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BLUE WHITE GREEN

by

Kayla Seo Peifer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts degree in Comparative Literature-Translation
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

December 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Russell Valentino

Graduate College
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Kayla Seo Peifer

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Comparative Literature-Translation at the December 2011 graduation.

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Russell Valentino, Thesis Supervisor

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Michel Laronde

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Sabine Gölz

To Djilali, who has journeyed all this way with me

"Suppose that life is represented by a sort of movement, that it comes from a place and time where we're born until the day we die. The sun of a life rises on a certain point on the horizon, spreading gentle rays and forming the gentle days of infancy. The great day of sensations, desires, knowledge, affection, and thoughts is coming. The light shines onto it. Stars reach their highest point along their courses and then fall and disappear. Man is a sort of ephemeral being, who will never again see that day."

Paul Valéry, *Mon Faust*

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INTRODUCTION

One of Algeria's most prominent authors, Samia Benameur, also known by her pen name Maïssa Bey, was born in 1950 in Ksar el Boukart in Algeria, hills not far from Algiers ("African" n.pag.). She studied at Algiers and later went on to teach French in the west of Algeria. At that time, many Algerians were fleeing the country; those who stayed found themselves in the middle of a dark time that would come to be known as the "black decade." The current "national harmony" laws principally serve to simply ignore the crimes of the 1990s. The media is forbidden to discuss these events, and those who have attempted have been threatened, beaten, or even killed (Sabra n.pag.).

She has claimed that writing is her refuge, where she is able to express her thoughts to the world. She has been obliged to live somewhat anonymously, fearful of the massacres that play such a large role in Algeria's history. Bey's father was tortured and executed in 1957, when Bey was only six, and the trauma of the event would later shape her works. By no means, however, does she shy away from speaking her mind. She strongly advocates speaking out in a world that is still very much bound by silence. Much of her work criticizes the male-dominated Muslim society and gives a voice to its women ("Maissa Bey (2)" n.pag.). She is the founder and current president of the cultural association "Paroles et écritures," founded in 2000. She is also co-founder of the Chèvre-feuille étoilée. Her works have won several awards, including the 1998 Grand Prix of the Société des gens de lettres (*Nouvelles d'Algérie*), the Prix Marguerite Audoux (*Cette fille-là*), *Surtout ne te retourne pas* (Prix Cybèle 2005), *Pierre, Sang, Papier ou Cendre* (Grand Prix du roman francophone SILA 2008), and *Puisque mon coeur est mort*

(Prix de l'Afrique Méditerranée/Maghreb 2010). Besides her novels, she also writes poetry, news articles, and reviews ("Maissa Bey (1)" n.pag.).

Bey almost always sets her focus around a young girl or woman, though these stories also deal extensively with various aspects of post-colonial Algerian life and Algeria's history as a colony, including fundamentalist violence, a male hierarchy and women's silence, and the post-war generation (Sabra n.pag.).

Colonization is probably the strongest influence on twentieth-century Algerian literature. The struggle between cultures is a prominent theme in many of Algeria's more famous works. Among Bey's contemporaries is the famous author Assia Djebar, along with some of the best-known male authors Kateb Yacine and Mohamed Dib. Bey grew up in a rich period of Algeria's literary history, when many of these authors had just started publishing. Also active at that time was Albert Camus, possibly Algeria's most famous writer. Although Bey did not begin publishing until the 1990s, her work shows inspiration from her forerunners as well as her own life.

One aspect that makes Bey's work stand out is her focus on the voiceless in the country. While she also tackles difficult political, social, and moral issues, she inspects them through the lens of silence. Instead of merely setting an Algerian girl in a society still dominated by French ideals and teachings, Bey analyzes the way this French lifestyle has affected her character's ability to express her opinion. In many ways, the two protagonists of *Bleu blanc vert* have even less freedom and certainty of their place than an Algerian child growing up under French rule. In that case, Algerians, although they are in a constant struggle against it, know their places, at least in the eyes of the French. Their fight for independence comes from this knowledge. Now that they are free of

colonial rule, although they can reassure themselves of their complete Algerian identity now, the effects of the time under the French remain. Children have been educated in schools with French teachers, French has become an important language in the culture, to the point that it filters into their Arabic, giving them a French accent. This mixture of languages is another topic novels deal with, if more indirectly. Works are published in both French and Arabic; in many cases, the language is significant. For some, it is merely a case of which language they are most comfortable with—as with Mohamed Dib, who wrote in French purely because he had been educated in a French school in a French colony. However, this too is a sign of the depth and breadth of the impact colonization had on Algerian culture. In fact, some authors and critics feel that writing in French is just another show of Algeria's oppression. Although she writes her novels in French, Bey describes herself as being Arabic by birth, culture, and language.

Bey published her first novel, *Au commencement était la mer*, in 1996. It focuses on a young girl living in a very strict, even radical Muslim society, where following her own desires only leads to persecution. It was met with immediate critical success in France.

In *Puisque mon coeur est mort*, a woman writes letters to her dead son, telling him how others insist that she move on and stop grieving, as is the standard philosophy regarding the events from the "black decade." The novel, published in 2010, created some controversy with its message of remembrance.

Bleu blanc vert (2007), spans several decades, beginning in 1962 after the Algerian Independence, and ending in 1992. The main story is about the romance between a girl and boy, and eventually their marriage and life together through the years.

The true focus of the novel, however, is the social situation in Algeria as it progresses through the years, how Algerians viewed and reacted to their freedom from France. The novel opens with an anecdote from the male narrator, detailing a time in school where the teachers forbade their students from using red pen. On blue and white paper, they said, that would make the colors of the French flag. Instead, he decides to mix the colors around, so that he is writing in blue on white and red paper. Although the teachers have only specified that students cannot write in blue pen, he sees this as a viable solution and does not understand their anger. Throughout, there is the constant push-and-pull feeling of the old and new ways clashing, the pre-war and post-war Algeria. Bey emphasizes the importance of tradition to parents, especially mothers, describing in detail many of the rituals performed for various ceremonies, such as marriage; it also contrasts the way the older generation of women behave as opposed to the younger. Women wait outside in pens for their husbands to return, waiting on their needs. In the absence of a husband, women will transfer that loyalty onto the eldest son; autonomy is not an option for them. On the other hand, the young male protagonist, named Ali, is able to persuade his girlfriend and later wife to break many of these traditions, and Lilas herself admits that she is not particularly interested in following customs, as her mother prepares everything for the wedding. On the other hand, her own mother finally begins going unveiled during the story, after her husband's death, which arouses both admiration and disapproval from the neighbors. The two children are much less concerned with Algeria's traditional past and more determined to shape its future. Ali describes some of the student uprisings at the university and policies the new socialist government is enforcing. As with *Puisque*

mon coeur est mort, neither protagonist is willing to simply let the past fade away, but they go further and become active agents in a struggle for freedom.

The story is told in alternating perspectives, first Ali, then Lilas, and is divided into three sections: 1968-78, 1978-88, 1988-98. Narrators' chapters are labeled simply "Him" or "Her," the names and natures of both characters left to be sketched by the story. Both are much more introspective than what would perhaps be considered a more "traditional" novel, mixing dialogue and prose relatively equally. Its style received mixed reviews, some feeling that it was less of a novel and more a reflection on the Revolution and post-war situation in Algeria. Others praised it, for finding the real story in Algerian history.

While the events of the novel are serious, as well as the tone in most places, it also finds a humorous voice, particularly in Ali, who recounts various anecdotes and is still able to find humor in their situation, particularly poking fun at the contradictions in the newly established government, who asserts that they have been elected by the people, thus the people have no right to complain if they dislike policies. It has since been adapted into a lighthearted film, drawing on such humorous points as the opening incident at school. But at the same time, the novel details many of the serious issues that come into an examination of the post-war age, namely its effect on people. Women have been liberated in this new age, but many are afraid to take the leap into modernity. Men too have changed, those returning from war or going out once again to fight for a new Algeria. Ali's father even leaves his mother, who can do nothing but hide the fact that she has been abandoned, excusing her husband's absences as political business to friends and neighbors. Perception of women by society is one of the main themes, and an

important reason to have both Lilas's and Ali's perspectives shown. Both are written in first person, primarily in the present tense, giving a sense of immediacy to the story, as opposed to a more conventional past tense approach, or writing in flashback—a technique that might also have served the story well, as Bey looks back on the events that have led Algeria to this point. However, in this style, readers don't have the same sense of past, present, and future and, like children and young teenagers, focus solely on the present, what they can see in front of them. As they get older, the story begins to bring in more observations by the two narrators about differences in "then" and "now," as well as a growing interest in the country's future. More time was dedicated to changing societal norms—for example, Lilas goes to college and gets a job. It also drops hints as to just how complete the new State's power is over their lives. Good supplies are extremely hard to come by, and are only obtained if you know someone in authority. TV and radio are meticulously censored. The narrator describes only censor of morally offending material, such as swearing and sexual references, but there is plenty of cause to believe censors would take other things—as he reiterates, to suppress any notions of rebellion the people might have.

Bey has a rather poetic style, particularly in Lilas's sections. The vast amounts of prose make for a slower read than some novels, but instead she takes time to carefully detail every part of a scene, another technique that contributes to the sense of immediacy. The introspective style also serves to highlight one of Bey's most important purposes, to give a voice to those who have none. What the characters don't or can't say, Bey puts it down in writing.

The individual chapters are more like short stories in themselves. While there is an overarching storyline, the individual sections are fairly self-contained, with a distinct beginning, middle, and end; and neither the beginning nor the end is directly linked to the preceding/following chapters.

Taking all these things into account, approaching this translation was a challenging task. Besides capturing the important themes and stylistic aspects, mentally I intended for the reader to feel that same sense of connection and immediacy with the situations as the narrators felt. Although it is a recent work, Bey was writing for an audience who may or may not have lived through the times she describes, thus it is still a very personal work, and the heavy emphasis on pre- and post-war Algerian culture and society can very easily alienate an English reader, which is the opposite effect Bey intends. There is also the danger of writing to an audience who has never experienced colonization, and who might share few or none of the issues the narrators face.

Therefore, I began by considering my target audience. Just as important as accuracy is readability; and so, defining my audience, I had to ensure that the vocabulary, style, and speech levels were appropriate (Di 112). A work is always confined to a specific time and place, both in the author's understanding and the world at large, and Bey seems particularly direct about the types of people she wants to reach. I decided that the best way of choosing an audience was by looking at my own interests in reading, to establish what styles I was most comfortable with. I rarely read scholarly texts for pleasure, but my taste does tend toward readings that are more difficult for the casual reader; I tend to prefer classics and historical fiction to book club readings. In his theory dynamic (or functional) equivalence, Eugene Nida asserts that the objective of translation

is to reproduce the original author's work as closely as possible, both in style as well as meaning (Marlowe n.pag.). This is not to say that no alterations may be made. According to Nida, form and content must both be considered, and at points one must take precedence over the other in order to remain as faithful as possible to thoughts expressed in the original, but he also allows for the need of the translator to ensure the translated text clearly conveys its message to the target audience, where some changes are often necessary. Nida's theory was born from his work on translations of the Bible, but, while a different process often with widely contrasting goals, the Bible still has several things in common with a fictional work. The Bible wasn't written merely as a set of records, it was very clearly targeting a contemporary audience, explaining and expanding on their understanding of the world. As with my translation of a fictional work, the goal is to make the original message as clear and equivalent to the target audience as possible, while still representing my own ideas and beliefs the original author attempted to convey to his or her audience. In fact, the King James version, whose goal was to translate the ultimate "Truth" contained therein, the translators themselves acknowledge that changes (specifically chapter divisions) were to be altered only as "Necessity" demanded (Vance n.pag.). That said, reaching a broad English-speaking audience didn't seem to be a particularly efficient approach; unlike a Bible translation, Bey's work does not need to reach the masses. Furthermore, onstantly trying to transmit as much of that atmosphere as possible to a worldwide readership who would bring a wide variety of their own cultural issues to the work. In and of itself, there's nothing wrong with that, but it does mean that the work is far less likely to resonate with them, to feel as personal as the original. Instead, I chose to target a smaller audience, coming

from one culture who would bring similar knowledge to the table. On the whole, this is meant for a more academic audience, and specifically an American audience. I considered, and actually began, hoping to reach a larger, more general audience. In the end, I discarded this, feeling that, while a broad readership would serve the original intent better, it would also gain benefit from directing itself at an audience that, like Algerian readers, already has some background knowledge of the subject. To write for the general public, careful and subtle ways of incorporating Algerian history and culture would be required, but it would be coming to them as fresh information, instead of prior familiarity with the subject. Ultimately, for the time I have chosen to single out a readership knowledgeable about Algerian culture, who would already be familiar with the settings and personalities Bey uses. And while this audience was, in some ways, much easier to write for, in others it was more difficult. Bey is not writing for academics or historians; her work is an expression of truths that have gone unspoken or unnoticed, which she wants to bring to public attention, which is lost in this interpretation. The audience won't be detracted by a more elevated style or advanced vocabulary, but the narrators are both young, ordinary Algerians, and it was important to me to maintain that tone of youthfulness, sometimes brash, sometimes idealistic. Di and Nida remind translators that "it simply is neither necessary nor wise" to write complex, convoluted sentences (Di 113).

Even with the target audience's background, finding the right balance of exposition and demonstration proved a challenge. In an article postulating a "perfect translation," Di Jin states that the only criteria for having a "perfect" translation is that it capture the thoughts behind the work and reproduce it in language that sounds natural and

makes for an effortless read in the target language. Although I don't share his opinion that there is such a thing as a perfect translation, there are certainly degrees of quality, and there is a general agreement that translations which are considered to be the best can meet the criteria Jin cites. Hilaire Belloc asserts that a good translation is one that can be evaluated as a native work. Finding language that would flow smoothly and naturally while remaining faithful to Bey's message. Some of the more challenging passages come from the issues with cultural separation between the French and Arabic. An example from page 95, "francisants," is a term which has no simple direct translation into English, and which is heavily reliant on social and circumstances here. In the end, I decided to leave the term in the original French, the difficulty once again being the ability to accurately convey the meaning of a word both in the context of the source text and the translated text. In this case, "francisant" is a form of the verb "franciser," roughly translating to "Frenchify." In this context, however, it refers to people, or rather a specific category of people, who have become more French than Algerian. English has few common terms to describe a person who has become more integrated into another culture. (The most notable example of such a term in English is *Americanize*.) Two other possible options would be to footnote the term or add a gloss. The first case did defeat the ultimate goal of making the reading experience as similar to that of a reader of the original; the second only yielded long, awkward phrases, when the sense of the original term can be understood by most Americans due to context and similarities to known words like *France* and *French*.

In other places, where translation was necessary, the most difficult part was capturing an image that was both clear and eloquent in the French. The most notable

example of this was on page 70, where Ali is talking about Hamid planting trees to counter some of the desert. Bey describes it as: "Il plante des arbres pour le barrage vert imaginé pour contenir l'avancée du désert." The image of a "green" attack and the "advancing" of the desert is really capturing here, but translations that are too literal came off with an unusually poetic air that didn't seem to fit his character, and too much simplification lost those images. I elected to make a small sacrifice; I left out the "avancée" in order to keep the notion of a "barrage vert," which was what had most struck me about that passage on first reading it. This was another occasion when I considered leaving some of the French, such as saying that he was involved in a "barrage vert," but it seemed unnecessary and counterintuitive when considering the French isn't any kind of set phrase, or describing a phenomenon that is unique to a part of the French-speaking world.

Besides target audience, another aspect I took into consideration was Bey's style. Since the object is to recreate the original author's style as closely as possible, it was important that I comprehend hers as fully as I could. From my own writing experience, I was able to pinpoint some of the most important aspects and which of those needed to be kept in the translation if at all possible. Most notably was simply the format she had chosen, with alternating points of view. Although not an uncommon technique, hers is more difficult in that the narrators don't have any specific introductions, rather their characters are shaped throughout the text. There is also the absence of a proper chaptering system, so that the two narrators' voices run together more smoothly. On the surface, this is not especially difficult to reconstruct, and a literal word-for-word translation would still produce most of these characteristics. The problem arose when

attempting to write the two separate voices. There is nothing that clearly marks differences in Ali's and Lilas's speech and thoughts, but the distinction is essential to the story. While the work has a tendency to stray into prose-poetry at times, I noticed that the more florid descriptions usually came from Lilas, and more concrete descriptions of Algeria at large came from Ali. Lilas is not uninterested in the country, per se, but her focus is more on the people around her. As previously stated, the variance in their individual voices is not sharp, and this also seemed like an essential point—Bey isn't pointing out just the divide between men and women, she also means to draw attention to the way the younger generation has come to think. Lilas and Ali are very different in some ways, but both of them saw colonization, and later the war, and that similarity also needs to come through, as they compare the behavior of their parents' and grandparents' generations.

To capture their voices, I decided to use slightly more casual speech for Ali, with words and expressions that fit more into casual speech. For Lilas I kept Bey's prose-poetic mood, but also with the intent of restraining the style slightly, so that the focus would be on the objects and settings being described, as opposed to the descriptions themselves. An overly ornate style can come off as more melodramatic than lyrical, and the story isn't as much about language as it is about events. For example, Lilas's description of a relaxing sunny day on page 90 is a time when I chose to pull back slightly on the emotion in the source text. I achieved this primarily through changing the formal elements to suit standard American English grammar slightly more. In most cases, I make a point to keep Bey's original punctuation and sentence construction: she uses short sentences, or short fragments that continue to build on a preceding sentence.

To restrain some of the emotion at points where it grew high, I combined the sentences or sentence fragments so that it read more naturally to an American ear.

Whenever possible, I refrained from deleting any material, for reasons of immediacy and voice previously discussed. Even when details seemed superfluous, I wanted the reader to gather the full picture, with as much of Bey's descriptions as possible; eliminating elements would also serve as a means of silencing or censoring the narrators, which is what Bey worked to counter.

The characters themselves were another element I was very concerned about translating. Not being the author, I had only my interpretations of the characters to work with. Whenever making an attempt to write characters created by someone else, the biggest challenge is always looking for the interpretation that seems to best suit the author's intention, whether or not that is the clearest interpretation. Other people can see things in a work that the author had never realized were there or had never intended to write. For that reason, I had to put aside some of my instincts to carve out my own analysis of the characters, and instead look at them as someone else. If I disagreed with a word or action, thinking that the character would never act that way, I stepped back and re-evaluated the situation. At one point, early in the novel when Lilas is still putting off some of Ali's more aggressive maneuvers, I saw her as a character who was in fact interested in preserving her purity for her wedding day, but as it turned out the only thing she was firmly denying Ali was agreeing to sleep with him. There are arguments that, as the author of this particular interpretation of the work, I have the freedom to change elements at certain times, if I don't agree with it in my analysis. On the other hand, as a

translator I feel an obligation to present the work to readers in a manner that best represents the original.

Expectation was another area in which I had several concerns. Lawrence Venuti's theory is strongly critical of the translator's invisibility and encourages translators to make themselves more visible in their work; however, as someone who has gone through the standard college repertoire of classic works, for me translation has always been both essential and invisible. Classes discuss Camus's language while reading an English copy of the work. Readers expect and even take for granted that they will be reading the original text, just in their own language. Whether the manner of thinking is right or wrong, these expectations are ones that I couldn't ignore, any more than I could overlook the demographics of a target audience.

That in mind, the difficulty was not so much in finding voices for the characters as for being able to confidently grasp the characters at all. I have previously worked extensively writing characters created by others, and my goal was and is to ensure my writing accurately reflects the way the characters act and think in the original. Of course it is impossible to know the author's thoughts and intentions, and this is where I deviate from the source material, inserting my thoughts and opinions in lieu of the original text. Both in the original and the translation, the final message ultimately depends on the reader, therefore I strive to represent Bey's characters in such a way that the target audience has the most complete understanding of them as possible from an outside source. The introspective style does draw very clear portraits of both protagonists, but the downside is then that any outside reflection on their behaviors can only be seen from the other narrator, who, in the absence of direct description from the other party, is given

the job of filling in holes and fleshing out characters, mostly through the anecdotes that figure so prominently in the story. Understanding their characters wasn't the challenge; it was understanding how to situate everyone around them. All other characters could only be seen and characterized by the two narrators' understanding of them, and there was a very delicate line between making the reader empathize with the narrator and at the same time reminding them that this is not coming from an unbiased omniscient narrator, but rather someone who is directly involved and very biased. Ali's hatred for a father who abandoned his family, while justified, is also only part of the story; and there are never any discussions with his mother to expand upon some of the situation and its impact on the family as a whole. His father only ever occupies the role of a villain, who left his family and doesn't even bother sending money after Ali gets a job. The prejudice is a key part of the story, to keep the narrator in focus and underline some of the finer points of their relationship, but only on one side. Thus every character besides Ali and Lilas could only be grasped with their understanding, and though this is important for the translation, it also poses problems when trying to understand the character in his own right. Maybe we only ever get to meet Ali's brother directly, but his character has to be equally developed for both Ali and the translator so that his actions can be written with an understanding that Ali may not have, but which nevertheless must be present to represent the character.

Another linguistic obstacle I had to overcome was the smattering of Arabic words throughout the text. I struggled for a long time trying to decide whether or not I should translate the Arabic words into English; on the one hand, the language serves a purpose in the story, and many of the terms are too culturally bound to make translation a good

option. On the other hand, while these words are not French and can therefore arguably be left in the original language in a translation, they are also words that Algerians should all be familiar with, Arabic being the national language and all of the terms used being only descriptions of various aspects of an average Algerian life—names of clothing (the haïk) or places (wilya). Neither of these would be accurately represented by an English translation (like *robe* or *veil*, or *village*). In the end, I decided to leave the Arabic words as they were to further underscore the cultural divide between the French and Algerian.

Even within the French text, though, there were places that I felt stood better in the original French than in English. An advantage of French-English translation is that the languages share so much vocabulary, it isn't usually a problem for readers to see a casual French phrase here or there, because most likely they'll recognize enough words that it becomes clear. The problem was where I thought I should leave the original French, and where I should translate.

The first problem I had with it was in the opening section at the school, where the students liked to sing a parody of *La Marseillaise*. Although there are good translations of the lyrics that I could have based the parody version on, the song itself seemed much too tied to French culture and, in this case, the representation of oppression by the French, that leaving it in French served both to keep much of the cultural relationship between the song and the two countries. It also served as a linguistic reminder of French rule, that the children were taught in schools with French teachers and that French became the language of more educated people in Algeria. Two other sections where I struggled with which language to put the passage in were the two poems (pp. 40-41, 79-80). Both are relatively short, and their role does not become incomprehensible without a

full understanding of the words; in fact, on the second one, a poem about a woman named Leïla, and Ali states afterward that he read the poem to Lilas because of the similarity in their names. For a long time, I intended to leave these poems in French as well, but they don't, in fact, function the same way as the *Marseillaise* parody; these are not meant to be linked to French culture either as an oppressor or even a specific culture. The second poem has even been translated into French. For that reason, I felt that the lines needed to be translated into English, although I made an effort to be much more literal with these than in other places in the story.

