

Yalo did not understand what was happening.

The young man stood before the interrogator and closed his eyes. He always closed his eyes when he faced danger, when he was alone, and when his mother . . . On that day too, the morning of Thursday, December 22, 1993, he closed his eyes involuntarily.

Yalo did not understand why everything was white.

He saw the white interrogator, sitting behind a white table, the sun refracting on the glass window behind him, and his face bathed in reflected light. All Yalo saw were halos of light and a woman walking through the city streets, tripping on her shadow.

Yalo closed his eyes for a moment, or so he thought. This young man with his knitted eyebrows and long tan face, his slender height, closed his eyes for a moment before reopening them. But here, in the Jounieh police station, he closed his eyes and saw crossed lines around two lips that moved as if whispering. He looked at his handcuffed wrists and felt that the sun that obscured the face of the interrogator struck him in the eyes, so he closed them.

The young man stood before the interrogator at ten o'clock that cold morning and saw the sun refracted on the window, shining on the white head of the man whose mouth opened with questions. Yalo closed his eyes.

Yalo did not understand what the interrogator was shouting about.

He heard a voice shouting at him, “Open your eyes, man!” He opened them and light entered, into their depths like flaming skewers. He discovered that he had had his eyes closed for a long time, that he had spent half his life in the dark, and he saw himself as a blind man sees the night.

Yalo did not understand why she had come, but when he saw her he dropped onto the chair.

When he entered the room, the nameless girl was not there. He entered stumbling because he was blinded by the sun refracted on the glass. He stood in the whiteness, his hands cuffed and his body shivering with sweat. He was not afraid, even though the interrogator would write in his report that the suspect was trembling with fear. But Yalo was not; he was shivering with sweat. Sweat dripped from every part of him, and his clothes were spotted with the odd-smelling moisture emerging from his pores. Yalo felt naked under his long black coat, and smelled the odor of another person. He discovered that he did not know this man called Daniel, also known as Yalo.

The girl with no name arrived. Perhaps she had already been in the interrogation room, but he had not seen her when he came in. He saw her and dropped onto the chair, feeling that his legs had betrayed him. A slight dizziness came over him, and since he was unable to open his eyes, he closed them.

“Open your eyes, buddy!” shouted the interrogator. So he opened them, and saw an apparition that resembled the girl with no name. She said that she had no name. But Yalo knew everything. While she was dozing, her body delicate and naked, he opened her black leather bag and wrote down her name, address, telephone number, and everything else.

Yalo did not understand why she said she had no name.

Her breathing was uneven and the breeze around her face seemed to

suffocate her. She was unable to speak, but she was able to say this: “I don’t have a name.” Yalo bowed his head and took her.

There in the cottage, below the Villa Gardenia owned by Monsieur Michel Salloum, there, when he asked for her name, she said in a voice filled with gaps, lacking the air that was closing her lungs, “I don’t have a name. Please, no names.” “Fine,” he said. “My name is Yalo. Don’t forget my name.”

Yet she stood here, her name beside her. When the interrogator asked for her name, she didn’t hesitate before answering, “Shirin Raad.” She did not tell the interrogator, “Please, no names.” She did not stretch out her hand as she had done there in the cottage where Yalo had slept with her after she had stretched out her incense-scented arms. He had taken her palms and put them over his eyes, then started to kiss her white forearms, inhaling the fragrance of incense and musk. He inhaled the fragrance of her black hair and buried his face in it, intoxicated. He told her that he was drunk on incense, and she smiled as if a mask had vanished from her face. Yalo saw her smile through the shadows the candlelight threw against the wall. It was her first smile on that night of fear.

What was Shirin doing here?

When he opened his eyes after the interrogator’s shouts, he saw himself in Ballouna. He told her, “Come,” and she walked behind him. They walked from the pine forest below the Church of St. Nicholas and climbed the hill to the villa. The girl fell to the ground, or so it seemed to Yalo, so he turned to raise her, grasped her hand, and they walked on. When she fell a second time, he bent over her again, to carry her, but she shrank from him and stood up. She grasped the trunk of a pine tree and froze where she stood, panting heavily. He offered her his hand. She took it and walked beside him. He listened to the sound of her breathing and her panting fear.

