might this lack of awareness, ironically, facilitate homosexual relationships? How does it hinder them?

13. \*Consider Layal's advice to Siham in relation to Adrienne Rich's famous article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."

\*\*Understanding the difficulty of "being oneself" in such a social and cultural milieu, and keeping this in mind, do you think Layal's advice is sound? What are its advantages and disadvantages?

14. Sutra is protection from scandal and hearsay.

15. Comment on the exchange between the "old hag" and Layal regarding marriage as a form of protection for women. Consider both the traditional views as well as twentieth century feminist views/responses in your answer.

16. Here Siham is referring to the French Philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and his work *Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion* (1932) Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1948. An e-book version of the abovementioned edition is available for download from Les Classiques des Sciences Sociales [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/bergson\\_henri/bergson\\_henri.html](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/bergson_henri/bergson_henri.html). See page 11 where Bergson writes: “Il (le criminel) se reintégrerait dans la société en confessant son crime...”

17. Eyes, intoxicants, Phoenician seashells, lips, vessel of time, narcissist kingdom, nostalgia, insomnia, memories, heart, glass, infidel, miracle, love. Analyse the use of symbols in this poem. How do you think they contribute to the overall mood or ambience of the poem? You are able to perform a close reading of the symbology used in Siham’s poetry throughout the novel. How does the use of symbols help reflect her moods and circumstances? What are the possible intertextual meanings

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of some of these symbols? Back up your answer with evidence and sound argumentation.

18. Make a list of the primary symbols in this poem. What are their possible meanings?

19. What, at this stage, do you imagine Siham’s “problem” with her father to be? Do you think this could verily be the cause of Siham’s “deviation”? Why or why not?

20. Read Freud’s work on the “unconscious” and comment briefly on how his work in this area supports Layal’s statement above. Would Siham’s “deviant” behavior be evidence of a neurosis then? Do you agree or disagree with this possible diagnosis.

21. Why is Siham’s second revelation (regarding early childhood desires for “women”) incongruent with the initial diagnosis that Layal comes up with? What kind of model of sexuality and sexual orientation does the novel suggest, that would be in keeping with what Siham observes about herself? In your answer you might want to consider constructivist and essentialist theories regarding sexual orientation. You might want to read Edward Stein’s works in *Forms of Desire*

and/or David Halperin's early work *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (N. B. the main thesis of Halperin's books was revised in his introduction to *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*).

22. What do you think of Layal's advice to Siham? Consider your answer in relation to Adrienne Rich's 1980 article "Compulsory Heterosexuality..."
23. Comment on the brief exchange between the "old hag" and Farid. Discuss this in relation to the homo-social and the homosexual. You might like to consider the main thesis of Eve K. Sedgwick's book 'Between Men'.
24. Compare the claims that Mimi makes regarding marriage, child-bearing and gender roles in the Arab world. How do these differ from more liberal Western cultures? How are they similar to conservative or traditional cultures in the West? Provide evidence in your answer (you may consider non-contemporary Western cultures as well as contemporary ones in your answer).

#### Notes and Exercises

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25. In what way does this revelation undermine Siham's previous allusion to the incident with her father? What do you think her motivation was for "fabricating" the severity or possibly the actuality of the incident? How does Mansour undermine discourses which attribute homosexuality to childhood traumatic experience and what effect does giving the traditional reader what they expect (regarding homosexuality) and then retracting it at a later point have on misconceptions regarding homosexuality?
26. What is the significance of "and if knowledge knew that you were to become pregnant with it, then it would have shriven itself from fornication"? To which external text or story is this obscure statement referring?
27. Discuss Layal's internal monologue in relation to the concept of the open secret (discussed by Eve Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet*) and comment on the juxtaposition of "many illnesses" with the "dark labyrinths [of which] lesbianism is" one. How does Layal both subvert and cooperate with traditional discourses on homosexuality?

28. What do you make of these peculiar and homoerotic exchanges between Mimi and Layal? And what is Layal trying to suppress? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
29. Discuss how Layal's discussion of "man's role" and "woman's role" is both progressive and conservative at the same time? What is the narrative trying to do in order to contest prevalent homophobic attitudes toward female homosexual relations? How is this point in the narrative unwittingly exclusive of certain lesbian identities such as those of the stone butch and the butch-femme dyad, or such sexual orientations of "exclusive tops" or "exclusive bottoms." Do you think the transposition of the various identities and configurations (of sexual preference) from one culture onto another is appropriate or inappropriate in this context?
30. What if she does not "often [desire] to do with me what I do with her now," does that make one character the "man" and the other the "woman"? Discuss this in

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relation to the patriarchal paradigm in which male=active=male and female=passive=feminine to the exclusion of all other configurations.