Other places I struggled considerably were with some of the word games Bey plays. The section that probably gave me the most problems was with her medical wordplay humor on pages 74-75. At the clinic, gossiping women undertake to diagnose one another, and Bey slightly alters some medical terms, to point out the ridiculousness of the women. They list problems such as douleur "verticale," a nerf "asiatique," and "intention" de sang. It was the last one that gave me so many problems, finding a way to make an equivalent wordplay joke while at the same time being sure the reader fully understands that it's a joke, and not a mistranslation or an error in terminology on Bey's part. I discarded "intention" altogether, because the actual meaning of the substituted words didn't seem to be a factor in any way, as long as they sounded similar to the proper terms. After that, I had to look for a word that, when reading it in the phrase, would automatically bring "blood pressure" to mind, but could also be used in the following lines from the women about their "intentions." I finally decided on "posture," because the sounds of posture-pressure are very similar and I could feel fairly certain that the audience would be able to find the original intended term and understand the humor of

the situation. Bey finishes the passage with a line about Samir collecting the "perles," (*gems* in my translation), which also marks the joke.

Finally and most importantly, I had to think about the translation as a reader—not necessarily techniques I had to use to make it enjoyable and accessible to an English-speaking audience, but passages that I thought were particularly funny or clever, ones I wanted to highlight. The one I was most keen on seeing well illustrated was again at the opening, in the school. That was the part that got me interested in the story, though I'd never read Bey previously. The idea of someone being so fanatically against reminders of the past, with something as insignificant as a pen and paper, fascinated me. This was also the place where I became interested in Ali, with his unusual way of thinking and interpreting directions. It was here more than at any other point in the book that I felt I really did connect to him as a person, when he still hasn't quite grasped what sort of political change Algeria has just come through. In that section, I tried to use a more childish, innocent tone of voice; Ali really didn't understand why he wasn't allowed to correct in red pen anymore.

Another part I especially enjoyed was some of the mentions of popular culture at the time, such as the Egyptian TV shows. Girls would start speaking Egyptian to be trendy. Pop culture is a sure way of making the work both relatable and believable, while emphasizing the differences in culture. Every society has some form of pop culture, so hearing about mothers who are addicted to daytime TV, or girls who take on characteristics from the shows they admire, is something that all American readers can recognize, no matter their social position. Bey talks at length about the characters' personal lives and Algeria's politics at the time, but it becomes easy to forget that this

wasn't all that long ago. References to popular culture can immediately situate a story in the reader's mind. Bey also weaves it in subtly, so pop culture isn't overwhelming some of her more important themes. It is also another way of characterizing her protagonists, who are both adolescents/young adults but spend very little of their time talking about pop culture, focusing instead on their families, their careers, their lifestyle.

Stylistically, some of her more unconventional techniques posed problems for me. The lack of distinct chaptering and use of short, almost staccato, sentences was an issue, along with her paragraphing system. She uses very few paragraph breaks, the text all running together into one long passage. I hesitated in emulating that style; for one, I was afraid it would be alienating to readers; and for another, it's not a style that I, as a writer, am especially comfortable using. My original writing actually tends to be the opposite of Bey's, very "American," some have called it—ample dialogue and minimal descriptive passages. Taking on this work in the first place was a challenge to my writing skills, but in the end it actually made it better to translate, in some ways. Because I wasn't familiar with this style of writing, I examined elements much more closely than I would have in a work in a style similar to my own. I also got the chance to think really deliberately about these characters as people as well as creations of another author's mind.

One of the most rewarding parts of translating this text was this test of my writing abilities. I have taken on plenty of other authors' characters, but it was almost always to use them in my own work, to set up new situations for them and try to determine how they would act. This time, I knew how they would act, but I still had to make it sound like a natural progression of events. Bey's style made that particularly difficult in some

places, when her individual “chapters” don’t have any strong connections to one another, but this was also a process of sorting through each one to find the thread of the core story.

Currently, the translation stands incomplete, but I am eager to continue and look into more of Maïssa Bey’s writings.

PART I. 1962-1972

CHAPTER I

HIM

Blue. White. Green. As soon as he put his briefcase on the desk, he said: from now on, I don't want to see anyone underlining words in red pen! Not in their notebooks, not on their papers. At first, I thought that meant he was going to use red, as a color reserved for professors. For corrections and comments. Good, very good, fair, poor, exclamation points, question marks, underlined zeros, circling good or bad grades a certain number of times so the parents could see. He added: now you will only underline in green. In green pen. I raised my hand. He called on me. I asked why. Why we weren't allowed to use red anymore. So he got up on the platform and explained. I was confused. He said that if we wrote in blue pen on white paper and corrected in red, that would be blue, white, and red. The colors of France. Of the French flag. He said that we're free now, that we've been free for four months. After thirty-two years of colonization. Seven and a half years of war. A million and a half martyrs. And he wrote all the numbers on the board, in red chalk. He said that we had to forget France now. Forget the French flag. And *La Marseillaise*. But I still remember the words. We sang it every morning at the school in my village. Saluting the flag. The French flag, of course. But amongst ourselves, we would change some of the words. For example, instead of "Le jour de gloire est arrivé," we sang "La soupe est prête, venez manger." To the same tune. But quietly, so no one else could hear. It was our form of rebellion. A war of words. I don't remember whose idea it was anymore. Now since school's started again, we sing *Kassamen*. Our national anthem. We sing it every morning. Without changing the words. Saluting the flag. Our flag. Our green and white flag, with a star and a red

crescent in the middle. I don't know who had that idea. For the colors and the design. It wasn't very long before it was flying on all the public buildings. And even the balconies of apartment complexes. They brought out hundreds, thousands, especially on Independence Day. I wondered where they had hidden them all these years. The professor added in a menacing tone, waving an even more menacing finger at us: you must respect the independent Algeria and her martyrs. I respect Algeria. And her martyrs. I didn't dare raise my hand to ask if this was a new law. And why the other professors never told us not to write in red pen. Maybe they just didn't pay attention to things like that. The students around me aren't asking questions. But since I'm independent, I put down my blue pen and pulled the black one out of my box. I started to write. It wouldn't be blue, white, and red anymore. Now it was black, white, and red. This way, I'm obeying my teacher and my country. And my liberty. When he went through the rows and saw my work, he took it from me. He ripped it up. Then he picked up my notebook and tore it as well. He seemed furious. I didn't understand why. He said: that will teach you to obey. He asked me to leave the class and go to the principal's. The principal didn't understand either. He signed my entry slip, and I went back. He's our history professor. He has a lot of trouble with his courses. Because he's not really a teacher. Like a lot of the other teachers at our school. Because most of the professors from last year have left. They left before or just after the Independence. They were French. So we make do. In the meantime. Until the real school year began again, with real professors. The principal and the newspapers said the same thing: "To address the urgent needs." That is, to take on the challenge. With dignity. We will pursue our Revolution. He told us that. Those are the only kinds of words he uses. And when he

speaks in French, he rolls his Rs. So we always copied him. Even exaggerate a little. Just to pass the time and have a little fun. We were never allowed to do that before. The French instructors punished us. We learned to speak French very properly, very carefully. Because Algeria was France. And in our fifth year, the master always said, "Being French is something to be proud of." Our history professor also told us that when France had occupied Algeria in the past, not many children had gone to school. Fewer still had gone to high school. Almost none to university. When he says "children," he means Algerian children. Us. It's true that there aren't many of us at the school in the village. Our professor is still a student at the university. But he explained that it was because he put his studies on hold for two years during the Revolution. That was why he was having a hard time. Also why we still had no textbook. Last year, we learned French history and geography. Useless kings. Sun kings. Rivers, the Alps, the Massif Central. The French Revolution. The guillotine. We hadn't gotten to Algeria yet. Now we had to start our own history. After a hundred and thirty-two years of colonization, it's difficult. A hundred and thirty-two years, more even, because there were people who'd come before the French. And then our history wasn't written yet. So for now, we memorize dates and names and numbers. The number of deaths, for example. It's enough. I mean to say, it's enough for a good grade. I've memorized the lesson. July 1830: beginning of the occupation; May 8, 1945: demonstrations and suppression at Sétif Guelma Kherrata. November 1, 1954: outbreak of conflict by the ALN. August 20, 1956: Soumman Congress. March 19, 1962: Évian Accords negotiating the ceasefire. And the most important, Independence Day, July 5, 1962. We never have any problem remembering the last dates, because we'd lived them. Those are recent events.

It was why it hadn't gone into any of the history books yet. I've always believed it to be a stroke of luck that one is able to live through any great historical event, and more so to be led by great historical figures. When I went home, I asked my father what country's flag had the colors black, white, and red. He didn't know, so we looked it up in a dictionary. One that we'd found at home. With other serious books that had been left by the people before us. Beautiful books with titles in gold lettering. There's only one country with a red, white, and black flag. That's either North or South Yemen. It's an Arab country. There are other countries with those colors on their flag, but they have green on there as well: The Arab Emirates, Syria, Jordan. All sister nations. So I don't know why he tore up my notebook. Because now we are three times the Arabs we were. It was Ben Bella, our new leader, who said it: We're Arabs, Arabs, Arabs. We understand that well. Everyone brothers. We're all brothers now, Arabs and socialists. I don't really know what that means, socialists. My father says that it means that we all share equally. My mother nods. She seems to agree. But at mealtime, my father always gets more meat and fruit than the rest of us—my brother, my mother, and me. Maybe it's because my father didn't get to eat much meat in prison. Before, my brother and I didn't have to say in school that our father had been in prison. Especially not in school. That was before Independence. Now, it's the first thing you have to say. On all the enrollment papers, I write in capital letters: father's occupation: mujahid. I'm the only fighter's son in the class. None of the others could say as much. They're the sons of what we call *marsiens*, because their fathers joined the struggle in March. After the ceasefire. The *marsiens* took their time deciding. Then the war was nearly over. So they're mocked, even when people know it wasn't their fault. The children's fault, I

mean. In my case, it's not the same. I'm proud of my father. He was among the first to go into the djebels, the mountains. For the liberation of the country. When he came back months later, I didn't recognize him. He didn't know me, either. I was seven the night he left to go the resistance fighters. When I woke up, he was gone. I'm thirteen now. He didn't stay in the mountains for long. He was captured after two years. They threw him in prison. Since his return, our life has changed. He stayed in the village with us for a few days before leaving again. And then one day he came back in a van and said that we were going to Algiers. We've lived in Algiers ever since. In an empty place. The empty ones are all furnished apartments. There are still plenty in our complex. In the neighborhood. We're in Building A. Eighth floor. When we walked inside, it felt like someone was still living there. It had everything. A refrigerator. A television. A dishwasher. Beds, already made up. An armoire. Even some toys. We'd never watched television. No one in our neighborhood had had one. And when she comes, my grandmother never sits with us. She thinks that the men on television can see her. It makes us laugh, but it's not her fault. She is embarrassed. She doesn't want to listen when my father tries to explain. But what amazes me the most is the bathroom with the bathtub. When we lived in the village, we'd sometimes go to the Turkish baths. Now we could wash at home. Hamid and I share a room. My father and mother are in another. There's a large guest room. And then there's a balcony looking out over a wide street. The first time, leaning over, I got dizzy because of the height and the sight of the tiny cars passing below. In the village, we slept on mattresses on the floor. With my mother and grandmother. When my father wasn't there. And there were no stairs. We had a small house, a small garden with a fig tree, a Eureka lemon tree, and cacti all around the house.

Kind of like a cluster of thorns around a prickly pear in summer. I love prickly pears. But you can't eat too many, or you get constipated. And you get a stomachache. We also have a chicken coop for eggs, and three goats for milk. All the men who weren't in the resistance or in prison worked in the fields. Especially the older men. I really liked my village. I liked my goats. I could go out, run up to the nearby hill. I was free. Freer than here. At first, I didn't want to go, to leave everything behind. My goats, my friends, my uncles, my grandmother. And when we got into the van, I saw my mother swipe at her eyes. So my father couldn't see. But my father says that Algiers is the only place where children can get an education. And he can start a new life. Because it's the capital. He left his birthplace to change our lives. As soon as he got out of prison, he says: we have to get out of here right away. He wants us to get an education. He keeps saying that an educated people can't be colonized. Maybe he's afraid that others will come to replace the French. He wants us to become scholars: doctors, professors, engineers. Helping the country. Building the nation. Every morning before Hamid and I go to school, he threatens us. If you don't work hard, you'll become garbage men or street sweepers or bricklayers. But we need sweepers to clean streets and bricklayers to build houses. I don't say any of this to him, of course. Getting back to colors, now I know, I look around. As I come home, I notice something that certainly would have upset the professor. Our building is painted white, but the underside of the balconies is blue. Deeper than the sky. It's very beautiful. Very neat. In Algiers, there are a lot of great white buildings, which is why they call it the white city. But sometimes there are women who put their red laundry out to dry on the balconies. There are even a few red curtains drawn in the windows to keep out the sun. I'll have to talk to my mother about

that. She doesn't know. She never went to school. But if she knew, she would have explained to the neighbors that it's not necessary to display the French colors anymore. On the contrary. But it seems simpler to repaint the building green. Or just the balconies. Being Algerian is something to be proud of.

CHAPTER II

HER

Summer is over. This long, long vacation is over, as well as the time when I felt at home anywhere. The stampedes down the stairs, the open doors and grand discoveries—all over. There are still empty apartments in our building. But they were completely cleaned out. The new tenants were responsible for moving. When they needed something, they sent their children around the other apartments. It's because our building is large. Twelve floors in Buildings A and B and six in C. There are two apartments per landing, three in Building C, which adds up to quite a few rooms. Lots of rooms and lots of tenants. I could do the math, but I hate numbers. I could never learn my multiplication tables. I never remembered the rules of division. As soon as I think of something else, they just slip away. That happens a lot. Too often, my mother says. I like books. Stories. That's why I spent the summer visiting the apartments that had recently been cleared out. Since many of them hadn't been locked, I could get into just about all the apartments. In each one, I invented another life. For a few hours, I imagined myself living that life. But then the night came, and I had to return home. So I left my dreams to go to sleep. But almost as soon as I woke up, I'd be off again to new discoveries. My mother made me promise not to leave the apartment complex. I would come back at mealtimes. Sometimes I'd forget even those. So she called me. Or sent one of my brothers out after me. I went up and down all day. I knocked on doors. No one answered. I went around to all the apartments that were open, but I never took anything. My mother made me promise not to. I just wanted to find some books. I wouldn't take them with me; I'd read them there at the apartment, even if I didn't finish.

I went inside. A house without inhabitants is bizarre. It keeps the odors of the people who lived there last. Every house has its smell. I like the smell of the fourth apartment on the right in our building, Building A. As soon as you open the door, you get the scent of wilted roses and slightly burnt caramel. It's saturated everything: the walls, the inside of the drawers and cabinets, the curtains and towels that are still stored here. And when I open a book, the smell leaps out at me, as if it had been shut away inside. The smell of a place is like the distinguishing marks listed on an ID. It's like the house was saying to me: you see, I'm still full of another life, one so full **of** flowers and sweets that I've kept the substance. I asked Maman if she had known the previous occupants. Maman remembers everything. Even if she doesn't associate with French people that often, she would always say hello to the ones she saw outside, in the entrance hall, or in the stairwell. Some of them wouldn't answer. They'd act as if they hadn't seen her. But it didn't matter to her; if she saw them again the next day, she'd say hello again. She could never meet a neighbor, Arab or French, without wishing them a good day or good evening. It would be very bad. She told me that the woman who had lived at the apartment on the right was an old woman named Madame Catherine. She lived alone. Her children were studying in France. She went to see them every so often. She made these jams throughout the year, and the smell would fill the stairwell. She gave it to everyone, or almost everyone. Even us. She always said hello to my mother when she saw her on the stairs. She gave Maman the recipe for her quince cheese paste. And when I went to her house at the end of July, there were still plenty of empty jars on her sideboard in the kitchen. In her junk room, there are (or were—I'm not sure if they're still there now that the apartment's been taken) dozens and dozens of magazines.

Graphic novels, *Nous deux*, *Confidences*, *Intimité*. All of them in cartons organized by year. I don't think I put them back properly. I enjoyed myself all summer. I love romance stories. Especially ones with a happy ending. And in all the magazines and stories I read, there was always a happy ending, despite everything. This is how they almost always start. A man and a woman meet by chance. He is rich, handsome, and aloof. She is beautiful, poor, and proud. Oftentimes an orphan. Like me. At first, there's nothing between them. Sometimes, they hate each other from the moment they meet. Eventually, they come to realize that they love one another. Not right away. Then they fall into each other's arms. Because it's stronger than them. Love is stronger than everything. I know it's not like real life. But one day I'll meet someone who'll see me and know that I'm the one he's been waiting for. I'm sure of it. It's that or nothing. I like Delly's and Max du Veuzit's novels the best. Just when you think it's all over, when they're going to marry someone else and all hope is lost, suddenly there's a twist. And then it all falls into place. You sigh in relief. When I get too impatient to know if he'll take her in his arms, if she'll finally give into that passion, I skip ahead. Even if I already know basically how the story will end. Because all the women say yes to a handsome, rich, taciturn man. It was primarily by reading Madame Catherine's magazines and books that I learned these words: substance, aroma, anew, taciturn, indomitable, aloof, capitulate, and many others. And when I see a word for the first time, I stop and look it up in a dictionary. They're all over, in all the houses. When I like the word, I put it and the definition in my notebook where I write down new words. So I remember it later. Like the teachers taught us. I also learned how to use the literary past and imperfect tenses. Maybe it's thanks to my reading that I always had the best grades in grammar,

conjugation, analysis, and especially writing. My mother doesn't really like me being so engrossed in these novels. She says they're not age-appropriate for me and that real life starts after the words THE END. But it's normal. My father isn't here. And she didn't even meet my father until the day of their wedding. They'd never seen each other before. I wonder if she was petrified. That's another word I like. She says that they came to love one another afterward. Not like the novels. She also says she was very lucky to find a man like him. But their happiness didn't last long. THE END came very quickly. They only lived together for six years. My father is one of the martyrs of the Revolution. He lived just long enough to have four children before dying in an ambush. My brother Mohamed is the oldest. Too old for me to play with. Then there are the twins, Amine and Samir. Fraternal twins. They don't look anything alike. And then me. Lilas. I was supposed to be named Leïla. That was what my father wanted. Leïla means night. But at the town hall, they wrote my name differently on my birth certificate. My mother said the person who put my name down was French. He didn't know about the Arabic night. I really like it. Leïla, night. Lilas, flower. Flower of the night. It's my secret name. I've never told anyone. That person will come one day, the only one I'll tell. Apparently my father was overjoyed the day I was born. After three boys, it seems only natural. But then my grandmother came. She only had one son and six daughters, and she said things I didn't always understand. She told my mother: I just heard some news that won't increase my wealth, nor trust my neighbor, nor vanquish my enemy, nor avenge an affront. Maman explained that that was what old people said when a girl was born. It was a maxim. She also said that, to put a young boy to sleep, you sang: May God Almighty protect him, and grant him a light-skinned woman, beautiful and sweet

smelling; may she inherit from her father and uncles, and may he wed her for a hundred douros. I think that's beautiful. Health, wealth, love, and beauty. Those are a mother's dreams for her son. But now it's not the same. We can't say things like that anymore. Women can vanquish an enemy. Ever since they took part in the war. I even saw some marching in military uniform in the parades on July 5. Now the old people will have to find some other maxims. And other songs. Because we led the Revolution. And now many women work. Later, I'll go to work. But first I have to finish my education. That's what Maman says. Since school has begun again, women have taught in the schools. Not just Frenchwomen. There are many who don't wear haïks anymore. My mother still does because she is a widow. When there is no man in the house, women have to be careful of their reputations. That could be another maxim. I definitely don't care for those, though. I prefer quotations. In a seventh-floor apartment, I found a dictionary of quotations. I copied some into my diary. With all different colored pens. I know them by heart. Especially the ones about love. My favorite is, *"Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction."*[1] *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is my favorite book. You'd never believe that an adult had written it. I wonder how these authors find phrases that will stay alive even after their deaths. And when you read them, it's like there's an echo that stays in your head afterward. An echo of the author's voice. Finally, it's that seventh-floor apartment that I like the most. Not for the smell. For the paintings on the living room walls. That's where I spend most of my time. I stay for hours on end. Every day, I choose one of the paintings. I push an armchair over to sit facing it. I stare at it until

[1] From an anonymous online translation

nothing else in the world exists. Everything went dark. And I was on the inside. Watching them allowed me to slip into their minds. I stared at them without moving, until I was among them. I had to completely leave my life behind to be able to join them and enter their world. I was a little girl in a straw hat. A woman sat in front of her mirror, one arm raised, fixing her hair. A dancer with a tambourine. And I told myself the stories of each of the people who had posed for the paintings. I wonder who they were, what their names were, where they lived, and why they'd been chosen. Surely there was a reason. And a reason why, afterwards, the people who had seen these paintings had been so moved they'd only been happy looking at them. And then maybe the painter doesn't even know why or for whom he paints. He does it because he can't do anything else. Because he's an artist. How and why he became one is a mystery. How do we choose the paintings and the objects that come into our homes and share our lives? Why do we want this one, and not another? To each his own, my mother says. Later, when I have my own house, these are the only kinds of paintings I'll have on the walls in all the rooms. These or nothing. Oftentimes, I wonder why the people who lived here before didn't take these with them. My mother says that I ask too many questions. That it's tiring. And that I can't know everything. So I keep these questions to myself. For another time. Or for someone who wants to answer me. But I wonder if they took other things. More valuable things. Jewels or irreplaceable souvenirs. Maybe they just didn't have the time to take down the paintings. Or the room to put it in their luggage. I don't know where they are now. But if they knew that I came to their house almost every day over the summer to gaze at their paintings, to keep them alive and watch over them, I think they would be happy.