When they reached the cottage, he left her at the door, entered and lit

a candle, tried to arrange his rumpled clothing and accessories, yet abandoned this quickly, realizing it would take too much time. When he went back to her, he found her resting her head on the leaf of the open door, making crying sounds.

“Don’t be afraid,” he told her. “Come. You’ll sleep here, I’ll make you a bed on the floor, don’t be afraid.”

She went in hesitantly and stood in the middle of the room, as if looking for a chair to sit on. Yalo jumped up and removed his pants from the chair and threw them on the bed, but instead of sitting down she remained standing and confused.

“Do you want tea?” he asked her.

Instead of answering, she reached out pleadingly. Yalo took her outstretched hands, but when he saw the fear forming concentric circles in the depths of her little eyes, he drew back. He said he was afraid, he would say that he felt fear, but at that moment he did not know, he did not feel afraid before writing the word. He said it and felt it, then wrote it. Today, when he remembered her little eyes in the trembling candlelight, when he saw how the pupils of her eyes shrank into concentric circles, he felt fear, and said that he was afraid of her eyes.

When he drew back, he saw her coming toward him. Her hands were suspended in the air as if she were appealing to him for help. He came close to her and took her palms and placed them over his eyes, and she became quiet. He held her hands and felt their trembling, as if the lines of fear that throbbed within each of them had become like the arteries that circulate tension throughout the body. He placed her palms over his eyes, and saw the darkness, and felt how her body calmed down and quieted, and gave off the scent of incense.

“What’s that sweet smell?” asked Yalo, drawing back. He sat on the chair and covered his face with his hands as though exhausted, and remained

there unmoving. The candlelight flickered in the piney breeze rising from the forest. The girl with no name stood beside him to regain the breeze fear had stolen from her when she saw the black phantom approaching, from the car stopped at the corner of the dense pine forest, below the Orthodox Church.

Why was she wearing her short skirt that showed her thighs?

She sat in front of the interrogator in her short red skirt and crossed her legs, and spoke as if she had swallowed all the air in the interrogation room.

Yalo had told her not to wear short skirts. “What is that supposed to be, huh?” But she did not answer. She looked down at her knees, which is where he was also looking, and her lips moved in the hint of a smile, and she shook her head. They went out together in the morning and he stopped a taxi for Beirut for her, then went back to his cottage.

But now she sat, wearing that same red skirt, or one like it, her legs crossed, speaking without any stammer or hesitation, as she had done there.

They were in the car like two shadows. From the top of his lookout hill, Yalo could see only the man’s gray hair. Yalo aimed the beam of his flashlight at the car just as the shots were fired. He felt, as he dodged among the pine trees, carrying the Russian Kalashnikov, and the flashlight, that he was going hunting. The cars were traps for prey like him. He was like a sparrow hunter, he knew the seasons, and enjoyed them. This is what he tried to explain to the interrogator. He said that the point for a hunter like him was not robbery or women, but pleasure. The pleasure of hunting, the love stolen inside the cars with sealed windows, and the pleasure of the first moment, the moment the light fell on the two faces, or on the hand reaching for the thighs, or on the head bent to the breasts free of the folds of clothing.

The beam that Yalo aimed hit its target directly. Yalo was not playing

with the light, it immediately hit the right spot. Had the beam not hit its target, he would have considered his adventure a failure; he would have retraced his steps or hid in wait for the car to pass, withdrawing quietly, dragging his failure behind him.

The first shot, or nothing; that was his hunting philosophy. For him the best thing was the gray hair that shone in the light. The best moments were men's heads covered with white hair as they bent over a forearm or a thigh. The beam penetrated the old gray hair, lit it up, and froze it in place. The light entered the bending white and drew a complete circle around it. The beam lifted up from the gray hair and moved to the other side, drawing eyes, and there were the woman's eyes, dilated with a mixture of fear and desire.