31. Give full publication details of an essay on Sappho written by Marguerite Yourcenar. You may like to conduct a review of Sappho's poetry that has been translated into English and write a close analytical comparison of certain of her poems with selections from Siham's poetry.
32. Using "Why are they like that" until "so what's the problem?" as an epitaph, address the final question of this section.
33. Discuss the above exchange regarding naming children in relation to Julia Kristeva's edict "in the name of the Father, the Son...and the Woman?"
34. Find the correspondence between Freud and Fleiss to which Layal is referring and after reading it summarise the main arguments. Does the novel interact with these ideas in any way? Does it uphold or negate them?
35. Although it is possible to read the above discussion in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis regarding lack, Layal indicates that her discussion is powered by

“Greek Philosophy.” Plato’s Symposium on love, particularly the sayings of Aristophanes, discuss the mythology that humans were originally eight limbed creatures who were bisected by Zeus. One searches for his/her other half which could be either male or female, depending on whether the eight-limbed creature was all male, all female or hermaphroditic. Discuss Layal’s assertions in relation to this metaphor.

36. \*Surely the above description of male-female power dynamics is a generalization and is not true in relation to every sexual relationship between a man and a woman in the Arab world. Nevertheless, the problem Siham raises is quite real. Research the political writings of Nawal Sadawi in relation to “women and sex” and “men and sex,” and verify the context of Siham’s speech. Conduct general research on the treatment of women in the third world in general. Can you find “physical”

#### Notes and Exercises

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evidence of how women are treated as sexual objects who are not entitled to receiving sexual pleasure?

\*\*Conduct some research into 1950s-1970s US feminist literature concerned with women’s sexualities. Do you see any similarities between that context and the one Siham is discussing in relation to the Arab world? Why do you think this is so?

37. Siham’s rhetoric in defence of homosexual relations and her philosophical inclinations toward universalizing the act of love actually very important in the cultural and historical context of this novel. Discuss the importance of this rhetoric as a strategy to combat homophobia. Discuss its limitations.
38. Write an essay on love, narcissism, object choice, identification and attachment in psychoanalysis in relation to Siham’s argument that ultimately love of the Other begins with the love of one self. In your answer consider Siham’s assertion regarding homosexuality as attaining a “deeper, purer” love than hetero-sexuality.
39. Siham is here discussing a constructionist view of sexuality as opposed to an essentialist one, undermining the novel’s earlier suggestions of “genetic”

involvement in sexual orientation. Siham is also proposing that more women in the Arab world become “gay” precisely because there is a rift between men and women in the sexual realm. What does this suggest about certain “Arab homosexualities” that are characteristically different from the prevalent Western understanding of lesbian identities? However, can Siham’s sexual orientation be fully situated within this “indigenous schema of why there are female homosexuals in the Middle East (namely some men’s inability to pleasure women)?

40. What are the problematic of the above statement for a Western, queer culture? Consider the post-gay (post-label) movement in your answer.
41. Consider how Siham’s peculiar statements can be truthful within her specific cultural context and even within a western cultural framework from earlier decades and centuries.

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42. Medieval Arabic literature discussing female homoeroticism frequently referred to female homosexual activity with, the euphemism of the grinding of saffron. This is mentioned on more than one occasion in Ahmad Ibn Yusuf al-Tifashis (d.1253) *Nuzhat al-Albab Fima La Yujad fi Kitab* Trans. Jamal Jomaa (Beirut and London: Riad el Rayess, 1992), 235-247. Saffron strands have an appearance reminiscent of pubic hair and the grinding of saffron is then a euphemism for the grinding of women’s pubic region.
43. From the context of the story what do you think the cities of Mint and Saffron represent respectively?
44. The name “Layal” appears here in the original, apparently said to be a misprint, although this “error” and the previous one like it both give way to reading Layal’s sexuality in a completely different light.
45. \*Discuss the ending of the novel in relation to Siham’s discussion of love as ultimately “narcissistic” and in relation to Freud’s remarks regarding “object choice.” Do you agree or disagree with Siham’s assertions that we love others for



what we (want to) see in them as opposed to traits that they may inherently possess for themselves?

\*\*How does the final scene of the novel attempt to demonstrate “the truth” of the concept that love is ultimately narcissistic? You may be able to refer to Layal’s earlier discussions with Raya regarding Greek philosophy of “the Like [realizing] only the Like.”

\*\*\*What are the cultural codes and values inscribed in the novel in relation to marriage, gender and sexuality?

\*\*\*\*Write a comparison between the society described in this novel and the 1950s Western attitudes towards chastity, marriage and sexuality. Use the Todd Haynes film *Far from heaven* (2002) as a comparison text.

\*\*\*\*\*Consider the novel’s ideas and rhetoric regarding homosexuality in context of its cultural and social milieu. Appraise the value and significance of this rhetoric, exploring both its ingenuity and potential limitations.



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