CHAPTER III

HIM

The war isn't exactly over. The radio tells of skirmishes. "Fratricidal conflicts," they call them. Almost everywhere across the country. From east to west. My father grows more silent, and he's gone more and more often. He comes home late in the evening, and when he does he's in a bad mood. Be quiet, my mother says, even if we're not talking, don't provoke him even more. I didn't really understand what was going on. Last night, my brother Hamid told me that the fighting is still going on. He's the oldest, so he knows more. When I asked if the French were back, he acted as if I was an idiot. Who then, though? Who are our new enemies? Not taking his eyes from the mirror, he sniggered. It's us. I thought he was making fun of me. But he explained that we were fighting amongst ourselves. Us, he meant us, free and independent Algerians? It's true. An inter-Algerian War. The Armée de Libération Nationale against the Armée de Liberation Nationale. People who'd fought the French were now fighting amongst each other. Skirmishes, battles. Deaths, wounded. Weapons. Tanks. He pops a pimple after each word. He has a lot of them. Nothing annoys him more than when people say he's budding. And when he's annoyed, he loses control of his voice. It swings up and down like a frantic clock hand. Especially when he's annoyed. Everyone laughs at him. So he stops talking and hides away. He hid in the bathroom while we were there. In front of the mirror. Popping his zits. Shaving the stubble that managed to grow up between the blackheads and boils. Scrubbing himself clean in the tub. Trying to relax his hair with gel. That could go on for hours. Until my father, after calling him dozens of times, threatened to break down the door. To drag him out of there by his feet. At your age, I

was in the fields working from dawn to dusk helping my father. It's natural to help your father. But here there are no fields, and there, there had been no bathroom. Ever since we'd learned what was going on all throughout the country, my brother and I didn't dare fight with each other, especially in front of our parents. We settled our business outside. I heard my mother talking to our neighbor on the fifth floor of Building C, Zohra—we all called her La Sétifienne. My mother was saying that armies returning from the border were getting into fights with interior militia, the Resistance members, over the Chair**.** Brothers fighting amongst themselves for the chance to sit on a chair. Hamid burst out laughing when I told him what I'd heard. He thought I'd misunderstood. But I know what they wanted to say. The Chair means power. The person who comes in on it will be the one in charge. Sort of like that stupid game the girls play during recess. One two three, sun. And then they race to the wall. My father never had to fight or run to get the chair in the living room. The best place in front of the TV. Before, in the village, when he wasn't there, everyone sat together. My mother, my grandmother, my brother, and I. We shared everything. And then we didn't have any armchairs. Not even any regular chairs. We sat on mats or mattresses. And no one could be above the others. But that's how it was. He was the head of the family. And eventually, I would be. I wonder who sat in the armchair at those Mudjahid meetings he went to every day. What place he had among his brothers. I mean his other brothers. Since the Independence, we're all brothers and sisters. Every radio broadcast starts with that: "Dear brothers, dear sisters." Born from the same mother, the Revolution. France used to be our motherland. But we hadn't quite finished being born. Or dying, rather. Some had had just enough time to think they were war heroes before being shot by one of their brothers. Maybe without

even being able to go back home for their wives and children. Or their mothers. As if a seven and a half-year war wasn't long enough. Not enough murder. A million and a half deaths. That's what we learned in school. That's why we shouted at the demonstrations the other day. We went to the main post office first, and then further out to the main boulevard by the sea. We stopped in front of the great building. There were the people in charge. The ones who hadn't wanted to stop fighting. And all the way we were shouting, "Seven years is enough!" "A million and a half is enough!" "Long live the free Algeria!" It should be seven and a half years, but that's harder to say. So we left off the last six months. We sang all the hymns. Everyone sang so loudly that when we came back home, none of us could talk. My mother said it was honey and lemon for all of us. But I don't know if anyone heard us. My mother brought us down here. Without saying a word to my father. The neighbors spread the word. In the middle of the crowd, I saw some of my friends with their parents. There were a lot of women. It was hot. There were so many that it looked like waves of white and black in the streets. We walked hand in hand under the sun. Like brothers and sisters. Some of them were even dancing. Like it was a party. And yet we all knew that the situation was very serious. The adults said it over and over. And we all went back together. That was my first demonstration. I hoped it wouldn't be my last, because I had a lot of fun. I would have liked to ask my father something. Because he knows. He has fought in the war. Has the people who died that summer after the Independence died for the motherland? Like the other martyrs of the Revolution? That would make more than a million and a half deaths. But I was too tired. I couldn't wait up for him. I fell asleep before he came home.

CHAPTER IV

HER

I thought I heard gunshots last night. I asked Maman this morning if I'd been dreaming. But they were real. She'd heard them, too. She was in a bad mood. I didn't press the matter. It's better not to ask too many questions in these situations. But I thought the war was over. And that men had replaced weapons from the tools they used to rebuilt the country. It used to be bombs and gunshots every day and night. Especially in the last days. Just before the Independence. Before we fled the attacks, Maman can't stand the gunfire anymore. The attack came in May. On my birthday, to be exact. We didn't celebrate birthdays in our house. Because, as Maman said, with all the deaths every day, we had lost the festive spirit. And my father isn't there anymore. We were all terrified that day. That morning, when we opened the door, we found an inscription on the wall next to our house: "Death to Arabs." In red. At midnight, the OAS fired on our apartment. The shooters were in the street just behind the complex. Today, we could still see some of the bullet holes in the back wall, the one that faces onto the garden. Twelve holes. And we kept the bed and frame that had both gotten hit through the window that night. Maman said it was a memory. But it was a bad one. It was better to forget the bad memories. That was Amine's bed. He was sleeping. Everyone was asleep. As soon as Maman realized that our apartment was the one under attack, she pulled him off the bed. Just in time. We all went to hide in the storeroom. Because it's between two rooms and there's no window. It was completely dark. Maman held us close, breathing fast, as if she were out of breath. She was sniffling, too. I realized she was crying. I started to cry, too. My brothers were scared, but they didn't cry. Mohamd

wasn't there. Maman had sent him to my grandfather's after a man, passing him on the stairs one day, had treated him as a future Fellagha. She was scared. For all of us, really. I asked Maman if we were going to die. She covered my mouth with her hand. The shooting had lasted for several minutes. Or a long time. There was no way to know. I'd read in books how seconds could sometimes last for like hours. And then sometimes we'd hear knocking on our door. We thought it was them. That they'd come to get us. We pressed ourselves against the wall, huddled under some clothes inside the wardrobe. Waiting for them to break down the door. But it was the neighbor across the hall. Madame Lill. She called my mother. It took a minute to get out of the wardrobe, but that was the only thing to do. We hurried across the hall. Still in the dark. Still pressed against my mother. She opened the door. We rushed into the other apartment. They were all awake there, too. The father and sons. They hid us in the bathroom. It was like our storeroom. No windows. We could still hear gunshots, but further off now. Suddenly everything was still. They brought us into the living room. Madame Lill hugged Maman. They were both shaking. They'd been friends since the first day we'd moved into the apartment we'd bought as co-owners, with the money from my father's death benefits. Because they'd paid for my father's death. Not the men who killed him. The men he worked for. Because he had a very important position. He was a teacher. We're in Algiers thanks to him. We've lived in this apartment for almost two and a half years. Since July 8, 1960. I remember, because it was an important date. Important for us. That was the day we changed our lives. We arrived in the afternoon. The moving van with all our furniture and luggage had gotten here before us. My aunt and uncle had taken care of everything: buying the house, the move, everything. We went in. It

seemed a little small, but beautiful. Very clean. Because the apartment was new. The building, too. No one else had lived here. It still smelled strongly of paint inside. Right away, my favorite part was the balcony. It was the first time I'd ever been up so high. Between the two buildings across the way, you could catch a glimpse of the ocean, which is always changing colors. And then Madame Lill knocked on the door with a huge bouquet and a box of cookies. She'd said: it's a welcoming gift. She seemed happy to meet her new neighbors. We were surprised. In return, a few days later Maman prepared a couscous and had Amine take a large plateful to her. And that was how they became friends. They saw each other every day and talked about everything. Their children, the war, their lives. And when my grandfather came to visit, he spent hours with Madame Lill's father. He called him "my friend Léon." That was before, when the Lills were still there. I don't know if Monsieur Léon's left, or if he's still in his hometown. They became friends the moment Monsieur Léon told my grandfather that he knew the Koran by heart. He'd learned it at the Koranic school in the village He told my grandfather about it. He used to wait for his friends at the door. One day, the teacher told him to come in with them. He sat with his friends and followed their lead. My grandfather is very interested in religions because he's a cadi. It's like a judge, except he only works with Muslim affairs. He explained that to me. He can write French and Arabic. He's read the Bible and Mr. Léon's other religious texts. They'd discussed all sorts of religions from the moment they met. Their views were very similar. Madame Lill's name is Simone. She's also named Messaouda. Messaouda, which means blessed. It's an Arab name. But Madame Lill isn't Arab. She's Jewish. My grandfather explained that the Jews haven't been French for a long time. They used to be like us. But Simone-

Messaouda wasn't anything like the French people around here. The ones living in our apartment building. She speaks Arabic just like us, except she has a southern accent. She lived down south with her family before she got married and moved to Algiers. When she went there on vacation, she always brought us some dates and spices. Her husband is named Gaston. She has three sons: Pierre, Paul, Jacques. Most importantly, she had a television. We had never watched television before. So we always went to her home. Especially on Thursday afternoon, to watch the children's programs. She served us French toast and huge bowls of chocolate milk. The rooms always smelled like butter, sugar, and milk. She also made flatbread for us. Maman loves that. In exchange, when she made bread or galettes, she would always make a few extra to give to them. Often Madame Lill would tell us to make sure we didn't leave any crumbs on her furniture. That was against their religion. The evening of the attack, she gave us great bowls of hot chocolate. We weren't hungry or thirsty, but we drank it. To make her feel good. And we slept on the mattresses she laid out in the middle of the living room. The next day, we got up and left to find a new home. We were afraid to leave the building, because we thought the OAS soldiers were outside, waiting for us. But some of our neighbors, who knew Maman, walked with us out to the taxi. The driver's teeth were chattering, he was so frightened. Because he was an Arab. And Arabs weren't supposed to be in the French neighborhoods anymore. I don't know anymore who sent him to get us. The neighbors were gathered at the door to say their goodbyes and for protection. Finally I believe. It was the last time we saw them. Almost all of them had left before we returned in July. Madame Lill left her apartment keys with Maman. She had them returned through her sister, who hadn't wanted to leave the country. Every so often we turn on the lights and

watch TV at her apartment. Waiting. No one comes. Maybe they'll come back. It's only after that I understand why the OAS didn't come for us the next day. Maman explained it. More than anything, they wanted to make us afraid. So that we would leave. Because our building was in a European quarter. That is, one with more French than Arabs. That might be why they didn't bomb the city that night when there were all those explosions. It was the beginning of March. They said it was terrorist attacks. I was afraid, too. We were all huddled together in bed with Maman. Unable to sleep. We'd already had trouble sleeping with the saucepan concert outside. After eight o'clock, they'd all start banging on pots and pans chanting "French Al-ge-ri-a." In rhythm. There were seven Arab families in our building. All of them were forced to leave sometime in April or May. I don't remember now. Except for Rabha, who lived on the fourth floor and whom we called "sellout," because she'd married a Frenchman and worked for the government. She stayed even when the OAS hunted down all the Arabs. She left with her Frenchman just before the vote for the Independence. We'd also left the keys to our apartment with Madame Lill. And a woman who lived alone in an Arab quarter moved into our apartment. They exchanged us for her. Arab for French. She was a Frenchwoman, with a Spanish name. Madame Anita Gomez. And during that time, we lived in her house. For two months. In the middle of the Arab quarter right next to ours. It was separated by the Jardin d'Essai. That was the border. She had a piano and a garden. That's where I saw my first death. Almost every day, vehicles would come by with the dead and wounded. There was even the sound of mortar fire in the neighborhood. We weren't hit. Thankfully. But many of the houses were destroyed. Finally, after everything, we could say that we were lucky. Maybe it was my father who

protected us, from wherever he is. Who knows? I was six and a half when he passed away. I barely remember his face. Once, a long time ago, when I was very young, I asked my grandfather if my father was our own personal god now that he'd gone to heaven. Because that was what Maman had told me when I asked where he'd gone. A slap in the face was my only reply. I still remember it. I didn't understand why. Or how someone could answer with a slap. But maybe it had been wrong. Wrong to ask questions about God. You have to be very careful about gods. The Jewish God says that they can't light any lights on Saturdays. They can't work then, either. That's their Sabbath. Maman often sent me over to turn on the lights. But I never knew who turned them off again before they went to sleep.

CHAPTER V

HIM

Something's going on almost every day in our building. Make that almost every hour. There are arguments, lots of arguments, followed by reconciliations; parties, mourning, people moving in and people moving out. A constant movement. Almost all the apartments have been occupied ever since we came here over a year ago. Now there are a lot of people. Sometimes I feel like our building is like a big chest of drawers. And each drawer is full of lives. It creaks with stories when you open it. Especially ones about women. In the daytime, you might think there are only women in this world. Because the men are never at home in the daytime. Except those who don't work. And even if they don't work, they don't stay home all day; they go to the cafés to see each another. The women don't. When the men aren't there, the women visit each other. At one home or another. That's how they know everything. Everything that's happening in the apartment complex and in the neighborhood. Words that flow, cross, pass down, get repeated, and eventually create a line stretched between the homes. To transmit the news. Hamid calls it the Arab telephone. Since they don't go outside, they can still go into each other's homes. All they have to do is go upstairs or downstairs. It's not like the village. In the village, as soon as a woman walks outside her home, everyone knows. Everyone sees her. They recognize her even underneath her veil. And when they stay in, they talk from their balconies. The balconies overlooking the courtyard. Of course. Not the others, because they could be seen from the street. Balconies are very useful for that. Sometimes, I'm in my room, and I hear them talking. Some say words I don't understand. They use a lot of allusions. Words women use for men and for sex. And

they laugh. My mother doesn't go out on the balcony. She doesn't go to the neighbors' homes. Except when someone dies. Or when someone is born. My father doesn't want her to go. He doesn't want her "associating" with them. He always says that he was afraid of getting mixed up with the wrong people. Us, too. He says it's dangerous for the stability of the family. If someone has dishonest intentions, they can rub off on others, and put dangerous ideas in people's heads. But, as Hamid says, all parents say that. Other people's children are always bad company. My mother could go out when he's not there. Like the others. He would never know. But she says she's not that type of person. She says she's fine at home. Even if there's no one to talk to all day. Except when we come home from school. Sometimes I feel bad for her. I think she would be better off in the village. With her sisters, her mother, her cousins. But she has to follow her husband. That's how it is. It's only natural. So she keeps herself occupied. I mean she does things like the others. She cleans. For the women, work begins very early in the morning. As soon as the men leave. First, they see the children off to school. Because now school is for everyone, and everyone goes to school. Not like before. Then they rest. Because the children aren't there to bother them. They take advantage of the time. That way, when the men come home, everything is clean. Cleanliness is very important. My mother cleans the floor every day. When she's done with everything, she goes to the market. Some women don't leave. Even to go to the market. The Mozabites' children do the shopping. But my mother has to do ours because my father works all day. Before going out, she puts on her haïk. She covers her face with her veil. As she walks, she takes her haïk in one hand. Her basket is in the other. She always says that it's not easy to walk down the street like that. Especially when it's rainy or windy. But she has to. And

afterwards, it's time to cook. After eleven o'clock, all the women are in the kitchen. And the smells escape to take refuge in the stairwell. They mingle, and the higher you climb, the hungrier you get. When I say that, Hamid makes fun of me. He says that I have a good nose. He says it's natural because I'm like a saluki. That's the nickname he gave me. Because I'm really tall and really thin. I haven't stopped growing since last year. I get taller, but not heavier. And yet we eat well now that my father has joined the Party. I'm taller than my friends. Even the ones who are older than me. I think he's actually jealous because he's the oldest and I'm taller. But it's not my fault. It's growth. I lost my childhood. A lot of things change when you lose your childhood. It's like when snakes shed their skin. They leave behind something that no longer serves a purpose. I wish I could be a snake, so I could slither everywhere. Into the other apartments. To see women on the inside. I know what a woman's body looks like. Because I've already seen women naked. When I went to the bathhouse with my mother. But as I grew up, I couldn't stay with the women. That's natural. We can't mix anymore. You're not allowed to be with the women anymore, once you become a man. Boys become men when they no longer go to the bathhouse with their mother. But the images stayed with me. And they spring up when I'm trying to go to sleep at night. I can't sop them. Sometimes I'm ashamed when my mother makes my bed in the mornings. But she doesn't say anything about the stains on the sheets. I don't know if it's the same for girls. There aren't a lot of women or girls in the building who interest me. They're too old. Or too young. Or else they're my friends' sisters. It's not interesting. I'm getting to know just about all the tenants in our complex. Those who came at the same time as us. And the ones who came after. There aren't many others,

ones who lived here before the Independence. Four or five families, I think. They're still here. The building used to be occupied mostly by French people. Our old Frenchwoman, Madame Moreno, lives on the first floor of Building C. I say "our" because everyone loves her. She's like a grandmother for the people who live here. When we meet her on the stairs, she always has candy and a kind word. The others all left. They went home. To France. Others came to take their place. Coopérants[1], spending their military service abroad. There are a lot of them at school. They say they're happy to be here. We're happy, too. We really like them. We're not enemies anymore. Because of the accords. They were signed to create peace. My father explained that. Like in our building. One day the women are arguing. The next they're best friends. Sometimes they're united against other neighbors. They have their cliques. It all depends on the region they came from. The ones from Sétif against those from Oran. Those from Jijel against the ones from Tlemcen. Most often East versus West. And sometimes Arabs versus Kabyles. And the children do the same thing. It's natural. They repeat what they hear. My mother never gets mixed up in these affairs. She says it's very bad. That we should be like one family. Because we sort of live in one big house. We're all Algerian. And our home is Algeria. The apartment building is like a *haouch*. One house with many families. Except here, we're piled on top of each other. Or buried under. Depending on where you live. You might not know yourself very well, but you know everything about the others. Because of the sounds and smells. You can learn a lot through sound and smell. For example, on the first floor, there's a man who lives alone. He's single. No smell of any cooking comes from his apartment. But we often hear American music.

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[1] Those spending mandatory military service working abroad

Rock and such. And sometimes he has guests that dance and make a lot of noise. I heard some neighbors say that he brings girls home. At night. Secretly. He must like having a good time. On the fourth floor, you can often smell grilled meat. It's the scented proof of their wealth. Because meat is expensive. You can eat it every day if you don't have a lot of money. It's not like sardines. Everyone can eat sardines. They're the cheapest of all. Moreover, the sardine seller is always out in the street. He never stops his cry *"esserd…iiiine."* You can hear him even from the twelfth floor. So all the women go down or send their children out to buy one, two, or three kilos of sardines. It all depends on the number of mouths there are to feed. And on the stairs, the smell of sardines overwhelms all the others. No one is on the seventh floor all day. It's a French couple. Monsieur and Madame Couteau. It's written on their door. They both work. We hardly ever see them. They lived in a village not far from Algiers before the Independence. And they didn't leave with the others. Because they helped the FLN. My father told me. I didn't know that there were any French with us in the war. I mean on our side. They have a little girl. The woman across the hall watches her along with her own children. When Madame Couteau came home from the hospital with the baby, all the women went over to congratulate her. They baked cakes. My mother made a *tomina* with semolina, honey, and butter, like we make at home to celebrate a new baby. It's natural. We're on the eighth floor. That's where I stop. When I come home at noon, everything's ready. When my mother opens the door, I know exactly what she's made for us. And since my father never comes home for lunch, we take the opportunity to eat in the living room. Around the low table. Like before. Because my mother took our *meïda* when we left our village. My father didn't like it. But for once, she managed to convince him. My mother

loves her round *meïda* with its smooth wood. My grandfather made it. We sit around it on mattresses. My mother sets the main dish in the center and we eat together. And after, I help her clear the table while Hamid shuts himself in the bathroom. My father prefers to eat at the dining room table. With a setting for everyone. He's changed a lot since we came to Algiers. He wears suits and ties year round. My mother doesn't know how to tie ties. So he had to learn himself. But she washes and presses his shirts very nicely. He says we should act more like city dwellers. He wants to promote us in society. So we sit in chairs and eat with forks. We have to pass inspection before we go out. He almost makes stand at attention. Like the army. Especially no missing buttons, stains, or holes in our clothes! That really upsets him. And my mother's the one who has to pay. Still, she does everything she can for us. When he comes home, he doesn't say hello. Right away, he asks if we've done our homework. Before we go to bed, he checks our bags. To see if everything's there. Notebooks. Books. Pencil cases. Folios. He checks our report cards, to see what the teachers have written to him. He's always looking over our shoulders. Sometimes he talks about himself. He tells us how his father didn't allow him to go on to middle school. Because he was needed on the farm. But he worked hard in school. He had the best grades. He could easily have succeeded in life. Hamid says that we can tell the story any way we want when it's in the past. No one will be able to say if it's true or not. I think he wants us to follow his example, and that we're lucky the war's over. My father learned a lot in prison. There were several more educated prisoners there, and they taught him. French, Arabic, math, and science. They managed to study without books. It was like a school. That's where he learned Arabic. We didn't learn it in elementary school. We only started last year. Because we have to

learn the national language. But I know French better. The Arabic we learn at school isn't exactly the same as what we speak at home. It's more difficult. But my father says we have to reclaim our language. By every means possible. Now I understand why he didn't want to stay in the village. Because if he had, he'd have been living out in the country. Like his father. And we would have been like him. We'd have been farmers. But if there were no more farmers, who would work the land? Our geography professor says that agriculture is a vital part of a country. Meaning it's important for our survival. But I think you have to choose. There are people who like the land and people who like books. On television, they say: "The earth belongs to those who work it." I would say: the earth belongs to those who love it. I don't know what I'd do if I was given the choice. Because I really loved living in and running through the countryside. But it's not the same as working on the land. I know. My father loves to learn. So he chose. And now he's going to enroll in university night classes for the Mujahideen. We'll see even less of him. Hamid says that it doesn't bother him, not seeing our father for a whole day. On the contrary; it's more peaceful without him. Because he thinks he's too harsh. Too harsh with us. Too harsh with my mother. They almost never speak. My mother has never set foot in a school. Like all the village girls. But that doesn't mean she's ignorant. On the contrary. She managed things by herself when he wasn't there. After my grandfather died, she had to go to work. Because my father was in prison. She cleaned the homes of French people who lived in the village. She had to. There, at their houses, she learned some French words. She also went to the fields. We wouldn't have made it otherwise. My father says all of these things are in the past. He doesn't want to talk about them. Not amongst ourselves, not with others. But when he wasn't there, we

lived an almost normal life. And our clothes were clean. Never torn. We had enough to eat. Not much, but we weren't hungry. It wasn't misery like in *Les Misérables*. In school, I only learned at school that there were poor people in France. That was the very reason they'd had their Revolution. There always comes a time where you can't bear the misery anymore. There were no miserable Frenchmen in our village. They were always well dressed. My mother also helped the Revolution. She ran arms for the Mujahideen. She even stood up to the French soldiers during the raids. I still remember it. And now she talks to us a lot. She listens. She may be illiterate, but she's not ignorant. Because it's not the same thing. People who never went to school can learn about life outside of books. That's what she says. She also protects us. When we get into fights or some other kind of trouble, she doesn't tell our father. It's simple, she keeps quiet around him. She never calls him by name. Whenever she talks about him, she says *your father*. When she talks about him with others, she says *my children's father*. It's a show of respect. When he's here, she doesn't seem like the same woman. All of her stories, her laughs, and her kisses for us. For Hamid and me. I don't think he'd hear her even if she did talk to him. When she told him she preferred Ben Bella to the other Revolutionary leaders, he merely shrugged. With a dismissive air. As if she wouldn't know. Because she's not educated. He loves that word. Educated. He says the word EDUCATION as if it's in capitals. But when a neighbor suggested my mother go to some night classes at the middle school nearby, she hadn't dared ask his permission. She said: I know the answer. You don't ask questions when you already know the answer. She was right. Because I asked. I waited until he was in a better mood. One evening, after dinner, I mentioned nonchalantly: what if Maman were to take some classes…? He didn't even let me finish

my sentence. He said to worry about my own classes. And he got up to go to his room. Sometimes I hear them at night. A wall separates our rooms. My father groans. Several times. The bed squeaks. Several times. And then my father lets out an Ah. Very short. As if he were surprised. And that's it. My mother stays quiet. A few minutes later, she gets up and opens the door quietly. She goes to the bathroom and closes the door behind her. There's the sound of running water. Then she returns to her room. They think we're asleep. But I've had trouble sleeping for several months now. There are too many images swirling around in my head. Too many questions left unanswered. Too many urges. I feel like everything's gotten mixed up in my head. I know Hamid's not asleep, either. And even if he's pretending to be asleep, he hears them. So I copy him. Pretending to sleep. It's better. Because we can't speak about these things. Not with a brother, or with our friends. On the other hand, we talk about it a lot between ourselves. What men and women do. Even some girls and boys. But that's not as common. And we don't see many of those kinds of girls around here. In our building, anyway. Or maybe I just don't know about it. Because girls want to keep their virginity. Hamid explained all of these things to me. It's a matter of honor. Hamid has already done it. He's been with girls. At Casbah. But he didn't tell me anything about it. I found out about it from his friends. And because he told me he'd already done it. Make love, that is. But I don't think that what I hear at night, or what my friends talk about, can always be called lovemaking.