The light came closer. The phantom emerged after turning on the flashlight and playing it over the car. In the first moments of the hunt, Yalo focused the light, making it sharp and narrow as a ray. After the eyes were frozen, he enlarged the beam and flashed it around as he approached the closed window and rapped it with the muzzle of his rifle. The window opened and revealed terror. The phantom's head drew close to the man's window, but he did not allow the woman's eyes to escape his own alert hawk eyes, wide open in the dark. He penetrated the dark and flashed the beam of light, and the shadows rose. He approached within the shadows, and rapped the window with the muzzle of his rifle, and ordered it open. He looked into the woman's eyes and contemplated how wide they were, with the pupils shrunk to nothing. Then he withdrew quietly with his booty: a wristwatch, a ring, a gold chain, a necklace, and a few dollars, nothing more. Of course. Once he had asked a man to remove his necktie because he felt that fear was choking the man through the necktie that hung over his opened belt, like a noose. Once he had asked a woman to give him her yellow shawl, for no reason at all. But he wanted nothing more; more came to him with no strain

or effort. Yalo was not looking for anything more, but he did take it when it showed up, because he had learned from his torment in the city known as Paris never to refuse grace.

Things were different with Shirin, however.

Why did she say he had raped her in the forest?

“I did not – ” Yalo said, but heard the interrogator’s shout:

“You confessed, you dog! And now you say no. You know what happens to liars!”

Yalo was not lying, however. It was true that he had agreed that what he had done could be called rape, but . . . it was not a question of that night. Shirin had not leveled any charge against him having to do with that night, only with the days that came after.

Things had been different there with her. Yalo had not known the right words to use to tell her that the smell of incense her arms gave off that night had surrounded him like white clouds and then penetrated his very spinal column.

When he told her that he loved her from his spinal column – this was three months after the forest – she laughed so hard that tears ran down her face, and she kept having to blow her nose. At first he thought she was crying, and he bent over the table loaded with appetizers at the Albert Restaurant in Achrafieh, then he saw that she was laughing.

“I’m laughing at *you*,” she said. “You’re an idiot, all appearance and nothing more. What is this third-rate crap?”

And she started to speak English, telling him, “Finished, you must understand, everything is finished.”

He said that he did not understand English, so she spoke to him in French.

“*C’est fini, Monsieur Yalo.*”

“What’s *fini*?” he asked.

“Us,” she said.

“So you want to *finish* me?” he asked.

“Please, Monsieur Yalo, I can’t go on like this, please leave me alone and go, let’s understand each other, tell me what you want and it’s yours.”

She opened her bag and brought out a handful of dollars.

Why had she told the interrogator that he had slapped her because she refused to eat?

No, he had not slapped her because she refused to eat sparrows, as she had alleged to the interrogator.

“Who would eat music?” she said when she saw the plate of fried sparrows swimming in a broth of lemon and garlic.

“I don’t eat sparrows – it’s wrong!”

Yalo prepared a morsel of a small sparrow wrapped in bread and dipped in sauce, and brought it near her mouth.

“*Non, non*, please!”

But the hand that brought the bread-wrapped sparrow stayed there, outstretched, then began to approach her mouth and hover around it, before brushing it against the closed lips. The girl gave in, she opened her mouth, accepted the morsel, and began to chew, yet the muscles of her mouth contracted in repulsion.

She swallowed the sparrow and then stopped eating and talking.

Yalo kept drinking arak and gazing at her face. Her face was as small as a small white moon hung over her long neck. He wanted to tell her all about the moon. He wanted to tell her how he had discovered the moon and the stars and the Milky Way, which looked like a swath of milk in the sky, there in Ballouna, below the villa to which Parisian fate had guided him, but he was afraid she would laugh at him.

“So it seems like you don’t speak Arabic or think much of Abd al-Halim Hafiz.”