CHAPTER VI

HER

We changed our address. We moved. But we're still in the same building. Now we live in Madame Lill's apartment. And that's not the same address anymore because our street name was changed to Rue Belouizdad. It used to be the Rue de Lyon. Lyon is a city in France. Mohamed Belouizaded is a martyr of the Revolution. Like my father. But my father doesn't have a street yet. A street named after him. Maybe they thought of him in his hometown. We never go there. But I don't think there are enough streets for everyone who died. We moved into the apartment across from the one we used to live in. Because it's larger. And especially because Madame Lill told my mother that she didn't want anyone else living there. She called her and they cried over the phone. It's difficult for them. They know that they won't see each other again. France is a long way away. Madame Lill asked Maman to keep the television and the table. The rest was sent by ship. Madame Lill's sister and Maman took care of everything. Madame Lill also left a beautiful swatch of red velvet. For me. She said I should keep it for my wedding trousseau. For my undershirt embroidered in gold. She really liked me. Because she only had sons. She said that she would have liked a daughter. A little girl with my hair. And my eyes. I hate my hair. It curls. It's too long. Maman doesn't want me to cut it. When I grow up, I'll cut it very short. I sleep with Maman in the boys' room. The one Madame Lill's sons used. And my brothers in the other room. We put up sofas in the living room. For the family. The ones that are going through Algiers and are end up staying for months. In the apartment we used to live in across the way, a French couple has moved in. Coopérants. He's a philosophy professor, and she teaches physics.

Mireille and Michel. It's too bad they don't go to my school! They're very nice. Every so often I go over so they can help with my lessons. And sometimes, on Sunday, they take my brother and me to the beach, in their car. They say that we have a very beautiful country. And a sun so large they find it in people's smiles and in their hearts. Maman made some of our dishes for them to try. Like she'd done for Madame Lill. I like going to their home because they have a lot of books. Michel gives me advice, and he loans me some of the books. Which have nothing to do with the ones I read last year. Some I like a lot. Some not at all. Because they're too difficult, too sad. Too serious. When I read them, I feel everything darkening around me. It's like I'm plunging down a tunnel and unable to climb back to the light. I find light in books of poetry. Where words meet by accident, words not made for each other, that forge their path together and invite us to go along. I also write poetry. But I don't show it to anyone. Through Michel, I discovered an Algerian author. His name is Mohammed Dib. I really liked *La Grande Maison*. It reminded me of the apartment complex, with its neighbors. I didn't know that there were Algerians who could write that way in French. We study French literature in school. I mean works by French people. This year, in my school, we had quite a few coopérant teachers. Especially French ones. Some are from sister countries. Russians and Bulgarians. They teach the sciences. They can't teach the other subjects. Because they don't speak French well. My math teacher, for example, told Myriam that she would never succeed in life because she was always "sleeping with him" instead of paying attention in class! He meant she was sleeping during the lesson. He didn't even understand why the whole class burst out laughing. There are also Egyptians, for our Arabic class. But they get upset a lot. Because we have trouble understanding what

they're saying. Their Arabic isn't the same as ours. They have a funny accent. We prefer the teachers from France. Because they're easier to understand. They came to help us. Help us build our country. They say that we're lucky. That everything is still a possibility here. Because in France, everything's already finished. Of course, they weren't colonized. Never. Except during World War II. But that's different. They were only occupied by the German army. And like us, they fought. They raised a resistance movement to fight for their freedom. Like us. My uncle also fought against the Germans. For France. He was wounded in Italy. At Monte-Cassino. Then he was taken prisoner and sent to the labor camps. He had a medal. And he came back. He told us how he took a bullet in the shoulder. And that it had taken days to get it out. He's handicapped. He gets a pension. My mother also gets one. For being a war widow. She also has access to a family allowance. But even adding the two together, it's not much. She fills out piles of papers every day. She goes to offices to solve all the administrative problems. Almost every morning. When she returns, she's exhausted. And very unhappy. She sits down on the sofa and cries. She says it's hard to raise four children alone. To clothe them. Feed them. Then she gets up. And she goes into the kitchen to make us something to eat. But she doesn't always complain. And when the neighbors come over, she laughs. They tell stories. They talk a lot about their husbands. And their mothers-in-law. They think I don't hear them. So they say things that children shouldn't know. There are always neighbors at our home. Because there's no man here. That's what my mother says. And with no man around, they're freer to laugh. To talk. And even if lunch is a little late, it's not a big deal. And then we live on the second floor. So when they're coming back from the market, they stop by our apartment. One stop before

they go back up. The other day, Zohra, the woman from Sétif who lives on the fourth floor, stopped by with her parents' shopping basskets. She fell on the couch. It was very hot. She was sweating. So she said: I'm laughing all over. My mother didn't dare laugh in front of her. Zohra doesn't speak French very well. But she would in front of my mother. Because my mother is educated. She graduated elementary school. She fills out paperwork for the people in our building. She reads their mail for them. She also writes their letters. She could even have gotten a job, but my grandfather didn't want her to. We live modestly. We're poor, but proud. And happy. But not shy, because our house is always full of guests and we share everything we have. Even when we don't have a lot to eat. The only thing that matters, my mother says, is education. She wants us to finish. To finish our education. She wants it fiercely. Mohamed says that he's going to be a doctor. Amine wants to be a great athlete with a lot of gold medals. He's a fast runner. After classes, he goes to Ruisseau stadium to train. Just next door. But first, you have to finish your homework, Maman tells him. Samir doesn't say much. He says he doesn't know what he wants to do when he grows up. His grades are bad, except in art and music. I know he likes music. English and American songs. The Elvis and Beatles type music. He tries to do his hair like them, growing it out. But it's not allowed in school. The other day, his Arabic professor stuck some gum in his hair. So he would have to cut it. My mother said: it serves you right. She's always on the professors' side. We don't have any record players in the house, and we argue over the single radio. I prefer French songs. *Salut les Copains* and such. Especially Françoise Hardy. The lyrics express the deepest, most secret parts of my soul. She knows how to find words. She sings about love. Friendship. Solitude. Betrayal. Sometimes, I cry listening to her. Because no one

can understand my feelings. I only have one friend, Myriam. She lives far away. I'm not allowed to go to her home. My mother doesn't want me to go out. Except to go to school. And since there are other girls in the building who go to the same school, we walk out together. And come home together. If I'm a little late, she's out on the balcony. She doesn't let me dawdle in the streets. She says that I have to be twice as careful because I don't have a father. Careful of what? She answers: you'll understand later. I know why. And I know that she can't talk about it. Because a mother can't talk about those things. Not with her daughter. Even less with her son. I was really afraid the day I started my period. Because she hadn't explained anything. When I saw the bloodstains in my underwear, I came out of the bathroom and told Maman. My brothers were there. Maman hurried me into the bedroom and explained things to me. She said I shouldn't talk about it in front of my brothers. It's something only for women. And she announced that I had become a woman. She gave me a sanitary pad. Asking me not to leave it lying around in the bathroom. And to wash it out by myself. With Marseille soap. And that's all. But my cousins explained everything to me. In fact, my breasts have begun to grow. There are two hard bumps on my chest. They hurt when I touch them. Or when I knock into someone in gym class. But I have to hide my breasts. I know boys become men on the day of their circumcision. I heard women saying it to Samir and Amine the day they were circumcised. I was still young, but I remember it very well. I thought when they stood up again, they'd have suddenly grown. They placed some money on their knees and said: now you're a man. We threw a big party that day. After it was over, the women cheered. Maman brought in the little bits of flesh that were cut on napkins filled with jasmine flowers. She hid them. After they danced. My mother made couscous and

cookies for everyone. The boys got a lot of gifts. I wonder why there's a party for the boys, but nothing for girls when they become women. It seems almost shameful, becoming a woman. So when I had my first period, I looked it up in a medical dictionary. In secret, of course. In the one Mohamed bought in the market at Belcourt. That's where we get books now. Men have a penis and testicles, and women have lips and a thin, fragile bit of skin over the sexual organs. That's called the hymen. It's another name for virginity. A little piece of skin that stays intact until you're married. If it doesn't, there's serious trouble. For the whole family. It's very important. Because if it's broken, you can't get married. On the wedding night, you can't wear a "caraco." When the man comes to consummate the marriage. On Faitha's wedding day, Maman's younger sister, everything happened very quickly. At ten p.m., her husband went to the bedroom. He shut the door behind him. After half an hour, his friends knocked on the door, calling him. Because they were impatient to see him. His mother was with them. So he opened the door and threw out her slip. My aunt, the eldest sister, danced with Faitha. Holding it with both her hands above her head. So they could see better. On it, there were hairs and streaks of blood. And all the women cried out joyfully. They said she had been "relieved." But that has to hurt. Because you bleed. When I get married, I'm going away. Far away. So they don't do this to me. And I'm not marrying someone they choose for me. But of course I'll only give myself to someone who knows how to love me. To my future husband. For better or for worse. More better, I hope. And I hope that we'll face the trials of life. And they will make us stronger. Like in stories. If not, it's not worth getting married. Faitha didn't smile once on her wedding day. But she was very beautiful. She wore beautiful dresses. My grandfather arranged a marriage

with a soldier. I heard them say that he couldn't refuse. There would be trouble otherwise. Because soldiers are heroes. You can't refuse a hero anything. Even the most precious items. Women would give them their jewels and money in the name of solidarity. Maman didn't give anything. Because she doesn't have any jewels. Last year, she sold the ones she had to buy us new school supplies. But the other women, even if they don't have many, gave all their jewels to the president. In his speech on television, he said that he'd decided to create a solidarity fund. It's called the National Solidarity Funds. So Algeria can start to move ahead. Because the State is too young to survive alone. And since the French left, there's no money left in the banks. They took it all. So there's no money for schools, construction, etc. So Maman went down to the town hall. Women lined up to give everything they could. Even the ones who didn't have much participated in the "solidarity campaign." They did interviews on the radio. They always said they were happy to participate in the construction of our country. My grandmother gave some gold louis. Everything she'd been saving up for so long. The ones she'd been saving for a rainy day, Maman said. There were boxes full of gold and silver jewelry. They came from all over. All over Algeria. The television ads said that spontaneous contributions show the rest of the world the sacrifices and solidarity of the Algerian people. We give everything we have for development and progress. By the people and for the people. Otherwise nothing.

CHAPTER VII

HIM

It's starting again. And my father left. He went to war again. And many other men with him. It's general mobilization. We hear patriotic songs everywhere. In the city hall, in schools, in stores. In the stadiums where the men volunteer. This time, we don't hear gunshots in the city. Because the war is far away. Far from Algiers. Thousands of kilometers. Night and day, you can see trucks full of men in arms go by. They go off to war singing. To defend the country. To defend the fatherland. It takes place in the desert. In the Sahara. The Moroccans crossed the borders into the country. Their king wants to capture part of Algeria. But this is our land. It's watered with the blood of our martyrs. That's what the president said in his speech on TV. He repeated it three times: *Hagrouna! Hagrouna! Hagrouna!* Saying that our weakness helped them. And he explained. It's because our men had only just returned from the last war. Our wounds weren't yet healed. We have no planes. There aren't enough arms. Not enough men. With all the deaths in the war, it's natural. He said that one had shamefully attacked a feeble, dying country. When they heard this, the women began to cry. And the flags came out. They hung them on the balconies. They shouted: "Long live Algeria!" All of the men who had returned from the war a little over a year ago want to go fight in this other one. They want to die for the fatherland. Even Hamid wants to defend the country. He told my father: I'm going with you. My mother started to cry. I wonder if the women will ever stop crying. For their sons, their husbands, their brothers. My father told Hamid: get your degree first. He'll get it next year. I hope the war will be over by then. I don't want to go to war. But I think I must be the only one. Or maybe

no one wants to say it. Especially in front of others. That's the only thing my friends talk about. Our new history and geography teacher explained the situation to us. First he drew a map of Algeria on the board. He talked about its borders. He wrote the definition of the word "border" on the board: something that indicates the limits of a country. I've never seen any borders. I know the shape of some countries, but I don't know how they were drawn, or who did it. There are some bizarre shapes. If you turn your head to the side a little, France looks like an old man with a little goatee and a turban. I know because the map of France used to be the only one on the board. When I was in grade school. And we had to draw them in our notebooks. With brown for the mountains. And green for the plains. And blue all around. For the sea. I don't know how a border is marked. Maybe there are really high walls. So high that no one can climb them. Or maybe barbed wire. Thousands of kilometers of barbed wire. But the teacher said it was just an imaginary line that separated countries. That was Morocco and that was Algeria. And Algeria is larger than Morocco and Tunisia. If it's an imaginary line, how can anyone know? Especially in the desert. You walk and walk and walk, and you're in another country. Because the desert is all the same. Sand and mountains. And if even if you meet someone, you can't know if he's Moroccan, Algerian, or Tunisian. Because we look alike. And we speak the same language. The teacher explained that it was so everyone knew where their country began and ended. Presidents and kings agreed and signed some papers. I don't know who decided and signed for us. Because we didn't have the same leaders before. We couldn't decide for ourselves. It's very complicated. I was afraid of asking and seeming stupid. So I didn't say anything. And then he talked about mineral resources. Iron deposits. He said that Algeria is a rich country. We have

iron. We have gas. We have oil. We're richer than the neighboring countries. That's why they're jealous. Until recently, they were sister countries. But even sisters can be jealous. So they fought. He said that Morocco wanted a part of our country because of the iron. Iron ore deposits in Gara Djebilet, in the Tindouf basin. He explained words like sovereignty, inviolability, international conventions. But the class didn't hear. The words were too complicated for them. In the middle of class, they started singing *Kassamen*. And they brought in everyone else. We opened classroom doors and told students to come out. We even got the sixth graders out. We assembled in the courtyard. The principal wanted to make us go back inside, but none of us wanted to listen to him. He was running all over the place. But he couldn't stop us from singing *Djazaïrouna,* the song of our Algeria. The older ones said to him: we're not just making a racket. We're saying how much we love Algeria. We're not going to sit with our arms crossed while men are dying. They even made him salute the flag. And he stayed out on the playground watching us. We were lined up in rows. And we marched around. Military salute and rhythmic steps. One! Two! We did as best we could. We hadn't had any training. We went around the court several times. We wanted to go out into the street, but the principal had closed the doors. So everything ended in total disaster. But we had a good laugh. And we'd gotten out of two hours of class! When I told my mother what we'd done, she said: you can't help the country like that. Just the opposite. I think she's right. But we've been at war ever since we were little. So we have to have fun once in a while. The next day, when I went to school, they told me students had really signed up. They were going to war. All the students were in their last year. That meant even more mothers crying. And maybe more deaths and fewer scholars.

CHAPTER VIII

HER

The day was fine in my dream.

And we were together

Holding hands.

Our beach was blue.

My sun at its height

was the color of my love.

We ran

We held each other's hands.

And under each of our steps,

In the sand,

A flower came to life.

Shadow and velvet

Flower of night

In the heart of day

Did you say

Do you remember?

I don't know who those lines are addressed to, written in my notebook. Certainly to the person who would one day live in my dreams. I don't know who he is, what he's doing at this moment. But I know he exists. He must. And he'll read these someday. I often think about the person I'll fall in love with. My only, my one true love. He has to be out there somewhere. Maybe not too far. I know I should think of something else.

My studies, for example. But I can't keep myself from dreaming. From writing. From letting my imagination run for hours at a time. From go beyond and start inventing lives. At that moment, nothing interests me. Everything seems boring. It's a good thing I have books. That's my only consolation in those somber days. When I open the pages, it's like I'm on a magic carpet. Very high and very far. But sometimes getting off is hard. Because there are others. My brothers. My mother. My family. Everyone still below, gesturing and calling for me to come back. Telling me not to go too far without them. They're keeping an eye on me. Lilas, come put the dishes away! Lilas, go get some, or sugar! Lilas, set the table! Lilas, come back down! And they get angry because I grumble. I have to obey. Because I'm a girl. I don't understand my mother. On one hand, like all the women in the building, she complains about always serving others. First her father, then her brothers. Then her husband. And now her sons. On the other hand, she wants me to be like her. But I don't want to be the daughter who stays quiet when others tell her what to do! Who's quiet and obedient. They're only thinking about my happiness. That's what they say. Of course. I'm the youngest. The only girl. And I'm fifteen. But they don't understand that I'm not a little girl anymore. Can the happiness I dream of be the same as the one they envision for me? I don't want a happiness that just pleases others. I want to follow my own path in life. Not wait for someone to take me by the hand. So I set a goal. To succeed. So I don't have to depend on others. So I can be free and independent. It's possible, because the Revolution isn't finished. Everyone keeps saying that women have rights. We celebrated International Women's Day on March 8. There were meetings, marches, and even, it seemed, some spontaneous demonstrations. And the president, our former president, promised that

women would one day be equal to men. But he didn't say when. Even one of the Party leaders said: men have their rules, and so do women. That's right, said the reporters who quoted him. It was in a speech, and it seems no one smiled. The same leader said: in the past, we were standing at the edge of an abyss, and now, thanks to God, we've taken a step forward. We took this step on June 19. On the radio and the in the newspapers, they said it was a "Revolutionary recovery." My uncle says it's a coup d'État. That's the day President Ben Bella was thrown in prison. Because he wasn't a good president. That's what they told us afterwards. But everyone had voted for him. He was replaced by a Council of the Revolution. The raïs who led them looked as if he didn't laugh often. His expression was very severe. And his eyebrows were always raised. That's why we don't laugh very much. I don't know if he'll keep the promises Ben Bella made to women. But he's a Revolutionary hero. He promised to revive the country, which was slipping off course. It's like a captain taking control of his ship to keep it from sinking. The way he seized power could also be considered mutiny. Like in *Le Cuirassé Potemkine*. But for different reasons. We're not on a ship. I really liked that film. Especially the part where the people of Odessa came to support the battleships. The audience all applauded then. Some of the women even cried out. Before the attack. And everyone gasped at the scene where the baby carriage fell down the harbor steps. It's the most beautiful film in the world, the debate moderator said. After every film, there's a debate at Ciné-pop. I'm impatient for the end of the week so I can go. My uncle takes us in his car. The cinema's not like others. Every week, they show a new film. For popular culture. Tickets aren't expensive. Most of the people get in without paying. And there are cinema experts who come in and explain the film to us. Directors and such. I even got some autographs.

René Vauthier, for example. My uncle said that the sessions were Vauthier's idea. Among others. But he's the most famous one, because he made films on Algeria. There are always so many people at these sessions that they end up sitting in the aisles, on the stairs. The room is too small. Once there was even a short circuit. We heard some crackling. We saw sparks. And then the lights went out. And since we'd been through the war, we were really scared. We thought it was a raid. Everyone shouted. We tried to get out of the room. But luckily, they reassured us. They quickly took control of the situation. They repaired the cables, which had gotten too warm. And the projection started again. They show a lot of Russian films at Ciné-pop. And Revolutionary films. My favorite is *Quand passent les cigognes*, with Tatiana Samïlova as Veronika. Maman and I cried through almost the entire film. And people handed tissues around the room. I wonder what they're like. The actors, I mean. When you see them onscreen, you don't feel like they're playing a role. At the end of the session, my mother told me that it had felt like the day she'd said goodbye to my father. That she was Veronika. Or had been her. Someone who'd seen her love go far away during the war. The death of Veronika's fiancé, killed with a bullet to the chest, reopened Maman's wound. And there were other coincidences all throughout the film. She was also taken in by my father's parents. We lived with them for a while before settling in Algiers. But she didn't betray my father. Veronika married Mark, her fiancé's cousin. Maman never thought of marrying another man. It would have been difficult, with four children. And it's impossible in our family. We couldn't even imagine it. A widow with children can think of nothing but her children. Before she's a woman, she is first and only a mother. When Maman explained this to me, I was happy at first. Because that meant no one would ever replace my father.

And I was used to our life. Our family. If there were another man, he would be a stranger. But later I thought it must be hard to live without a man's love. Without his shoulder to lean on. Maman always says that we need "shoulders" to get something, now. And the one who could have given her that protection is gone. Her love is dead. And for her, everything else died with him. Now she has to forget that she's a woman. No doubt that's why she always wears the same skirts, the same sweaters. And she chooses colors that aren't really colors. Gray, black, and marine blue. She never thinks about dressing up or doing her makeup. Not even for a party or a wedding. I don't know if I could. If I could give up beauty. That's not to say I think I am beautiful. I just mean dressing up, putting on makeup and doing my hair and such. She wasn't very old when my father died, just twenty-eight. But I had never thought of that. When we got back from the film, she told me. Not in front of my brothers. We went into the bedroom. We got into bed and, when the lights were out, she started talking. It was the first time she'd talked to me like that. As if she was talking to a friend. Maybe that's what films are for. And books. To keep us from feeling alone. To keep us from hiding away in our problems, our hearts alone. While she talked, my heart broke. I didn't know how much she'd suffered. To be honest, I had never thought about it. My father was gone. That's all. I was upset when I saw the other fathers. I was jealous when I saw them walking down the street hand in hand with their daughters. It was as if he'd abandoned me in the middle of the path of life. But I was thinking of myself. Only myself. Never my mother. I always thought we were missing something, or someone. Now I realize that, even though I can't find words for my suffering, I wanted my father to. I wanted him to explain how he could abandon us without thinking of us. When you have children, you

have to think of them before thinking of the Revolution. But taking part in the Revolution is also thinking of your children, I realize that now. And I wonder who, in this situation, suffers most. The one who goes or the one who stays. If there was another war and my husband had to go, called by duty, I would be very upset. Especially if I had to take care of our children alone. It's too difficult. But what matters most to men is being men. In other words, showing they're courageous. Proving they know how to sacrifice themselves. When it's necessary. And nothing is more necessary than liberty. So the struggle for our Independence is necessary. Men aren't afraid. Men don't cry. As for us, the women, there's nothing for us to do but bear with it, pray, and wait. And cry.

CHAPTER IX

HIM

Her name is Lilas. Before her, I'd never heard that name. Normally, here, we say Leïla. There are a lot of Leïlas. But she's Lilas. With an s at the end. That's what she told me. And I think she's the only Lilas in the world. She's seventeen. One year younger than me. And eyes that could sink a fleet of battleships. Even on a calm day. Everything. Everything about her floors me. Her eyes. Her smile. Her voice. The way she walks. The way she waves when she sees me far off. And I don't even want to think about her body. Better not to. For years we've lived in the same building, in the same building, and I never noticed her! I can hardly believe it. All that lost time! She's lived here longer than us. Her family was already living in these buildings when the French were here. Before 1962. Still on the second floor. The door on the right. Not in the same apartment they're in now. The one just across the hall. Now I know everything about her. Almost everything. Because I talk to her. Because we see each other. Because we're in love. Well, I'm not exactly sure about her. We haven't said those important words yet. Those The ones you say with a quivering heart and their eyes in eyes met. I've never felt that. I've never said I love you to a girl. Everything happened so fast. I haven't told her how I feel yet. I don't know if I could someday. We're still at the beginning. We shouldn't go too fast. But I'm sure she knows. She understands. She can't not understand. She'd have to be blind. I want her to know that I can't go a day without seeing her. Wherever she goes, she finds me along her way. As if by accident. Nonchalantly. And it's thanks to her brother Amine that I could speak to her. I've known him a long time. We know everyone living in the apartments. Naturally; we're

neighbors. And we're about the same age. We played ball together in the little street behind the building and smoked our first cigarettes in the hallway downstairs, before going home. I also know her two other brothers. The medical student and the youngest, Samir, the one they call the artist. I can't stop thinking about the first time I saw her. I mean really saw her. Noticed her. Because I must have passed by her hundreds of times. But that day, she was wearing a very short orange dress, with small beige and yellow accents, with big sleeves like a butterfly's wings. She was with Amine. She was walking. I think they had just stepped off. I was in front of them. There was a wind. It blew her dress against her body. It was like she was naked. A vision with color and dimension. All the lines of her body were drawn so carefully, I felt dizzy. Something like Ursula Andress in *Dr. No*. That's the effect she had on me. Because in my bed at night, I think a lot about the scene where Ursula Andress comes out of the water with her dress all wet. And I'm sure I'm not the only one. I know plenty of others who've been captivated by her. Lilas is even more beautiful than Anna Karina, who I just saw, rue Didouche. She was with Marcello Mastroianni. They came to make a film in Algiers. *L'Etranger*. That's the name of the film. A story that takes place in Algiers during colonization. It's directed by Visconti. He did other films that were shot here. I have friends who've been in them. The money was quite good. I still think Lilas looks a little like Anna Karina. They both have something fragile and dreamy in their expressions. I don't know where it comes from. Her eyes, maybe, slightly turned to the temples, her delicacy, the way she walks. She's…she's truly beautiful. When I saw her, I stopped in my tracks. I must have seemed like a real idiot, because as she approached, she smiled at me, like you might at some simple-minded person. I just had time to think: Amine sure

is lucky! Because I didn't know. I didn't know it was his sister. Even so…good God! I wonder how I could have done it! In all these years, how did I pass by without noticing her? If I'd told about this, no one would have believed me. Since then, I started running. Middle-distance. I'm not chasing her. I'm spending time with her brother. Getting to know him better. We go to the Ruisseau stadium twice a week to train. Sometimes more. 1500 meters, then 800. We can run 3000 meters, but we're definitely exhausted. We go so many rounds so that my legs feel wobbly after an hour. But I try to keep my head up. I'm not very resilient, but I'm motivated. Every time I start to wear down, I imagine her at the end of the track. In her orange dress. And I take off again, with a renewed energy. So I run. Putting my whole heart into it. Amine is ahead. He's far ahead of me. He's won several junior league races. He was even selected for the Mediterranean Games. And he wants to go farther. I'm out of breath. Just because I don't have the same ambitions as him. In terms of records and selections. But I keep going. I like soccer much better. Passes. Dribbles. Nutmegs. "He made it's rattling the bleachers. But I don't shine there, either. I'd rather be on the bench or in front of the TV. So I might as well! I pick him up before going to the stadium. And most of the time, she opens the door. The other day, his mother asked me in. To wait for Amine inside, because he wasn't ready yet. I had time to take things in. So I can imagine what she's doing, where she is, in the evenings. Now we talk when we meet on the stairs—by accident, of course. Hello. Hello. How are you? And you? It's cold this morning. But sunny. What about your ankle? Is it better? Nothing more. But these brief exchanges prove that she's definitely interested. That she talks about me with Amine. And if her brother is with her, the three of us head out for a bit. I always have some reason to be

going the same way. She's sitting for her baccalauréat exams this year. Like me. And if I graduate, if we both graduate, we'll go to university together. And it will be easier. That's the only reason I work. Single-mindedly. If my father knew that I was working so hard for reasons other than his! It was the only thing we ever talk about at home. Ever since Hamid failed his exams, all the pressure has been on me. Less from my mother. But my father! He took Hamid's failure as a personal affront. It took a while to process. He was so stunned that Amid was able to enlist in the army without giving him any warning or asking his permission. It was the day after we got the test results. He signed up for seven years. And he came back to tell our father. He's of age. For Hamid, it's simple. He says that he's thought about it. He didn't act without thinking things through. The army is the future. The future belongs to strong countrymen. And strong men are the ones who wear stars and polished gold djebels on their military stripes. Today, the top brass are colonels or military colonels. The president himself is a colonel. And since he came to power, he's had total control. Hence the following equation: Army = Power. That's what Hamid thinks and says. Moreover, as the sons of a former Mujahid, one can have certain privileges. Particular ones, Hamid says. For me it's knowledge, my studies. For him it's power. A little like that. Altogether. At least, that's what my parents are hoping. Even so, he signed up to sit for his bacalauréat again at the special session. He thinks he can easily get a better score than me. Because of the uniform. And every degree he earns lets him rise one level higher. Right now, he's been appointed to the South. At Tindouf. Where the battles against the Moroccans took place during the Sand War, three years ago now. But things have calmed down since then. My father knows the region well, since he was there. For most of the year, it's about 100 to

120 degrees in the shade. My mother is really worried about her son. Scorpions. Sunstroke. Being thirsty. Getting lost in the middle of the desert. The first time he came back, he was hardly recognizable as the timid, insecure boy who spent hours looking in the mirror. A man stood in front of us. Even my father was impressed. Military haircut. Sunburned face. It even looked like he'd grown. He said the sun was the best acne treatment. Sun and open air. And he added seriously: you should go there.

CHAPTER X

HER

If the bus arrives before I've counted to twenty, I'll pass my exams. If someone rings the doorbell while I'm studying, that's what the question will be about. For everything I see and hear, that's how it is. Morning till night, I cling ro everything I see, everything that goes on around me. I know it's stupid. But I can't keep from betting on the future. From searching everywhere for what feeds my fears and hopes. For several weeks now, I've been obsessed with exams. My mother, too. For several reasons. For one, my brothers all passed. So there's no question of failure. It would be the first in the family. So I absolutely must pass. Not for them. For me. I know the path I want to follow necessarily leads through those doors. A narrow door, because I haven't worked very hard this year. Actually, I've just started working seriously. I'm afraid. All year I felt weighed down with a sense of culpability because I couldn't concentrate on my lessons. But I knew very well the date was approaching. But other things were calling to me. Things I couldn't resist. Looks. Words. Gestures. It's a wonderful thing, knowing you're admired. And even better knowing you're loved. Even if I don't know if I return his feelings. I don't know if I love him. But I love that he loves me. That he comes calling almost every evening to see Amine. That he sits on the edge of a wall, just across from the apartments, and waits for hours to see me at the window or on the balcony. I love that I always meet him on the way to any destination. And that he makes it seem like nothing. That he stammers a little before answering my questions. I love how he doesn't know to smile at any of my jokes. If he thinks I'm not onto his game, he's wrong! Strange, I've never noticed him before. Before, he never paid any attention to

me. And yet he lives in the same building, on the eighth floor. But ever since the evening I met him as Amine and I were coming home, I've been seeing him everywhere. We talk every so often. Just small talk. And it's obviously enough to keep him happy. You can tell. There's no question of us going out together. For one thing, although I think he's somewhat cute, in spite of the pimples, he's not really my type. I really like his hair, very black, and I especially like the lock of hair (a little too long) that falls over his face. He looks a bit like Samy Frey, my favorite author. I also like the shape of his eyebrows, and the color of his eyes. Hazelnut brown. He's tall, but he's always hunched over as if there's a wind at his back. And he seems to walk a little crookedly against the wind. Furthermore, I'm not allowed to go out with any boys. Not allowed to date where any of my family or neighbors might find out. I should say, I'm not officially allowed to. Because it's actually possible. We could arrange something. In secret. Like most girls. But my studies come first. That's that. I don't want to think of anything else. Maybe next year. If I pass. If I go to college. Everything will be easier. And then I'll be much freer. It seems at college you can skip classes without an excuse. And the schedules are lighter. What a life! I don't even know what I want to major in. I'm hesitant. I'm indecisive. As always. If I had to fill out a profile, under "psychological," I would put: "principal fault: indecision." For qualities, I don't know. It seems that I'm cheerful. Cheerful, but a little too inclined to daydreaming. That's what Myriam says. But she's my friend. That's why. Still, she knows everything brewing inside me. What makes me angry, or rebellious, or envious. They're the same for her. That's why we're friends. But she can talk about them. Live them. Live them without being called out. She's not afraid of anything or anyone. And she has wonderful parents. They trust her. And that's

why she's so strong and sure of herself. They let her go out with her friends. Go to parties. Act in plays. Dress the way she wants. They don't measure the length of all her skirts. No inspection before she goes out. She wears miniskirts, pants, and tight-knit outfits. And they don't care what people say. But they don't live in an apartment building. They don't have neighbors who see and know everything. She doesn't need to lie. To hide. To invent dozens of stories just to snatch a few moments of happiness. She lives her life as she pleases. And she never does anything wrong. But what is "wrong"? Profound question, my philosophy teacher would say. Well, wrongness, it's a notion, a concept, right, which requires different perspectives, different approaches. Right? This whole idea goes along with the notions of morality and religion, right?—with liberty, justice, and of course taking situations and cultures into account. Right? In particular if you have to try to define this idea, you know, as opposed to the concept of "right." The philosophy teacher's name is Mademoiselle Audret, and we nicknamed her Mamselle S'pa. Because of this verbal tic she has. And because she swallows the first syllable of her catchphrase. And during it, the student sitting in the back row snaps the elastic of the bra on the girl in front of her. As if echoing the hundreds of "s'pa"s. Everyone is busy with their lessons; she doesn't notice anything. Such is our form of amusement. It makes us laugh all year. Without wanting to hurt anybody. Laugh without doing much good, as a means of relieving our tension. To help us deal with the pressure. But oftentimes, the things that do us good are forbidden. Or my mother and I disagree on the subject. She keeps repeating that everything she does, everything she keeps me from doing or forces me to do is for my own good. And she's the only judge of what's good for me. I know the list of things I have to do to be a good girl. The things a girl from a good family must

or must not do so she won't be considered a "loose woman," a trashy woman. But of course, these rules vary between the sexes. The philosophy teacher didn't tell us that. What's bad for girls might not be for boys. Quite often. And the other way around. Our mothers spend a lot of time teaching us to cook, clean, and obey men; it's the ultimate goal. Of course, it doesn't apply to boys. Unthinkable. But if I understand correctly, sometimes good or bad is situational. Take for example Aziza, from the tenth floor. She's beautiful. Even other women say so. She has a regal bearing. Dark green eyes, framed by thick, dark lashes, while the veil covering her face only served to accentuate the subtle nuances. She wasn't even sixteen when she was married. She was married so young, she told Maman, because she was too beautiful and had too much spirit. She could have caused problems for her family. Serious problems. Nothing is more serious than problems that a girl might make for her family. Especially girls for whom nature has provided a bit too generously. I think, if they'd had a choice, her parents would have had girls that weren't extraordinarily beautiful or extraordinarily ugly. And not overly intelligent, either. Aziza's father didn't seem able to accept this gift from God, so he married her to the first man who offered. On the other hand, they'd named her Aziza, "the well loved." You have to be careful naming a baby. Because afterwards you have to give the child reason to believe he was named well. Aziza is now thirty years old. Six children. A husband who humiliates and exploits her, and strikes her whenever she dares a remark, or just when he feels like it. I think he's jealous. In the beginning, when there were no children, he shut her in when he went out. And she can't leave him, because she has nowhere to go. Her father refuses to take her back in. Her husband is a truck driver. So he's away often. Fortunately. And despite her life, she's still as beautiful as ever. So,

because she'd had enough of the humiliation and exploitation and beatings, she decided to be happy, one day she decided to be happy. In spite of him. When he isn't there, she puts on her most beautiful dresses, does her makeup, sends her eldest children to school and leaves the others with her neighbor, her secret accomplice. And she goes out, wrapped in her haïk, her face covered with a veil of organdie and lace. So no one in the apartments or the neighborhood notices that she's wearing makeup or had dressed any differently. Because everyone watches everyone else in the apartments. The haïk is definitely useful! You can go unnoticed, unrecognized, especially if you hide your face except for a glimpse of an eye. That's what she did. And she went all over protected by her veil; certainly she was at parties. I think she saw other men. I'm almost sure of it, even though Maman doesn't let me listen to everything Aziza tells her. When she comes to our apartment, Maman sends me out and they start whispering. When she comes back to assure us her husband hasn't come back yet—he never tells her how long his trips will be—she stops in to call her neighbor, who was also keeping a lookout. If he's there, she asks the neighbor to send the children down, then she comes back up with them. She tells her husband that she was at her mother's. With the children, of course. Her mother knows everything. She protects her. She only wants the best for her daughter. Even if she knows that what she's doing is wrong. I mean, that doesn't happen in our home. A married woman who sees other men. It's a really serious thing. Women can be sentenced to death by stoning for adultery. Not here, fortunately. Even though we're Muslims, we're not barbarians. One doesn't necessarily imply the other, as Mohamed would say. But apparently some Muslim countries punish women that way. Not men. When someone mentions adultery, I can't help but think of Zohra, and how terrified she

was. Zohra lives on the fourth floor. Always her. Ever since Mohamed enrolled in medical school, people go to him. Because now, with all the buildings in the neighborhood mixed up, having a doctor in the complex is a form of security. And something everyone was proud of. Actually, he's only in his third year. But we've called him Doctor since his first class at medical school, in general education. Everyone waited impatiently for him to learn how to do injections and take people's blood pressure. And we get regular updates on his classes, impatiently waiting for him to study this or that sickness so we can go to him. One evening, Zohra came over. It was midnight. She was in a panic. She wanted to know if her son was safe. She had gone, by accident, to give him his "adulterer's" suppositories. Mohamed had reassured her solemnly. But to come back to the main question, which concerns Aziza. In her situation, even if she understands that she's breaking the law, or the laws of marriage—fidelity and such—can she sacrifice it all for something that made her happy? Materially and physically. It's certainly something to be considered, because when she comes back from her trips her eyes are always sparkling and she brings some bags that she'll sometimes leave with my mother until she can come and get them. And in those bags, there are often toys and candy for the children. So? If I'm happy, if I feel it necessary for my life, my stability, and considering I don't hurt anyone except those who've hurt me—what do the opinions of others mean? According to Mademoiselle S'pa and Spinoza, there's no good or bad within us. There's just desires, fulfilled or not. With all these examples in front of me, I'll hang myself if I don't get an eighteen out of twenty on my philosophy exam.

CHAPTER XI

HIM

Finally, it's useful to know how to run. More specifically to run quickly. Long-distance or middle-distance. It was all a question of training, endurance, and timing. These last few days, I haven't needed to go to the stadium to train. Something I haven't done in a long time. But since I was fit, they couldn't catch me. I would never have thought my training might help me escape some policemen. My friends weren't as lucky. They didn't have the same abilities or reflexes. They only got a few meters before they were arrested. I ran. I must have shattered all the records in Algeria. In Africa, even. While I was running, for some reason, I thought about what my grandmother said: fear can make even infirm old men run. The big show. With qualifiers. No podiums or medals for the victors, most of who vanished into thin air. On the other hand, the people who were eliminated got free housing. At the police stations. With no luxuries, no complimentary breakfasts. Maybe a complimentary beating. Still, we didn't really shake the foundations of the nation. As Rachid would say, there is no such thing as a foundation of the Party. There are only seats. But in the Party newspaper (the only newspaper), it generally says: a small group of students manipulated by the foreigner into attempting to undermine the Revolution. The imperialist hydra isn't dead. More than ever, we have to remain loyal to the values of November 1, 1954. The police have come to thwart the same small group. Algerians, more united than ever or more than ever united, must remain vigilant in the face of these enemy attacks, from groups both inside and outside who've come to undermine the basis and the achievements of the nation. End of story. Rachid is in prison. We don't know which one, or for how long. Saïd and

the rest were released after some rough interrogations. We had to shake them to put their thoughts in order again. They were still in shock. Faïza and Saléha spent two nights at the police station. Their parents were out of their minds with worry. After getting out, we didn't see them in class anymore. Because classes started again on February 18. After a fifteen-day strike. The girls were with us when the police surrounded the school to evict us. First we took shelter in the lecture halls, but they finally got inside. They tried to block all the exits. Then came the stampede. We couldn't escape the blows. But that was nothing compared to what they did to the ones they took away. And the girls weren't spared. Before they entered the inner part of the school, they had even called for backup from the dockers at the port. They were setting foot in a university for the first time in their lives. Many of them, once they were inside, didn't want to help them. We made friends with them. It made me think of a film I'd seen a few years ago, *Le Cuirassé Potemkine*, when the army, who'd been called in to subdue a revolt, refused to fire on the *Potemkine* mutineers. Our balance in the negative. None of our demands were met. Honestly, I didn't go into the details of our demands. I'd never been to a Unea meeting. But I agreed with them on principle. Solidarity. Except for the ones at medical school. I know something about them beginning the strike in defense of freedom of speech and to oppose the Party's takeover of mass organizations, starting with ours. I'm especially aware that we're all under close surveillance now, very close, because of our counter-revolutionary activities. My father is furious with me for hanging out with these "vagabonds." But in any case, my father has always been against freedom of speech. Starting with his own family. Now, he's responsible for the Kasma FLN in our neighborhood. He's important. You can see it right away from the way people greet

him. In the buildings, everyone asks him to intervene. For pension regulations, paperwork for former Mujahids, handicapped claims, job applications, and whatnot. He often helps people who could be useful to him one day. He admits it. But it's been cramped in the apartment for several months now. A place, he says, that doesn't fit his new position. Not with the image he's wanted to present since his climb up the social ladder. Especially now that he's gotten his law degree, having taken some evening classes for people like him, who gave up their studies to join the ALN. Courses he almot never went to, by the way. He regrets not being insightful enough in 1962, when he got out of prison. He always says that he should have gotten an allocation for a lovely villa in Hydra or El Biar. Like the others. When he says "others," he means his comrades **in** arms who had more foresight and managed better. Every time he's going up the stairs, he curses the scruffy concierge, whom he doesn't pay; he curses the broken elevator, the lightbulbs that are never replaced, the kids congregated in the halls. Still, he knows that the president himself encouraged Algerians to have children. To repopulate the country. So we have enough brainpower to face the challenges and develop the country. And in the apartments, everyone has eagerly begun this task. Not a week goes by that my mother isn't invited to celebrate a baby's seventh day. When he gets to our floor, out of breath because he's gotten heavier, he continues cursing. At my mother. Because she's there. My mother never responds, instead taking refuge in the kitchen, where he never sets foot. I think he's angry with her because she doesn't fit with his new work, with his new position, and his political ambitions—charged with some important responsibilities; who knows? But she hasn't changed. She still wears the same long dresses, her headscarves, her haïk. She still doesn't know how to read or write. But he can't blame

her for that. He never wanted her to take any classes to learn. She doesn't see the other women in the apartments very often. Except for Lilas's mother. My father makes an exception for her, because she's educated and unlike the others. Furthermore, her son is in medical school. He hasn't finished yet, but he's an intern at Mustapha Hospital, we can still call on him for help. Family ties are useful. Lilas and I. We can meet without it looking odd to her brothers or anyone else. And we don't curse the darkened stairs. On the contrary. That's the only place we can kiss. Really kiss, even go a little further. But no further than some caresses. She doesn't want to. It's normal for a girl like her. But it's frustrating. I'm saying that all the traditions and that crap from our parents has nothing to do with us, but she refuses to sleep with me. She says she wants to, but she's still too young. That we don't know each other well enough yet. But more than anything, she's afraid that I'll leave her afterwards. All her old-fashioned notions are holding her back. Everyone considers us a couple at school. We're at the same university. She studies psychology, and I'm in the law program. We go there together. We leave together. But once the bus drops us off in our neighborhood, we don't walk side by side in the street, and we don't go back inside together. Taking more precautions. She goes up first and waits for me in a corner on the landing. After a few minutes, I join her. And I fumble around in the dark. It excites both of us. But we're a serious couple, whatever she says; even if I go out with other girls now and then—without her knowing, obviously—to satisfy certain urges. I even told my mother about Lilas. Because she had a hunch. She kept dropping these hints. To tease me. Who are you getting all handsome for, hm? By the way, I just saw Lilas. She says hello. So I finally admitted it to her. Some of it, anyway. But like always, she said: finish school, and then we'll see. And we

need to get Hamid married first. He's the oldest. He asked my my mother to find a wife for him. But he made it really difficult, because he had such precise demands. She has to be modest, discreet, and above all, beautiful. For my part, I'm not totally convinced she can have the same standards as us, at least in this respect. But it's good that he's insistent. On her being beautiful, and particularly on her being just educated enough to raise the children well. He's a lieutenant now. He lives alone at Ouargla. Still down in the South. In a few years, he'll be promoted to captain. His future is all laid out. When he comes to see us, we don't talk very much. We still sleep in the same room, but our relationship has changed. We don't discuss that much outside our room. He never talks about what he's doing. He never says what he's thinking. I miss the time when, even though we fought, sometimes fiercely, we were still brothers. Stupidly laughing and joking around**.** Standing up together against my father's anger. Now I think Amid relates better to him than to me. They discuss politics, the country's situation, our options, our nation's assets. And when the president makes a speech, when he leads a meeting, when he opens a building site, when he visits a factory from the Revolution. They're almost standing at attention in front of the television. I get along better with Lilas's brother Amine than I do with my own brother. And he's not around much, either. He goes to competitions all across the country, even some foreign ones. He gets better every year. He was chosen for the Maghreb University Games. But his goal is to win a race at the Olympics. To win the first gold medal for Algeria. Of course, he doesn't know about Lilas and me. Samir does. Because he surprised us one day on the stairs when we were kissing. We hadn't even seen him come up. But he doesn't care. He's not like everyone else. He didn't say anything. He's only interested in music. To his

mother's despair. But he's very good at the guitar. He taught himself. And we often call him to liven up the neighborhood Ramadan parties. Amine and I go with him to pass time. Amine was happy when I announced that I was going to start training with him again. After I started seeing Lilas, I didn't see the use. But the way things are going, it could still be helpful.