He told her that, or something like that, but she said nothing in reply. The little white moon rested still on the long neck, then tears streamed from her eyes. She grasped a paper tissue, wiped her tears, and blew her nose. But the tears did not stop. He started to tell her stories about the “Brown Nightingale,” about Suad Hosny and Shadia, and the song “Jabbar” he loved so much.

He told her that he had come to love the poetry of Nizar Qabbani because of Abd al-Halim Hafiz, and that “A Message from Underwater,” in which a man is sinking in the water of passion, was the most beautiful poem he had ever heard in his life. And that he had not believed that Abd al-Halim did not write the lyrics to his own songs until he read about it in the newspaper.

“It’s impossible, Shirin, the words melt in his mouth like sugar, he spins the lyrics into fine threads, impossible that he didn’t write that poem, but later I believed it, and went and bought a book called *Drawing with Words*, but I didn’t understand a single word. Poetry doesn’t make sense unless it’s sung by someone like Abd al-Halim. You don’t like Abd al-Halim?”

The moon was silent, flinching with muscle contractions, and he saw the small eyes suspended on its round white surface.

Yalo had not noticed how small her eyes were before they had come to the Albert Restaurant. There in Ballouna he saw, and yet did not see, because the fragrance penetrated him and made him unable to see.

“Do you remember? I don’t know how you felt, but there, I felt like I was drowning in the smell of incense, I couldn’t see anything. Look at me close up so I can see the color of your eyes.”

Shirin had selected this restaurant and they drove there in her white Golf. He sat beside her but could not think of what to say. She had told him on the telephone to wait for her in Sassine Square in front of the Bashir

Gemayel memorial at one o'clock in the afternoon. He had stood there and waited in the rain, never budging from his spot. In vain he sought shelter from the torrents of rain under part of the memorial. He did not go to the Café Chaise nearby. He was afraid that she would not find him, afraid that she would not recognize him, afraid that he would not recognize her car. And when she arrived, he did not recognize her because he had been gazing at the passing cars without really seeing them. The car stopped beside him. She opened the door and motioned to him. He saw her and fell onto the leather seat, droplets dripping from his long black coat forming puddles on the floor.

“You’re still wearing that coat?” she asked.

He did not know what to say. He had worn it for her so that she would remember that night. But he was lying without even opening his mouth, because this was a coat he could not bear to be without. He wore it in Beirut, he wore it at the war barracks near Adlieh, he wore it in Paris, and he wore it in Ballouna, and he could not bear to take it off. He even hated summer for its sake. He never parted from this coat on his hunting trips in the forest. But he did not know what to say. The spinal column idea occurred to him, and he wanted to tell her about love that could unhinge vertebrae, but he said nothing. He waited in silence until they arrived at the Albert Restaurant, where she stopped the car and they got out. She went in ahead of him and found a private corner where they were seated. Before he had a chance to tell her that he had missed her, as he had planned to do after she had agreed to go out to the restaurant with him, the waiter appeared and she asked what he wanted to drink.

“Arak,” said Yalo.

“Arak,” said Shirin with a little hesitation. “Why not.”

Yalo began to order *mezze*. Shirin seemed oblivious to the different

dishes, or was not listening. Yalo was certain that her consent to have lunch with him would lead her, in the end, to his house in Ballouna or her house in Hazemiya.

When he had bathed at eleven o'clock that morning, as he worked the green shampoo into his hair, standing under the hot shower and closing his eyes, he saw Shirin. Water cascaded over him and his love poured out. He felt that everything was surging off his shoulders, his whole life was rushing by with the hot water, and he felt a strange elation. He pleased himself without knowing it, and everything flowed away as he finished. He came to her, leaving his sexual desire at home. He came to her naked, without desire. His desire had washed away and he came to her with love. Love alone, he said to himself, love for the sake of love, like Abd al-Halim. A love that he did not know how to express, but he would express it. From the first time he met Shirin, he had not stopped listening to the songs of Abd al-Halim. True, he had gone out on hunting parties but did so without any real desire. He had stopped seeing Madame Randa; he had slept with her only three times in six months, and each time she had put a pornographic movie in the VCR, for he never slept with her without a movie on.