CHAPTER XII

HER

I don't know what's happening to me. Rather, I know too well. It's mostly at night, after I leave Ali; I feel this sense of malaise well up in me. I'm waiting for something. Impatiently. There's a heat that creeps in, like a fire that can't be put out. And I can't talk about it to anyone. Myriam is gone. She went to a technical school in France to get her certification in special education for the deaf and mute. There are no such programs here. Not yet. We write to each other, but it's difficult to tell her about something that's so unfamiliar, so intimate. And in any case, I would be too afraid of someone intercepting the letter. One of my brothers, for instance. I can't talk to Ali about it, either. Especially not with him. Because he would find an explanation right away. One I don't want to hear. He would say: it's because you don't want to give into your desires. The ones you most want to. You're harming yourself with your repressions and inhibitions, with holding back. So naturally, your body is responding. I often have to remind him that I'm the one studying psychology. But he has explanations for everything. And he's very good at arguing. Especially when it comes to our relationships. I'd really like to hear what he has to say about these feelings. I could listen for hours. When he pleads his case, the judges will have to take steps to keep his speeches relatively short. I especially like the protective tone he has when he answers my questions. When he asks me, kindly, to go or not go somewhere, to do or not do what he thinks is good or bad for me. What surprises me is how easily I give in to his requests, maybe too easily. Oh, they're not commands; he says so himself. You can do whatever you want. I have no rights over you. You know that. But you also know that I don't

want anything to happen to you. You're the most important thing in the world to me. You know that. Yes, I know. So I end up agreeing with his objections. They're nearly the same as Maman's and Mohamed's, but I accept his more willingly because he isn't forbidding me. During the strikes at the university, he asked me to avoid lingering in the alleys and lecture halls, and even not to go to class when it was too hot. At first, I didn't agree. Because I'd discussed these things with my friends. I'd spoken my mind. I surprised even myself. And during the AGs, I voted to strike. I found myself becoming interested in politics, although I'd never really wanted to be. It's about us. Our desires. Our lives. We're the future. They're the past. They were our age when they took action, but they've forgotten. And it's up to us to make them remember. Does power necessitate deafness? All they have to do is listen. Even when the voices clash. How can we make any progress without these voices? How can a single party, a single way of thinking, represent an entire people, dictate their dreams, their aspirations? I don't remember where I found that phrase that now heads all my notebooks: the fever of the young heats the rest of the world. But I do know why I copied it down. I wish I could talk about it to Ali. We do discuss it, but sometimes I get the feeling he doesn't really like talking about it with me. He never restarts it. He only says that when he's with me, he doesn't want to revolutionize the world. He would rather we talk about something else. About us. About our future together. The standard path: marriage, children, financial security. Solid, concrete words. He says that we're serious. I can't help but think that it's maybe a little too serious. A little too fast. But he's insistent. He keeps pushing me. H's even talked to his mother. When I see her on the stairs and when she comes over, she smiles secretively at me, like we're accomplices. I think she approves of us. I hope she hasn't

hinted anything to Maman. Because I'm not really sure. I'm not sure if I want to make any serious commitment right away. To put myself under someone else's guardianship from now on. That's what Myriam said when I told her about the things Ali's and my plans. She even continued my argument with this quote by Kant: "It's so easy to be dependent." I would have liked **to** take life as it comes, step by step, alone and unaccompanied, and especially without anyone directing me where to go. But so be it…I know Myriam didn't finish the quote for fear of hurting me, but I think Kant drives his point home. "Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why mn forgte their freedom." I still remember some things from my philosophy classes. I know I have no one to blame but myself. I don't think I'm even capable of knowing what I want, of following my dreams. I don't even know what my dreams mean. Moreover, I love Ali. I love his hands on me. I love when he takes my hand and wraps an arm around my waist to show everyone at school we're a couple. I love the picture he paints of me. It feels wonderful to gaze into his eyes and lose myself in them. I especially like his agitation and impatience when we're alone, close together. He says I ask too many questions. That I'm needlessly philosophical. He says everything could be simple, if I would just trust him. And I can't. Not completely. I'm torn. I want to free myself of the rules that are holding me back, but at the same time, I'm scared. I know he wants to sleep with me. He's asked me, choosing his words carefully so he wouldn't shock me. He said: take our love to the end. But I don't dare go down that path. Cross the line. Ali is always talking about these lines, explaining that they're just invisible borders drawn by convention long ago. An old-fashioned convention. And, he continues emphatically, those days are gone. Don't you see that everything's changed? That we're condemned to follow the path of

progress? That we have to cast off prejudices that keep us from going forward? I feel as if he could stir a political meeting and mobilize the masses, as passionately as he speaks. Especially when he has a goal. I listen patiently. Every so often I smile, because these are the same words used by the people who cross the picket line and sent the police into the university. But coming from them, they're only double talk and slogans used by revolutionaries, meant to delude whoever hears them. He truly believes. He thinks that, in order to change the world, we must first have our own revolution. Everything wiped clean. I agree with him. But I wait. I don't dare do anything. Not only because I would betray my mother's confidence. Mostly, it's because I don't feel ready. I want to be. In the fifteen days I spent at home during the strike, I did nothing but read. Novels, of course. I buy a lot of them from the secondhand bookstore, which is at the end of the rue Didouche. And every time I come across a passage about two lovers, I feel their desire for one another. Strange and foreign sensations that I can't put words to. I don't dare. But when the neighboring women come to visit Maman, I still listen. They have no shame describing their relationships in detail. Crudely. They often talk about their husbands' desires. But mostly they talk about the measures they resort to in order to escape their "duty." All the reasons it's better to avoid intercourse. And not just for fear of getting pregnant. To hear them talk, I wonder if the negation of desire and pleasure is a way of protecting themselves against temptation. How many of them know what pleasure is? I even heard Fatiha say she refused to do what her husband asked because she was afraid he would think of her as a prostitute. Why would she associate orgasming as something forbidden, and consequently depraved? If it comes to this, why continue living with someone you can't stand? I know most of the women didn't know their

husbands before they were married, and never loved them. For them, as Zahia says, marriage can be summed up like this: a moment of peace, nine months waiting, then exhaustion for the rest of your life. That's not the life I want. I'm not like them. And I don't want—I especially don't want—to end up like them. Zahia is several years younger than my mother, but she seems much older. Prematurely deformed by too many pregnancies in quick succession, so that one can't tell anymore if she's pregnant or not. She's completely unconcerned with her body, her appearance, the image she could present, only a few years after she was a newlywed girl in silk and brocade, sitting on her throne, a single night—a young wife covered in gold and surrounded by flowers. Like most of the women who come here to vent. And they find that they're much better off, much happier, than other women before. Doubtlessly. Now they aren't nearly as constrained as my great-grandmother had been when she was young, sitting by a tree all day, waiting all day for her husband. Ever since I heard my mother describe that scene, I couldn't get the image out of my head. Her grandmother, or any other woman living in a douar, going into town or to visit another village (accompanied by her husband, of course), and subsequently left in an animal pen. She had to sit across from the tree, not leaning against it. Her body and head were veiled, with just a small opening for her eyes. Her only instruction: wait. For hours on end if necessary. Always waiting her master while he takes care of business at the weekly souk, where women weren't allowed. They were gathered in an enclosure. Forbidden to look at anything except the tree trunk, no doubt memorizing its bends and curves. Unmoving. Not eating or drinking. Until he returns and they climb back onto the donkey to head for home. The image of those women haunts me: all of them sitting, immobile, with nothing to do but wait for their

husbands to come and take them home. I don't think this happens anymore. Not even in the most backward villages. But there are other expectations. Ones that are just as grueling. All of them humiliating. Different ways of alienating a person. And maybe even with the name of love. All of it frightens me. I want to write my story all in blue, with words rustling with the clear dawn, lighter and more translucent than dewdrops in the heart of the fragile morning. Ali doesn't understand those words. He listens, but he says we have to be realistic. The future belongs to those who know how to shape their dreams to the world around them. That it's useless to want the moon when you have no ladder to reach it. But he admits that, oddly, it's what he loves about me. My resistance to his desire. And this lightness and unpredictability that I bring to his life. Then he goes on very pointedly to develop his theory about couples: when one wants to climb trees, the other must always wait below, to help her climb down again without breaking her neck.

A man accepting that a woman can climb trees is already progress. Considerable progress. But she must still be able to reach the top, and most of all, she must want to come down again.

CHAPTER XIII

HIM

Man walked on the moon. It's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind, we heard, directly from the moon. This will undoubtedly be what humanity remembers most about 1969. In Algeria, there might be the memory of the Pan-African Cultural Festival. The musicians. The singers, their bare breasts hidden away quickly under the emergency stash of white bras brought by the organizers, who were worried about offending people. Dancers from all over Africa come to soak up the light, the colors, and the street music of Algiers. Algiers, capital of all revolutions, asylum and refuge for all revolutionaries. What I'll remember about this year are my mother's tears. And especially my helplessness before those tears. Because I couldn't do or say anything to help her overcome her despair. To console her. Nothing but my solemn promise that I would never leave her. My father left. He lived with another woman. They already had a baby. His second wife. Everything happened in secret, in lies. He made up alibis that no one ever thought to question. Missions. Business trips. Meetings of the utmost importance to the country's future. And his, too. But my keen nose wouldn't have been any use. Sometimes, though, it's hard to face the evidence. We prefer to turn our gazes away. Because it's more convenient, or because we're afraid of being blinded. I only thought about myself, my studies, Lilas, our plans, our occasional disagreements, which seem trivial in comparison to our situation today. And I saw nothing—or didn't want to see anything. My mother says she'd had a premonition, a recurring dream that she lost the house key and couldn't get in. Regardless of the interpretation, I think a wife has to sense those things. With signs we can't detect, for various reasons. His absences, which

grew to be longer and more frequent, seemed normal given his work. And I didn't think about his snide remarks about my mother, which also became increasingly persistent and acerbic. She was useless, ignorant; the way she talked, walked, cooked, dressed were all wrong. My mother says that for a man as ambitious as him, a servant wife isn't enough. He needs something more. Moreover, everything that reminded him of his days as a common peasant annoyed him, now that he had such important political responsibilities. But he didn't allow her to join him on his unstoppable rise. She couldn't move forward. She always stayed three steps behind him. Never truly at his side. Just like the other women from her generation. And she always accepted everything. Courageously. Without recrimination. She accepted his absence all throughout the war. The solitude, the destitution. The responsibilities. Even in her despair, she remained clear-sighted. Just like always. The day my father decided to leave us for his new wife, she told him. It was the first time she'd spoken to him. Without lowering her eyes, I mean. I wasn't there. I don't know what he said. She didn't tell me about the discussion. She just murmured to herself, although I was there: anyone who trusts a man must think she can keep water in a sieve. I didn't ask any of the questions burning at my lips. Who is this woman? When did he meet her? And the baby? Where is he going to live? But I guess they worked everything out. I don't know if my mother asked for an explanation. She didn't tell me anything about it. What's there to say about someone who's left and now despises everything that ties him to a past he wants to forget? But I know one thing: he didn't look for me before he left. I didn't look for him, either. Maybe he didn't have the courage to see me. How can a father tell his son that he's going to start another family, erase everything they made together? I'll never forgive him for betraying us. I don't

want anything more to do with him. He took all his things with him when he left. He was out of our lives. But he promised to send money at the end of every month to provide for us. Right away, I told him we didn't want his money. That I could manage. But my mother said no. It's nothing to him, and he owes us the money, she said. The important thing now the initial shock has worn off is to act as if nothing has happened so the neighbors don't know. That's her main concern. We have to save face. Not let anything show. So she made me promise not to tell anyone. Not even Lilas. When anyone asks my mother for news about my father, she answers very naturally. Yes, he's well. No, he's not here. He's on a mission. And when he comes back, he has to leave again right away. He has a lot of work. We almost never see him anymore. But that's how politics go. She still accepts the neighbors' requests and complaints. Folders of their requests accumulate on a shelf, never sent. I know, because she confided in me that, early one morning, she went to the marabou of Belcourt, Sidi M'hamed. She gave him offerings and lit candles in his tomb. She promised to cover his tomb in the most sumptuous fabrics if my father would come home. When nothing happened, she went a few days later to ask another saint, Sidi Abderrahmane, patron of the city, reputed to help abandoned women and sick children. And she must have gone to see clairvoyants and talebs[1]. Discreetly. My father didn't come back. But the important thing is to act as if he had. As if nothing had changed. We have to keep up appearances. At all costs. These are the same reasons Lilas and I have to keep our relationship a secret. I couldn't even talk about her to Hamid! He's only worried about his career. At least, I think so. He only learned that my father had left when he came to get his permission. More than a

[1] People studying the Koran, possessing clairvoyant powers

month later. My mother didn't want to call and alarm him. When she announced the news to him with no further comment, he seemed shaken. Silent. He stiffened, turning his head away; then he left and shut himself in his room. I don't know if he tried to contact my father afterward. If he went to demand an explanation. It's usually his job, as the older brother. And currently, with our father's departure, he's the head of the family. That must be why my mother started to treat him the same way she had my father. She's at his service. And you can see the pride on her face when she looks at him; she's proud of having a man of his character in the house, one who can be counted on. It's not the same with you, she assures me. You're my little boy. You always will be. Hamid accepts her attentions without even thanking her. He doesn't even seem aware of them. When he's on leave, he takes his place back in our room. His bed is made every morning. His clothes are neat and pressed. And his plate is set in my father's place at the dining room table. We've become almost total strangers. He doesn't ask about what I'm doing. And I don't know anything about his work now. What military life is like down South. I don't know if his unit is planting trees in the green battle against the desert. An excellent project. I can't even talk to him. I've really tried. But he shirks any conversation. One day, he sat a long time flipping through one of the books on my bedside table. *Les Chemins de la vie*, by Makarenko. About the penitentiaries in the USSR, where they held minors He looked up at me and said: that's what we should do to those scruffy students at your school who want to destabilize the country. Send them to the camps. Preferably in the Sahara. To teach them respect the principles of the revolution. I realized we had nothing else to say to each other. And out of all Makarenko's teachings, he'd only remembered one: imprisonment. It scares me a little.

I don't know how or why he could have become like this. Lilas, now with all her psychoanalytic babble, would say: but it's obvious! It's because of his relationship with your father. Rivalry and identification. The Oedipus complex. Wanting to kill his father. Subliminal images of a heroic father off in combat, glorified in the fight for freedom. Another legacy of war. All of our fathers are heroes. Therefore exalted. We aren't allowed to forget that. Every commemoration, every slogan, every speech reminds us. We have to prove we're worthy of our forefathers' sacrifices. Worthy of those who write history. Martyrs' blood and mothers' tears. My mother cries in her bedroom at night. I hear her. Those are the times that make me want to murder.

PART II. 1972-1982

CHAPTER XIV

HER

Acceleration. Times today are now only the continuation of events rattling and echoing through my memory. Black. White. Broken occasionally by light filtering through gaps. Life forges ahead, torn between a desire to forget and a need to remember. Sacred, reverent memories. Like dried flowers pressed between the pages of a book. *Memories of an intoxicating night of passion. Now is the time to escape to a place that will also exist beyond our dreams. This evening, the heavens opened to drop their stars onto me, gently, tenderly. We were in love. You inscribed your name in me, with signs more indelible than the marks of my forefathers. And you're there, trembling again, ever present in my innermost feelings. Living and remembering your caresses, my body tense, offered and enveloped in pleasure. You're there, my love. Clearly reliving the memories of your hand in my hair, your hand on my shoulders, your light touch, lighter than a single breath, sweeter than a crisp spring morning, tracing over the curves of my body and satisfying your desires, banishing all other needs besides this light within me; and then returning to earth, never elsewhere, never yours. You said you wanted to take the most perilous paths to reach the source. Thirsting for those who don't know, those who can't wait for dawn to satisfy their need for light. You're there, near me, and at that moment, that's all that matters. We'll be married. We'll have children. We'll go out into the sun with the glorious certainty of a summer consuming us in its glory.*

Signed: Flower of Night

These words, these sentences, make me smile today. It's hard to believe that I'm the one who wrote these lines on a paper I found at the bottom of a bag. They seem like

lines out of a romance novel, like the ones I devoured when I was twelve, the summer of the Independence. And for the first time, I realize that I haven't emerged unscathed from those first books. Still, I was twenty when I wrote these words, and finally felt freed from the difficulties of a tortuous adolescence, full of shadows and uncertainty. Those words are from the day when I gave myself to Ali. I remember, I wrote them when I came back home still steeped in his scent, the warmth of his body. I had to write out all my emotions, my discontentment. And now I feel an excessive, childish ecstasy, so that I hardly recognize myself. I believe I've changed a lot since then. But maybe that's because of everything I'm seeing and learning. To think that I enrolled in a psychology program with no real calling! Just because nothing else really attracted me. And now I'm convinced that it wasn't an accident. I'm passionate about everything in this program. All the explorations, the discoveries that are the basis of the vast array of human behavior. The endless possibilities of human nature. But it wasn't till my second year that I began to be interested in everything they taught. Once I passed the statistics and psychometrics modules. I never liked numbers, diagrams, graphs. Ali, though, he's enrolled in economic sciences, which are ab-so-lute-ly nec-es-sar-y for his career, he says, enunciating each syllable. He spends his time studying graphs, diagrams, charts, analyzing the variations. As for me, the only variations I've had to analyze these past few weeks are mood swings. I have to study the intensity of these changes, how long they last, how often they occur. Upward or downward curves. With a fairly constant plateau. And I'm not the only one. Soon he'll be called to "fulfill" his service time, and he's worried about his mother, who will be left alone. His brother Hamid was sent to the USSR as an attaché for the Algerian Embassy. But Ali doesn't want to go into the army.

Because he feels that all the "national duty" is too hyped up, more so for the students; when in reality it's nothing but a ploy to suppress every attempt to fight them. Ever since the student organization he belonged to was disbanded last year after another, more intense, strike, steps had been taken to repress the youth, who were judged as too troublesome, too concerned with the Revolution. A Revolution that they declare is only for the valiant fighters. My father was also one of them. He died fighting. That's all I know about him for now. Thanks to my uncle Saïd. He used to be a Mujahid who's remained true to the ideals that compelled him to join the National Liberation Army at the same time as his brother, my father. They joined at the beginning of the war. When he comes, Didi Saïd, as we call him, tells us about his time out in the bush. He recalls his fears, his doubts, his hope of living to see Algeria free. If only for a single day. He raps out: Liberty, Equality, Justice and Democracy. And for him, these words will only mean something if he impresses them with all his might on men's consciences. Men prepared to renounce all privilege in order to build a new Algeria. And there are plenty such men in the country, he says. True militants whose commitment is the same as during the struggle against the oppression of colonization, against inequality, against injustice, and especially against all form of dictatorship. But we don't hear them. They aren't on television. When I see him ranting and cursing and swearing, I think of Ali's father. He's in the groups we often see on television. Actually, that's the only place you see him. Never at home. Never with his son or his wife. It's been more than two years now since he left them and remarried. At first, Ali didn't want to tell me anything. His mother forbade him from telling. She was afraid. Afraid of something she considered more a break than a betrayal. But she finally told my mother. And now they're very

close. Maman teaches her to speak French, and I think she's even teaching her to read and write. In secret. They both know that we love each other, Ali and I. That we have plans. And neither of them is upset. Of course, they don't know the most important part. For Maman, I'm still that pure, fragile little girl who knows nothing of the realities of life. The little girl she has to protect, to prepare to become a woman. She already started going through bags, looking for things she'd bought for my trousseau: blankets, curtains, napkins, tablecloths, placemats, swatches of fabric, and who knows what else. I insisted that it was too early, that I would soon be on my own where I could buy the things I needed for myself, but it was no use. A girl can't leave her home "bare," she says, ending all objection. It's a question of family honor. Mohamed is responsible for us. He's the head of the family. And a doctor. Outside his work at the hospital, he substitutes at a private practice. And his earnings allow us to improve our living conditions. And Maman no longer struggles with material hardships that she could only overcome with personal sacrifices at the end of each month. She didn't even have any jewels to pawn, as most women did in difficult times. It's not possible to live decently on a war widow's pension. It's true that sacrifice doesn't necessarily turn into money, but many widows have to make some sacrifices in order to raise their children. Now, my mother's status has completely changed. To the neighbors, she's become "the doctor's mother." Every mother's aspiration. A young man that can be held up as an example for the children. A doctor that you go to at all hours of the day or night. For all sorts of reasons: "vertical" pain, back pain caused by the "asiatic" nerve, and of course the infamous blood "posture," which fluctuate according to their complaints. Sometimes they feel well and the "posture" is good. Other times, when they're angry or upset, the

"posture" can get worse. Samir collects these little gems. He has an amazing ability to make a mockery of everything. Himself most of all. With a surprising amount of clarity. No one can resist when he takes up his guitar and improvises songs about children's *"disgust,"* about the shortages and scheming. Maman is like that, too. Able to laugh at everything, despite all that's happened. And since I'm "married" and she has no more material problems, she's much more relaxed. She's been freed of a heavy burden, of seeing her daughter "fall" into good hands, to a son. Maybe that's the reason she decided not to wear a haïk anymore. Mohamed was the one who first spoke to her about it. And we chimed in. She let herself be convinced pretty easily. I don't think there was any objection or regret. I even think she'd been waiting a long time for this moment. Mohamed takes his role as head of the family very seriously, even wanting to check over our grades in school. It leads to plenty of arguments with Samir, who resists all authority figures. But my mother feels freed now. Or at least she doesn't have to do everything alone. Now there's a man in the house, and nothing else can influence her. Not her brother, my uncle, not her own father. It wasn't easy for her, those first days without a veil, venturing outside. He made her overcome her prejudices, her apprehension, her fear of shocking people, of making them start whispering about her. Without the protection of her veil, she felt as though everyone were staring at her. After a life of trying to be nothing more than a slim shadow, to pass unnoticed under people's gazes, and especially keep every strand of hair, every glimpse of an arm or leg, tucked away. It's only natural that she'd be uncomfortable. But it passed quickly. She grew accustomed to this new world more quickly than anyone would have guessed. Amine and Samir chipped in together to get her a bag and a pair of shoes. Mohamed bought a raincoat, suits, and

blouses she buttoned up to her neck. But she continued to keep her head covered. Until the day she asked me to accompany her to the hairstylist's. She wanted to get it cut and set. I think it was the first time in her life that she hadn't done her own hair. I watched her the whole time she was having her hair cut. She had a strange expression on her face. A sort of astonishment. It was as if she saw a new person in the mirror. As for me, I felt like I was meting a different woman. And in the street, the men's gazes confirmed my feeling. I'd never noticed what might make her beautiful. But I guess you never think about your mother like that. That day, I realized what an immense sacrifice she had imposed on herself, devoting herself completely to us. In the days following, she had to deal with the neighbors' reactions. Varied reactions. From genuinely enthusiastic admiration to embarrassed silences by those who disapproved. Still some neighbors began to follow her lead, especially those who were still veiled. Timidly at first. Step by step. Like her.

Ever since, we watch and discuss the Revolution in the building.

CHAPTER XV

HIM

It's done. It's official. We're going to be married. The way is cleared. No military service. I got my exemption. That precious yellow card. Because for now, in the absence of my father and elder brother already in the military, I am the head of the house. At least in the eyes of the military authorities, who got the information from one of their own. My brother Hamid. It's really the first time I can say that my father's departure benefited me. Certainly that wasn't his intention. He hasn't done anything to support us once since he left. And, as if joys never came singly, I suddenly found a firm to work at, following my swearing in. Along with Rachid, a friend from the university. He's not very well situated, but considering present conditions, it's nothing to complain about. I passed the bar and suddenly I'm "master" to the people I run into at Bab El Oued apartments, where I live. I'm starting to make a living. I had trouble demanding that my first client address me with the proper title. But I finally did, with some effort. My first case. A fraud case. And Lilas finally agreed to share my life. Of course I had to go through all the proper steps first. The proposal strictly following the traditional rules. My mother went to Lilas's mother with one of my aunts, who came especially for the occasion. Cookies and a bouquet of flowers. And was attended by her whole family. I wasn't allowed to see her. And, as custom demands, Lilas made only a brief appearance while our mothers discussed our future. It was as if we weren't directly involved. There was no bartering. No demands. Just a preliminary arrangement between two mothers who see each other almost every day. Habitually, it's the time to start haggling. Over the supposed value of young women. Lilas and I joked about it a lot. She would have been

worth several camels, as with the Touaregs family, or some livestock, if we lived in a douar in the country. But of course some concessions have to be made to modern times! And the mothers were there to follow custom. Even though Lilas's mother seemed free since she'd stopped veiling herself to go out. It had earned criticism from the neighbors. My mother hadn't dared talk about it in front of me, but I could tell she was shocked. Ever since my father abandoned us, instead of feeling liberated from the constraints that had weighed her down, she lives in the past. As if everything came to a halt with my father's departure, or maybe even before. She spends entire days alone in the apartment. She would only go out once in a while, and then only to go to the market or for brief visits with Lilas's mother. When I reproach her, she says it's difficult for her to climb up eight flights of stairs. And once a day is quite enough. Every time I come home, she's sitting on her mattress, legs tucked under, always in the same place, hands resting on her knees, unmoving. It's as if she'd drawn in on herself. Away from the world, in some stagnant place. Not noticing the passage of time, not registering anything else around her. She only turns on the TV at night. Sometimes she sits in the near dark until I come home. I often wonder what she could be thinking of when she's like that. I started watching her when she wasn't paying attention. Deep wrinkles are forming around her lips and give her a perpetually sad expression. And under her the folds of her eyelids, her eyes no longer have the same light. She always wears her loose flowered robes, cinched at the waist with a braided belt, but she seems smaller. A sort of fragility that makes me a wave of emotion and anger. I'll never forgive my father for what he's done. Not even on his deathbed. We never talk about him. She continues to receive the money he sends each month, but that's our only connection. The amount is just enough to live properly

on. Hamid also sends money and brings boxes of supplies when he comes. He buys them at the army stores, which are always well stocked. The only time my mother comes to life is when we're all together at home. Then all her liveliness returns. She serves us, makes sure everything's in place on the table before we sit down to eat. She'd never dream of doing it otherwise. Sometimes I feel guilty seeing her so attentive, so devoted, much more that I am towards her. But everything will change when Lila comes. My mother will finally have the daughter she always wanted. That's what I heard her say to Lilas's mother. Whenever they meet, they each make a big show of following the customs of politeness. It's who will rise the furthest. That's what we call the *salamalecs*. When she mentioned the daughter she'd never had, I realized that she must also be suffering from what wound. I never knew why my mother hadn't had other children after my father's liberation. She was still young. She married at fifteen. A loveless marriage, I suppose. Never having seen or met my father. But those were questions we could never ask her. Sometimes I wonder what a life without love is like. Sharing everything with someone you didn't choose. Just as good for a man as for a woman. But everything seemed, and still seems, to be working for them. How can a society be organized and function while completely ignoring such an essential, beautiful emotion as love? Arranged marriages and strict separation of the sexes were, and still often are, the foundations of social organization and morality. In fact, even today in some families I know, I get the feeling that the man doesn't choose his wife just for himself, but more for the family, particularly for his mother. In Arabic poetry, however, it's usually a matter of love. It's also the main theme in these poems. A woman's beauty is sung all through a stanza. But it's always doomed love, impossible or opposed by those in authority. That's

how verses from *Medjmoun Leïla*, Leïla's fool, go. He's the Arab poet Qays Ibn el Moulawah, who, in the eighth century, found these words to tell his love just how he felt:

"I was shipwrecked in Leïla

Her approach is a fresh oasis

To my eyes

And what detracts from her

Stirs in me

An admiring astonishment

For my Leïla."[1]

Those are verses that I learned to impress Lilas, because I thought the similarity in their names was too good an opportunity to pass up. The author of the poem, unable to marry his beloved, went insane and wandered around in the desert, half naked. Nothing like that will happen to us. Our families have already given their consent. Even better, there's been considerable progress; the joining of our families was celebrated with cries that must have announced it to all the neighbors. Now Lilas and I can leave and return together without causing any stir. Of course we have to wait until we're married to take things any further. For everyone, it comes from themselves. Except we didn't respect traditional rules. And while Lilas is my fiancée to the rest of the world, for me she's already my wife. She has been since the day we became lovers. It took a long time to overcome her apprehension. Questions, fears, doubts. And one she didn't tell me until quite a while after our first time. She was worried about being "bound" by her mother when she was young. She explained that it was a rite young girls went through to ensure

[1] Original text translation by René R. Khawam.

they weren't deflowered before marriage. Her mother talked about it to the neighbors, saying she had nothing to fear because her daughter had been bound in a simple ritual where a woman was called to tie a string between a young girl's legs while saying chants meant to guarantee the effectiveness of the ceremony. And to ensure the ceremony leaves a visible mark, they make a little incision high on the inside of the thigh, to leave a small horizontal scar. Sort of like a seal. The girl, perfectly aware of what this means and does, feels protected, out of reach, and has to wait until the wedding night for the same woman to undo it, or at least wait with the same string carefully guarded by her mother. They again specify to the girl that all penetration is impossible without this ritual. They also explain about certain problems the husband might have if they forget to undo the string. What annoys me is that Lilas could put her faith in these rituals, in such archaic ideas. She said she'd totally forgotten about that episode until the day we were alone in our friend's empty apartment. Maybe it was her way of protecting herself. Of explaining her uncontrollable trembling when I took her in my arms. A trembling that neither my caresses or my words could calm. Now she pretends it was from her desire. A desire too long contained, which couldn't find any other way of manifesting itself. It was my first time, too. My first time with a virgin. I was afraid of hurting her. She was afraid to give herself to me. We were impatient, maybe clumsy, just enough that the pleasure that surprised us like a wave released from behind a dike. And now…now, she's mine.

CHAPTER XVI

HER

I'm very lucky. I think I was born under a good sign. Finding work, my diploma still fresh in my pocket, without even applying, and what's more, in a health center a few hundred meters from my house; who could ask for more? But you have to realize that, in my field, there are more openings than applicants. I'm one of the first post-Independence graduates from the human sciences department. And because of that, I'm the only psychologist assigned to a large number of people. Men, women, who generously call me "doctor" in every sentence. At the same time, it makes me a little afraid. Despite all the courses I took, I'm inexperienced and, until now, my professors always accompanied me. Of course, most of the people who see me come mostly out of curiosity. They don't really see how I can treat them, as my only remedy is my words, and more often than not, they leave without any written prescription—that precious assistance that Mohamed told me about—how a man who'd never gone to a doctor in his life came for help, after the various talismans he'd scrupulously worn around his neck for almost a month hadn't cured him. Consultations are free. Since the Independence, medicine has been free for everyone. The health center is never empty. And the waiting rooms are on par with a Turkish bath. One, because they were often very warm; and two, because the women used them as another place to meet. They don't just go to the health center when they're sick! They spend the morning there, before going to run errands. Or maybe after. They set their baskets next to them and stay there for hours. With the children, of course. All the children. They see people from their neighborhoods, and make new acquaintances. They describe their maladies and compare with each other. They exchange news and

advice. They make plans to meet the next time. They can even form alliances. Sometimes, when they meet someone who's sick, they ask about the progression of their illness, and they propose diagnoses even before they've seen a doctor. Miracle remedies are suggested, exchanged, strongly recommended. Addresses, too. Addresses of *talebs* that are guaranteed to help. They can pass hours without getting bored or impatient. They learn so much! All they have to do is sit in the women's room and listen. Many women come because someone's told them about birth control, which they call "pills." A miracle pill that they can easily get from the gynecologist. After showing family records, of course. And they don't always consult their husbands, or even inform them about this scientific recourse that can prolong time between pregnancies and offer a year or two of respite. At the clinic, "limitation" is a forbidden word. It's forbidden, at least officially, to ask women to stop procreating. That would go against the birth policies advocated by authorities. But those most concerned in the matter are starting to see things differently. And almost everyone knows now that there is a way of avoiding the anxiety of waiting for the blood to flow. And, more serious yet, young girls know about it as well! And even if they have to trick their way into getting some of the precious medicine—what the girls call "the visa" amongst themselves—even if they have to have connections with someone in the medical field, or know a recently-married woman who keeps a constant supply, nothing is the same. And if they don't know anyone and still dare having relations with the one they love, they have to take other precautions, or assume the risks of a miserable abortion. That's what happened to Naïma, one of my friends from university. Foolishly in love with a boy she'd met at school, she still wanted to preserve her virginity. It didn't stop her from having what we call "heavy flirting" with her

boyfriend. Until the day she found out she was pregnant, without even realizing it. I heard Mohamed talking about all the "pregnant virgins" who came to the gastroenterologist with their parents, suspecting tumors or fibroma. But I had a hard time believing it. And I always heard our mothers warning girls not to sit in the steam room at the Turkish bath after the men had been there without making sure to clean their seat well, for fear that they'd be impregnated by a sperm that might have slipped traitorously down a small orifice made for other things. But those, too, were all lies more to maintain the fear of men felt by every young girl. Now I know that that's possible. Possible to be pregnant without having actually been intimate. We all went with Naïma for her abortion. At the same time, her boyfriend rushed into the arms of another girl to forget about this whole episode. And so she joined the crowd of girls who'd been seduced and abandoned, in the tradition of dramas and graphic novels that I once devoured. A little after this, I asked Ali if he would have married me if I hadn't been a virgin, if I hadn't saved myself for him. He hesitated. The question really embarrassed him. Doubtless because he had never asked himself that. He was sure of my purity. He made it into a joke. You can only belong to one man; you told me so yourself. And it could only be me. We were destined for each other. And no one can fight destiny. Typical way of avoiding the question. But I wonder about it often. As good as things are, there are still some subjects I can't broach with Ali. Not yet. I'm engaged. Officially. No one forced me. My future is becoming clearer and clearer. I'm advancing along a path marked with the illusion of having marked everything out, but I still have many doubts. I know very well that all engagements come with sacrifices. In fact, I'm sure I've built my dreams as high as possible. Without falling into the trap of the unexpected, the unknown. I've

entered the marriage as if that was the only possible response to the questions I asked myself. An encounter, just one. A face, just one. Words of love, very rare, but which gave me the sense of being. And that was enough for me to throw myself into the grand adventure of life. Or at least what I believed was the starting point of something thrilling, something unique and marvelous. Today, it's been reduced to some rather tame escapades, without much risk involved. Risks that I master perfectly, by lying and through all the precautions taken to ensure no one knows that I'm having sexual relations with someone who's still only my fiancé. Unlike my friends, I don't have any difficulty getting the pill. All I have to do is go to the pharmacists at the clinic and mention women in distress, friends I have to help, and I have all the pills I could ever want. I often help my friends. The problem is concealing it all from my mother. Carefully hiding my packets in places my mother will never find it. I think she would have lost her mind if she knew that her innocent, virtuous daughter, so discreet and different from the others, falls into the arms of a man every chance she got. A man who himself is so polite, so discreet and proper; and moreover, that she takes pleasure in it. A pleasure strong enough to make her wonder why she wanted this long to take the plunge. And only now am I asking myself these questions about the joy and desire of mothers, particularly my own. A mother whose life as a woman was cut short, can be summarized in a few embraces. I don't know anything about her, about her inner self. I only know that she has a remarkably well-kept figure, that she's full of life, love, and tenderness that she gives generously, only on her children. And that she doesn't seem to be suffering. At the moment, the only thing she's suffering from is the beginnings of menopause, hot flashes that leave her panting, overwhelmed. She talked about it the other day with one of her

friends who told her that she hadn't dared talk about it either, not even her husband, afraid that she would be tossed aside, considered as inept. Inept at procreation, therefore inept as a wife or in pleasing her husband. Husbands who ventured looking elsewhere. She's everywhere, that wives' fear. The fear of being abandoned. Fear of losing her virginity. Fear of not satisfying all the man's desires. The fear of raising criticism. Fear of not being able to rise to the status of "mother of his son" and losing her chance for the coveted privileges of a future queen mother. These are the fears and anxieties that I live among every day. Like that girl brought to the doctor's by her mother. A young girl walled in silence that began with the first offer of marriage. At first, I'm sure she showed no injury to her vocal cords. It wasn't until the end of several meetings that I could undo the thread. Returned to childhood, when she had played "forbidden" games with one of her male cousins who lived in the same house. And thus became conscious that this profound silence, accompanied by various troubles, both psychological and physical, like refusal to eat, sleeping disorders, and disappearance of menstrual cycles, was just a defense mechanism. I couldn't do anything for her, because the mother herself didn't understand that her daughter could never admit the ignominy for which she'd be blamed or be subjected to. From the day her daughter spoke to me, she never came back. That's what disgusts me. How can one fight a society that puts all its effort into denying mistakes and instead focus on keeping up appearances? Doesn't that mean I have to go through it?

CHAPTER XVII

HIM

I don't know who once asked this question: when the snow melts, where does the white go? The question has nagged at me for months. Haunted by an absurd question that I nevertheless couldn't stop trying to answer. Especially when I begin to relate it to every situation. Events we talk about, shows I go to almost every day. And on the streets of Algiers, in almost every area, there are men and women from all over the world, who seek refuge in a country they call the lighthouse of the Third World, or the Mecca of the Revolution. Leaders, persecuted political opponents, unable to exercise rights as important as freedom of speech and the principle of justice, representatives of oppressed minorities hunted down for expressing their opinions, or victims of injustice and dictatorship. Having a coffee or a beer at the brasserie des Facultés at the table next to Kathleen and Eldrige Cleaver's no longer astounds us. The Black Panthers are part of our lives; their battle, the ideals they defend are ours as well. The same goes for the FPLP, the Front populaire de libération palestinien, and the OLP, which represents the avant-garde of the worldwide Arab revolution. And the Six-Day War, the clear defeat of sister nations, left a lingering bitter taste. Naturally, we strongly support the Frelimo au Mozambique, the Unita en Angola, the ANC de Mandela en Afrique du Sud, Leader Maximo Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution, the Front de libération de l'Erythrée, the Basque workers, and Salvador Allende's Chili. Che Guevara, a saint and martyr, gave his life and his name to a large boulevard at the center of the town. All of that was reported in an article from the first Constitution published after the Independence, in 1963. It said that "the Algerian Revolution guaranteed shelter for all those who fought

for freedom." Along with our unfailing attachment to socialist options in November 1954. And during that time, in the name of those same values, we assassinated opponents here and there, or, in the best case scenarios, imprisoned them, dissolving student organizations and stifling any thoughts of argument. With the same practices we denounced in newspapers and speeches. Something escapes me. It must be the whiteness. White that disappears somewhere unknown when the snow melts. It's the same basic idea, from a logical perspective. At least I wasn't unknowingly contaminated or indoctrinated by the enemies of the Revolution, and I became a dangerous counter-revolutionary without realizing it. I just observe. Like many others. Talking in low whispers, and only with a few friends. Military security is never far away. Lilas says that I should just think of our future. What we want to build together. But that's just what scares me. We're going to get married, we're going to have children. Two: we don't want any more. Children that we want to see free and happy, as we believed would come from the Independence. Without demanding ease or happiness, I thought we'd certainly have the right to some comforts. Today they consist of the how high we can fill our bathtub, of the liters of oil my mother only got after three hours in line outside the Belcourt Monoprix, of the butter we managed to buy along with some cartons of overripe tomatoes, thanks to Amine's resourcefulness. Amine is Lilas's brother, who scours the State stores when he goes to the other departments on sporting trips. And imagine our joy the day we replaced our poor, loyal old refrigerator? It took a fierce negotiation with our neighbor in Apartment 20, fifth on the right in Building B. A very popular man in the apartments since his recent promotion to head of department at the Galeries algériennes on Rue Ben M'hidi. So my mother charged him with getting us almonds and flour for the

wedding cakes. Not forgetting to offer him a commission for this great service. Ever since the date was fixed, this marriage has become a real affair of State. Lilas and I had imagined a simple ceremony with close family. The officialization of our relationship seemed like a simple formality to us. It had nothing to do with our mothers' determination. My mother wants to take her revenge on my father and my brother. Hamid was married in the USSR to a Russian girl, who he hadn't even taken the time to introduce to us. We found out in a letter. My mother still hasn't quite gotten over it. My father ended all his payments the day I opened my law firm. I wonder how he found out. Maybe from the advertisement I put in the paper. My mother has never been so offensive. I'm going to show him whose daughter I am, she promised, before rameuter for the circumstance of all her family, brothers, sisters, uncles and cousins. I don't really see what she could show him, since he won't be here. He ceased to exist for me a long time ago. And for her. But she insists. There's family honor to uphold! And everyone contributed to "rouging the face" of their sister, niece, cousin. And then there are the neighbors. Arguments with Lilas's mother, who is obliged to receive all the women in the building who come by the apartment, who invite her to everything and so, obviously, owe her gifts. Thus it was Lilas's brother Mohamed who suggested it. Now he lives in a small villa along the sea at Alger-Plage, not far from here. Company housing that he got after his marriage, thanks to one of his friends, a doctor like him, but especially the subprefect's son, in other words the head of the daïra where he works at the hospital. It's the same friend who's providing the car, a new model DS 21, beribboned and filled with flowers for the occasion, aware that in the minds of the bridal party, Lila won't be my wife until the day she comes through those doors in a white dress, to the shouts of the

guests and neighbors crowded together on their balconies so as not to miss anything. After the celebration, Lilas will go back inside, with me. We'll spend our first night together, alone, in the apartment. In our room, converted into a wedding chamber. It's the only demand I managed to get our mothers to agree to. Not without facing a veritable tempest of protests. The wanted us to follow traditions to the end. My mother sent me emissaries to negotiate the wedding night discreetly. She could never discuss those things outright. But I understand the arguments she's been alluding to nonstop ever since I asked for Lilas's hand! Don't leave yourself open to criticism, and be sure to let Lilas's mother walk in front, to show everyone that she preserved her daughter's purity. Because I can't forget that Lilas's mother is a widow, and therefore more vulnerable. Still, despite all the demands, we stayed firm. Neither Lilas nor I want to repeat Mohamed's experience, who confided to me that, on his wedding night, he had to bring a little flacon of blood to simulate a deflowering that had taken place months before, and present to the two families standing guard at the door, a smear of blood from an anonymous donor. You have to know how to act. Lie. Be tricky. In every circumstance, everywhere. It's become a national sport. Resourcefulness. The D system. Acquaintances, friends, schemes, everything's good for getting out of a tricky spot or getting favors. Thus, through one of my friends, I was able to get on a waiting list for a national enterprise which imports automobiles. I don't know the length of the wait, or what kinds of cars they'll give me. It depends on the delivery. Rachid waited two years for his. Just two years, because he was able to exchange his purchase order with a friend. But that leaves me time to pay off the debts from the marriage celebration and to gather the money necessary. While I wait, I continue to take my bus, the crossed K, whose name says it all.

Until the change at training camp. Despite some understandable failures, considering the shortage of detached parts, he RSTA, Régie syndicale des transports algérois, is still here, exclusively to serve the people.

CHAPTER XVIII

HER

Sunny days, days of complete rest, with nothing weighing on you. Blissful, carefree days. Happiness so close you can see the tremors on the sparkling surface of the water, and there in the breeze that raises goosebumps on my skin as it drinks in the sunlight. Now I understand why people worshipped the sun. I look like a cookie that has been left forgotten in the oven a bit too long, Ali says, hugging me every night. A cookie tasting of orange and vanilla, with a hint of cinnamon, just what I like. We take in the light and the sun for hours on end in an indolent summer. And my half-naked boy, immobile, abandoned to the fervor of these moments. If my mother could see me! I can see her horrified reaction. She doesn't like tanned skin. Like most women born in sunny countries. At home, a girl can't be considered beautiful if you can't extol her white skin, the virginal pink of her cheeks, her large dark eyes and the solemn arch of her eyebrows. And of course there's the width of her hips, a mark of her childbearing capacity. And the men! The men don't choose. They trust their mothers. The mothers love their sons too much to let them make a mistake. They take care of everything. As soon as the date is fixed, all control was taken out of our hands. We were even excluded. The preparations were made without us. I had to threaten to call it all off so that they wouldn't put me through the traditional parade. Maman wanted me to do the same as all the other wives. Chignon of starched curls, assorted makeup for each of the traditional clothes she wanted me to wear for this great day: tuckers, caftans, the Constantine gandoura, and who knows what else. A riot of clothes embroidered in gold, to dazzle the neighbors and my future in-laws. Senseless, needless purchases for the desired result. But she was ready to make

sacrifices, to cover debts so no one could say she hadn't done everything she should. It's things like this that highlight the generation gap, the profound change in mentality. It's not about brushing off traditions. But it seems like everything's gone so fast. And we want to overcome prejudices so things might change in society. Starting with our own families. I actually thought Maman had made an effort. But her behavior is still dictated by the reactions of our neighbors and acquaintances, their reactions, knowing them too well. And I think she really wants to prove to everyone that unveiling herself doesn't exclude her from the entire community. As for me, I wore only thing besides the white dress, borrowed from one of my cousins. A pair of golden lamé harem pants with a red caraco embroidered in gold, also made from the velvet left for me by Madame Lill, our former neighbor. And since I had cut my hair some time before, Maman had to give up on her dreams of an elaborate, fashionable hairstyle. The most moving time was when I left the apartment. My grandfather had stationed himself in the doorway, and as I approached, he raised a section of his white burnous for me to pass under. Symbolizing both protection and separation. That was when my mother burst into tears. Instantly, the other women crowded on the stairs did as well. They had come to the bride leave her home to begin a new life. Even my brothers were moved. As for the separation, I'm not going very far. I'm staying in the apartment building. Only a few steps away. No, I won't say my wedding day was the most beautiful of my life. It wasn't until we were alone in our room that we realized we were finally free to love each other openly. And we didn't even make love that night. After so long hiding our relationship, coming up with plans to meet, spending the night together in each other's arms seemed like a miracle. And now we're far away. Far from others' eyes, far from everything. There'll

be many nights. Our nights here. Here are the stars that fall with the rain onto my body and give birth to a shower of sparks under my closed eyes. There are our lazy mornings, mornings still wrapped in brume and dreams, our bodies, our hands searching for each other blindly, recognizing one another, taking each other, disentangling and searching again, in a strange dance. In the day, as it finishes, there are our courses and child's play on the deserted beach. There are evenings when, in the silence of the night, each word exchanged filling the darkness with bright spots that shine for a long time before going out. And, when Amine and Samir come to see us, these bright resonances are accompanied by music which scatters in the tepid night air. Samir glues himself to his guitar. We sit in front of the cottage where we spent days outside the notice of time. An old hut that Rachid's brother, Ali's associate, prepared for us. And Samir pours out such heart-wrenching airs, they resound like a cry of distress. Airs that say clearly what he doesn't dare admit. Airs which, balanced by the weight of his silences, are a confession of what he otherwise finds impossible to say, which die softly on the shore. Samir isn't happy. He's changed. I steal glances at him, and my heart breaks. A shadow seems to have come over his look and won't leave again. He seems absent, as if an unknown darkness has come over him. An internal darkness that he doesn't know, that he can only explain through his melodies which come to cover the night and our newfound happiness a malaise that we can't quite measure. All his joie de vivre has left him. I don't know why. I hear through Ali that he only dreams of leaving. Of leaving the country. To go beyond, where he can be heard, or at least can start a new life. He's persuaded that he doesn't belong anywhere here. He's tried. After the bac, he enrolled at the conservatory. He was only there a few months. The time there had taught him nothing. That it was

impossible to find what he was looking for. And now, he contents himself with occasionally livening up family evenings or his fêtes de quartier, with a musical group. Without conviction. Half-heartedly. Just to make a little money. I see his emaciated features. His hair is so long that he pulls it back into a ponytail. His lanky form, which he spent long days training, really trying, hopelessly, to hide a pain that he wasn't want to confess to anyone. Not even Amine, his twin brother. Amine, who also gave up his dreams of a medal following the last championships; but he doesn't seem to be suffering. It must be because he continues to evolve in the sports world. His passion. Physical education teacher by day, athletic trainer to youth sports associations by night. He fits the part well. One only has to look at him to believe. His assurance, his good nature, contrasting almost violently with Samir's fragile, almost ethereal bearing. I often wonder how two beings, conceived at the same moment, raised in the same home, with equal tenderness and affection, can be so different. But since I've worked at the health center, I've asked myself so many things that I'll need to start all over in my studies to be able to answer them. Or scour the libraries looking through specialized works. But at this moment, I don't have the time or the wish to explore these depths. I have to take advantage of these moments suspended between the sea and the sky, isolated from time, which are quickly coming to an end. Close my eyes and let the sun dance rainbows under my eyelids. Let myself be taken away by the wave rocking me and carrying me further from shore. There will always be time to come back.

CHAPTER XIX

HIM

Summer is over. But its memory is still in each moment. And now we've settled into married life. I don't really know how, Lilas doesn't like that word. She prefers "our married lives." Now and in the future. We're back at the apartments. The stairs. The noises of others' lives. Habits, already. Friendly faces. Everything is back in place, as if after a parenthesis. Some days in the light and the dark. You could almost believe that nothing had changed. But I actually feel that I've entered an important, most decisive of my life. Lilas is here, every day. She waits for me and opens the door if I'm late. Even though she knows I have the keys. And all the light of these days seems to be concentrated in her eyes, in her smile. My mother makes herself scarce. In the morning, she trots around softly, trying to make as little noise as possible so as not to wake us. And again at night, as soon as we've finished dinner, she goes to her room to leave us alone in front of the television. She doesn't want to watch movies with us, ashamed, fearful of being upset should a kiss have managed to escape the censors. It happens sometimes. But less and less. The Algerian radio-television officials are getting more efficient. And more zealous. Sometimes entire words are replaced with various sounds, so as not to shock sensitive people. Lilas told me about the nickname of an American soap star, named Zébulon, which was systematically removed each time he was mentioned, because it's a synonym for the word used familiarly to refer to a man's sex. It had to take a lot of work to cut all that out. Censors are everywhere now. In all different forms. And legalized by the arrangements that establish very strict punishment for speaking your mind. The laws come one after another, adopted under unanimous vote

by the representatives of officials that we've elected, don't forget. Unanimous, resounding suppression of any hint of disagreement. After the policies on hydrocarbon, they vote on laws about Arabisation, welcomed by advocates of the new Algerian order. With the gratifying notion of at last getting our revenge, not just on history, which would be legitimate, but most of all on the thousands of "francisants," raised in the Algerian school. And every day, we pay the price of these attempts at exclusion. They taught me a language, French. They repeated that all that mattered was the level of instruction and the desire to bring one we most needed to the country. Abilities and know-how to bring the country to the level of developed ones. They let us believe that the rest was just a matter of time. And that time would come soon, where our children and generations beyond would learn their language in public schools, would take over. Not to incriminate their fathers. Measures were taken, decrees announced, to spread Islam and make it Arabic, make it the national religion of children born in a free country. But mostly to remind everyone, every moment of their lives, that we have to follow the path laid out for us. I'm an Arab and a Muslim, they don't let me forget it. From gentle to threatening, they assure me there's no salvation beyond this return to our roots. In court, political divisions are becoming increasingly clear. Some studied abroad in sister states: Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan. And then there are the others. Those who, like me and thousands of others, stayed in Algeria. Who were raised by the teachers. Mostly French, but under the authority of an Algerian minister, and in accordance with his directives. What went wrong? Today, we powerlessly follow this new order. Our horizon is now limited the founding principles of the Arab-Islamic culture. Exemplified by the new Constitution and the National Charter. And just to make the oppression even more efficient, we can't

move freely in foreign countries anymore. If we want to travel, we need an authorization to leave national territory. Delivered in bits and pieces, by the prefecture in the wilya. Lilas and I would have loved to go to France for a few days. But besides not having the money, we avoid all the administrative hassles getting that little bit of paper so many people covet. A document that is impossible to get without having some solid connections around the administration. Samir, Lilas's brother, did all he could to help us. But we couldn't get the necessary authorization or the money for the trip. Lilas and I have been talking about him a lot lately. I tried to find out what was bothering him. All I got was an annoyed silence. I suppose he can only express himself through his music. Amine is much more at ease in his skin. He made us laugh telling his latest jokes about socialist management and the words of our leaders. Because we can't forget that! This ability to make a joke out of any situation, no matter how serious. A humor closely in tune with life that lets us laugh at everything, especially ourselves. A little like a pressure valve. Twisting slogans with nicknames we give to different ministers, everything works in mocking the system's failings, the schemes and shortages. Thus the Minister of Finance is nicknamed Abou Lefric, and the one responsible for the party's equipment is Abou Ledogue. It seems that various forms of these jokes are also circulating through the East. It's true that we chose the same economic options, for the same ends. But we also have the sun. Beaches. The immense, ochre desert, the biggest and most beautiful in the world. A country whose beauty we were able to discover these past few weeks. We spent entire days bathing in wild coves, running across golden beaches, barely touched by holiday travelers. We walked through trails bordered in agaves and cacti, before getting caught in the night at the edge of the villages tucked into some hills, where we were

welcomed by some simple people, who opened their doors and shared their galettes and whey, their chief diet. They didn't let us leave without picking some figs and grapes, whose taste I'll never forget. It felt as if I was in my hometown, years before, when we stormed the countryside and the orchards in tremendous, ragged groups, in order to stock up on fruits before the policeman chased us away, threatening us with a gun before retreating under our volley of stones. Nothing changed in these douars, except the prevailing feeling of having recovered a sense of liberty and dignity along with their ancestral grounds, something that allowed them to hold their heads high. The traditions of sharing and hospitality are still there. And the women who received Lilas into their home seemed calmer, more serene, than the city dwellers, despite the still-precarious living conditions. I thought about my mother, her confinement, her isolation, and I wondered if it would have happened if we had stayed in the village. She would certainly be happier, and my father, held accountable by the whole village, might not have been able to abandon us. But I would never have met Lilas, either. And if only for that, I can't help but selfishly rejoice in my father's decision. To bring us to Algiers and settle in an apartment. When I share these hypotheses with Lilas, she just smiles. Then she says mockingly that I would definitely have married one of those beautiful young girls so carefully kept out of sight from men. A wife who's young, submissive, very serene, very calm, and above all calming. No dreams, no complications. Isn't that every man's dream? she adds. I know she's only half joking at times like this. And I don't pursue it. And everything ends in laughter and kisses. How else can I make her understand that when she's in my arms, I'm the happiest man in the world? That, in a society like ours, happiness doesn't come without some sacrifices? She's so whole, so passionate, so

demanding, I sometimes find it impossible to reassure her. Her uncertainty comes from a place beyond our relationship. She carries the weight of all the generations of women before her. A burden she finds it impossible to shake off. She says so herself. But I don't want these shadows to tarnish a newfound happiness. She needs to learn how to be happy. In spite of herself.

CHAPTER XX

HER

Add up the facts. The events. Words as well. Ones we hurled at each other. Inalienable truths. Ones we say. Ones we don't dare say. Ones that escape us, ones we wanted to keep. Add them to the years. All the years that count. But also the ones we account for. And even the ones that don't count. Because they leave traces. With us. And in these years, or in others, it doesn't really matter, go back in time. Certain moments. Ones the memory selects and engraves in our minds forever. Thy lodge themselves into what scientists call the cerebral cortex. Arbitrary selection, since oftentimes nothing distinguishes this particular moment from thousands of others. And you don't know why this moment remains unresolved. Like that November day. Sky. Sun. Trees. Tremors of sunlight over the treetops. Quivering light. Just at that one instant. The banality of that moment. Completely detached. Suspended. And nothing else. Nothing more. The seconds, the minutes that follow are erased. Why is it ingrained in my memory? An emotion, maybe. Born of this same banality. Conscious of the fleeting nature of time. Of its flow. The irreversibility. But maybe I need to look a bit further. I need to begin like that. It was a day in November. I only remember that I was sitting in the garden at the health center. And that I had let myself be taken over by the acute awareness of the precariousness of that moment, a moment that was mine alone. Just a few seconds. Open parentheses in the middle of a day like any other. A bubble. Yes, an iridescent, dancing moment, impalpable, as only the desires of happiness can. I held my breath. So that I could face the days where all is silence within. Days where no words of love fail to nestle themselves in a smile. Must I return to my life already?

Facts. Events. Words I spoke. And those I couldn't say when I needed to. But I didn't say anything, maybe because: 1) I couldn't, 2) I didn't want to, 3) I didn't dare. Cross out the incorrect answers. Like everything would be simple if there was only one answer to every question. I believed that for a long time. You love me? A little? A lot? Passionately? Insanely? Tell me! You can get a reply if you're insistent enough. Of course. Of course I love you. Yes, but what else? What else do you want? I have work to do.

Ali works. The windows are open at night. We're in our room. It's not very large. The bed takes up most of the space. I'm lying down. Ali is sitting at his desk, lit by a small circle. He has his back to me. He's making notes on files. He has a hearing tomorrow. Or the day after. And he has a lot of files right now. Like always. His desk is a mess of papers. Beside him, the ashtray is full.

He's late. You should sleep.

He says it without turning around. But he knows that I can't sleep while he's still up. I wait for him to join me. I turn on the bedside lamp. I take up my book again. He'll finish soon enough, in an hour at most. He'll get up. I might be asleep. Or pretend to be. He'll go to the kitchen. Get a glass of water. Silently, so as not to wake up his mother. We have to be careful. She's a light sleeper. Then he'll come back to the room. Shut the door behind him. Softly. Trying to keep the hinges from squeaking.

Then he'll come to me.

And if he comes to me, if he takes me in his arms, we'll make love. Silently. And if a cry or a sigh escapes me, he'll put his hand over my mouth. To muffle the sound. She might hear us. We have to be careful. A wall separates our rooms. He spills

into me. Wordlessly. Lips parted in ecstasy. His as well. She could hear him. Then he pulls out.

The next day, I'll wake up before him to use the bathroom. I always wake up before him. But never before his mother. She's up very early for prayer ablutions and to refill the bath and the water basins. Before the break. The taps only run two hours a day. You have to be quick. Then she makes coffee. I hear her, even though she tries to be quiet.

Do you know, he often says trying to convince me of our good fortune, do you know what the occupancy rate is now in Algiers?

I know. The children who come in for consultations tell me. And their mothers tell me as well. And still others. But he wants to specify: an average of 7.8 people per household. In the average neighborhood, of course. The three of us live in a three-room apartment. So we're fortunate. I know that as well. And I don't have to go far to see it. We're practically the only ones in our complex who live in such conditions. My mother, too. Ever since Mohamed and I left, there were only three people there. Well, I didn't exactly leave. More like went upstairs. I only changed floors. Without changing buildings. Without changing apartment complexes. Every time I leave and come back, I pass by my home.

I still say "my home."

Your home always remains the place where you were raised. And you leave a bit of yourself there. An odor that clings to the armoire. A stamp collection forgotten at the bottom of a drawer. A scratch on the lip of a table. A scratch whose history only you know. And other signs, other traces, which you alone have seen. I still hesitate a

moment outside of our door. Then I continue. Climbing the six flights of stairs, I think about my neighbors who stopped at our apartment as they came back from the market. About the tenderness and the crudeness of their words. The connivances and solidarity between all these women. In this community, this exclusively female reality, of which the men knew nothing. Literally a "no man's land." I think about Zohra, who made us laugh so much, and who, since losing her eleven-year-old son, never goes out without a dark veil and djellaba. I think about Aziza, who left because finally met a man, another man with whom she could try to forget her life before him. I also think about the way that Ali and I, just a few years ago, used to linger in the darkest corners of the stairwell. I think about his impatient, fumbling hands. About his hungry, demanding mouth. About the frantic beating of our hearts. About my eagerness and my hesitation. It seems so far away.

Now, if we happen to be going upstairs together, we're hurrying home. But we don't keep the same hours. I work mostly in the morning. Ali often returns very late. The hearings can go long into the night. He's exhausted when he leaves. And weary, drained. He can't listen to more complaints or be around more problems. He can't repress his own anger and defiance, not to mention other people's. He can't attempt to convince or dissuade people, cajole them or fix their problems. He can't silence the voice inside him, snickering at every word he says because it knows their inanity, the futility of his grand posturing and idealistic discourses on innocence and respect of people's rights.

These evenings, I only have to look at him to know that he can't say another word. His mother knows as well. So we sit together in the living room while he shuts

himself away in the room. The time to relax. To unwind. And we wait for him. The table is set. There's no question of eating without him. The noise of the television furnishes the silence. But luckily, my petit mère, Yemma as I call her, has fallen in love with Egyptian soap operas. Yemma, who can't sit through a single movie with us, follows each episode with a fervent devotion.

Every evening, she sits in an armchair, always in the same spot. Once the first notes of the opening begin, she becomes engrossed in her own little world. Nothing can grab her attention. Not even her son's arrival. If he comes in during the show, she offers her cheek distractedly, without removing her eyes from the screen when he bends over to give her a hug. Sometimes, when he comes home in a good mood, he makes a game out of trying to draw her attention. Come on, he says, tell us what happened today. Tell us everything! Without answering, she raises a hand as if to shoo him away.

Every evening between seven and eight, in the entire complex, all apartments and houses in the city—and certainly in the country—women of all ages take their positions in front of the television with the same fervor. Meals were prepared early in the morning, children sent outside in the summer, or more often relegated to another room, forbidden to leave. Obliging husbands linger outside, in front of the doors or in the café on the corner. None of them would ever admit it's to leave the television free for his wife. They have their pride! The stubborn ones, the ones who demand to be served while the show is on, know that every evening they'll have to suffer their wives' sighs and complaints. Some give in and leave their wives to the show. Yamina, the woman below us, a model wife and mother who is normally submissive and quiet, told Maman that she found a tool for persuasion: blackmail. If you leave me watch the show, I'll let you do

anything to me in bed. Otherwise, no deal. And it seems to have the desire effect, after several days. The mater concluded without a word. Maybe she should try this method in other situations as well. With the same determination.

I don't think Yamina has ever read Aristophanes, or even knows who Lysistrata is., but she may as well have. For one thing, our French teacher talked about that work, using expressions like "intimate encounters" for sexual intercourse so as not to offend our delicate sensibilities. Some of us decided to form a secret society with the codename Lysistrata. The goal was to peacefully oppose all forms of oppression. Silent protests, for example, when the professors behaved in ways we, in our quick-tempered adolescence, deemed inacceptable. We would sit through an hour-long class without saying a word. In the end, it only got us expelled. But we learned the vulnerability and the immense solitude of an individual against a group determined to stop him abusing his power. We disbanded at the end of the year, with a mixed record. We didn't start it up the year after, because of the bac exam coming up. We also admitted our little protests ended at the doors of the school.

In our families and along the street, it was a completely different world. We knew that all too well. Because there the roles were reversed. We were alone against the group, sometimes welcoming, sometimes hostile. Moreover, unlike our professors, we were powerless.

It's sort of the same in the Egyptian dramas. The heroine is generally a woman, married or single, who lives modestly, and who has to overcome a succession of difficulties in a very realistic chain of events. Every type of character is studied: abandoned, adulterer, remarried, rivalries between women, misunderstandings with the

in-laws, and of course, to attract the public, the greed and superciliousness of the upper classes compared with the natural pride and generosity of the poor. The whole gamut of conflicts that could arise within a family or a social group is depicted, episode after episode, with an exact realism. Against the backdrop of a society whose practices, reactions, family relations and beliefs are all close to ours. So it's easy to identify with them. Identify with and mimic them. Many girls have started speaking Egyptian, and more and more homes resemble those of series broadcast all year throughout Algeria. And so they get rid of all the old trinkets found after the French left, just after the Independence. To the delight of some antique collectors, as well as a certain type of person.

Sometimes I imagine that one of the pictures I loved so much is waiting for me at the back of a dark boutique. One of the ones I spent hours looking at in the seventh-floor apartment, when I was young, in the year of the Independence.

It would be forgotten in some corner, covered in dust, with just enough light that you could recognize it. I even found one of them in a book. A Renoir. *Fillette au chapeau de paille*. I understand now that they were only reproductions. But it left an impression on me. The same with the desire to surround myself with objects whose simple presence can make you feel that you aren't alone anymore. A little like Madame Moreno, whom we all called *Djedda*, grandmother. She hasn't left the building since it was built, at the end of the fifties. She still lives in the same apartment she did then, on the first floor of Building C. She lives alone, firmly shut in with her memories, in solitude, waiting for the day she can rejoin the shadows that haunt her memory. Everyone knows her as "the" Frenchwoman, and I only discovered recently that she's of

Spanish origin. When she opened the door to me. Every time I go to her home, I feel as if I've stepped into an old movie, where every piece of furniture, every ornament, has been chosen to suggest a particular story. And she takes pleasure in recalling that story in front of me, stroking her dry, bony hand over a random object from her dim, overcrowded living room. She always begins the same way: you see that, petite… "That" is pillow lace, yellowed to a Point de Venise, which she made herself for her trousseau. They were the only surviving possessions from the exodus following the Spanish civil war, which took her first to Oran and then here to Algiers, where she settled in 1945. And then there, again, a bronze statuette, a woman draped in a tunic, hair hanging loose around her tortured face, kneeling in supplication, arms stretched toward a heaven that seems completely deaf to her prayers. You see, petite, that's war. Every war I've passed through is written on her body, and mine as well. I carry with me the two stigmas of life: love and death. Which is why nothing else can touch me. Petite, love adds salt to the tears. But the one who hasn't cried, hasn't truly lived. You must understand that, ma petite.

CHAPTER XXI

HIM

Joy always eager to open my eyes every morning to the rumpled bed, on stretching out a hand to assure myself she's still there, close beside, and if she's gone, to see the imprint of her body in the rumpled sheets, burying my head in her pillow to take in her scent, our scent after making love. Taken over by memories of her hands gripping my shoulders, her body feverish and taut in the expectation of pleasure. Hearing her murmur indistinctly in my ear afterward before falling asleep wound around me, lulling me to sleep with the sound of her breathing. I like hearing the rustle of clothes before she comes to me. I like seeing her come and go naked in the bedroom. I can't get enough of this joy. I know she'd like hearing me say it aloud. But I can't. I don't know. She tells me often that she needs words, that love isn't sustained just by gestures. But it's so hard to say the words she wants to hear. Something stronger than my will, stronger even than my desire for her, is keeping me from saying what I feel. Even in the most intense moments. It's as if a dark force hidden away inside of me is blocking every effusion. I've started to envy people who can break down those walls. And still, Lilas and I have long talks. She even says I deserve the nickname given to talkative lawyers, who could go on forever when they have to plead or prepare indictments. But when it comes to reaching deep inside myself, the words refuse to pass through my lips. As a psychologist wanting to find explanations for everything, Lilas says it's nothing but an emotional blockage. Blockage that comes from an image of virility fostered first at home and then in society. A sort of conditioning males are subjected to beginning in infancy. In the first place, by rejecting all forms of sensitivity which, particularly in the minds of

mothers, are associated or confused with sentimentality. Thus a man who allows himself to show his emotions by tears or complaints, risks demeaning himself in the eyes of his friends. On the other hand, he can show his anger and his grievance openly. Behavior exactly the opposite of what is expected of a girl, Lilas stresses. I let her go on with her analysis, illustrating with examples she takes from situations she's confronted with each day at work. Deep down, I know she's right. Maybe I should have learned, maybe I should have forced myself to say aloud the words she wants to hear. But why is she so concerned with words? She's my wife. Now I can finally go out with her openly. All that we needed was a signature on a paper to accomplish this miracle. We don't have to hide anymore. Of course, at home there's my mother. Out of respect, we can't make any romantic gestures in front of her. But we have our bedroom to be intimate. Lilas seems satisfied with her new life. I know she would have liked more of a change. Jokingly, I sometimes remind her that moving from the second to the eighth floor is certainly an elevation! And if I want to push her to the edge, I add that marriage is already a social elevation—for women, of course. And for many here, a sort of insurance contract. When men respect the clauses of this contract, it provides rights in their favor, she retorts. So I can't stop thinking about my father who so easily threw off the burden of a family he deemed incompatible with his ambitions, to start a new life. That's certainly why I have a duty to my mother. Lilas and I talked about family constraints before we got married. We have an obligation to live with my mother. Not just a practical obligation. There's no question of leaving her. And if we go to live elsewhere, she'll come with us. Leave here, leave the apartments! That's all I dream about anymore. That's why I work so hard, come home late. That's why I don't have the energy to joke, to tell stories, to listen

to her. But since they live together, they keep each other company. They've known each other a long time. My mother often tells me that she'd have chosen Lilas if she'd had to pick a wife for me. I don't sense a hint of rivalry in their relationship, and I feel good between the two. There are some little quarrels here and there, over the way a household is run, allusions from my mother regarding certain mannerisms, but never anything serious, nothing that could start any serious conflict. Overall a generally cordial relationship. The majority of divorce cases I work on originate in conflicts, sometimes violent ones, between the wife and the husband's mother, the man trapped between the two. On one side, a jealous, demanding mother, and on the other an equally jealous and demanding wife. It isn't helped by the cramped living arrangements. I think God every day that I don't have with problems like that. Even if they don't always see eye to eye, they avoid venturing into extremely dangerous territory. When my mother expresses an opinion Lilas doesn't agree with, Lilas keeps quiet. But the living arrangements aren't pleasant for either of us. Lilas likes finding dinner already on the table when she comes home. Then she only has to do the dishes and put them away. Sometimes she sits with my mother in the living room while I look over my case notes. But most of the time, she joins me in the bedroom and sits on the bed with a book. And she waits until I've finished working. My mother would have liked us to have a baby right away. She talks about it a lot. She could have something to do while Lilas is at work! But Lilas remains deaf to all her hints. She's been on the pill since the beginning of our relationship. And for now, she has no intention of giving up a contraceptive that, she claims, is a true revolution of the twentieth century, the only non-violent revolution. She says she doesn't feel ready. That she feels less and less certain of the future. There doesn't seem to be

anything left of that drive that we—that everyone—once had. Nothing left of that prodigious desire to create a new world, to build our lives according to the promises we made in the euphoria of a hard-won liberty. Yes, I feel that there's nothing left but empty shells, emptied by a reality that's becoming more and more sterile, a parched existence. I saw thousands of Algerians crying on the day they buried Boumediene. I saw them crumble as his body passed by. I saw them tear at their faces and cry out in revolt against a man who fought for us and then left us orphans once again. And the next day, everyone returned to their everyday lives: the endless lines in front of State stores and bureaus headed by a corrupt administration at the height of its power. So it's for everyone who didn't know to take advantage of the system but were nevertheless indoctrinated enough to applaud grand achievements and declarations. While on the horizon—and we're certainly qualified to know and understand—the shadow of disillusionment is looming.

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