Shirin said that she would meet him in Sassine Square. So Yalo parked Madame's car at a corner near the Lala Grill and walked toward Sassine Square.

When he had caught Shirin with the gray-haired man bent over her neck, he had thought she did not own a car. The man had sped off in his car and left her alone, shivering in the forest, and Yalo took her to his cottage because he had no other solution.

Why had she told the interrogator that he had ordered her to get out, and had asked the man to leave?

"She is lying, sir."

When he said that she was lying, he raised his palm to his right cheek, and felt small white circles spinning out of his eyes, and then everything was a blur.

Was this really what had happened?

Yalo would spend long days in his cell trying to re-create the event exactly as it had happened, but he would fail.

When the light shone on the two victims and he ran toward them, he heard nothing. His footfalls, the sound of his cheap shoes smacking the ground, filled his ears. As always happened with him, the sound of his footsteps rose when he was on the hunt, and he heard nothing else.

He cast the beam of the flashlight on them and then advanced. When he reached the car, he saw the gray-haired man lift his head in terror before getting out of the car and standing before Yalo. Yalo looked at the girl and gestured with the muzzle of his rifle, and while his movement was not intended as an order to get out of the car, the girl opened the door and got out. Yalo turned and walked toward her, and at that moment the gray-haired man jumped back into the car, took off fast in reverse, then turned and sped off with the wheels spraying dirt. Yalo lifted his rifle and aimed it at the car, cocking it in preparation to fire, or so he thought, and he heard the girl crying. He lowered the rifle and went to her side, and silence fell between them.

Yalo guided the girl to his house after asking her to remove her high heels. He held her by the hand and stopped her and then walked with her, and when he realized she was stumbling because of the high heels, he looked at them and she understood, so she removed them without being asked. She carried her shoes in her right hand and walked beside him. Still, she kept stumbling and also fell down at one point. She bent over as if about to fall, and he bent over her, but she regained her balance and stood up.

He grasped her left hand and led her to where he had smelled the radiating scent of incense from her beautiful white arms.

Why had she lied to the interrogator, telling him that she had been with her fiancé?

Yalo did not remember that he had told her that her arms were like rice pudding, but there in the restaurant, after he had slapped her, and they had finished eating, Yalo ordered rice pudding. Shirin had smiled because she remembered that he had told her that her arms were sweeter than rice pudding.

No, he had not slapped her because of the sparrows as she claimed to the interrogator, but because she had offered him money and he despised money. He ate a dozen fried sparrows and drank half a bottle of local arak before slapping her for insulting his honor.

No, what she said was not true. He had not ordered her to kneel, she and her fiancé. She had knelt down after the gray-haired man left. Nor had she been with her fiancé. The young man who sat in the interrogation room had not been with her there in the forest.

She told the interrogator that he had ordered them to kneel and then pointed his rifle at them, intending to kill her fiancé, Emile Shahin, but she implored him to spare him, and he did.

“You are Emile?” asked the interrogator.

“Yes, yes, Emile Shahin,” replied the young man.

“Do you have anything to add?”

“Shirin said it all,” said Emile.

She said that he had ordered Emile to say his prayers before he was killed in front of his lover. “Then I began to plead with him, and I cried, but he was still stubborn, with his gun aimed at my fiancé’s head, so I screamed, I don’t know where I found the strength. Emile jumped up and ran to the car

and escaped, thank God, my fiancé was able to escape, but I was trapped with this bandit.”

“Daniel, what do you have to say in response?” the interrogator asked.

Yalo felt tongue-tied, he fell mute. The pebble came back. His mother used to put a small pebble under his tongue so that he could learn to speak without stuttering. Then he forgot the stutter when he saw the blood, that is what he would have written had he been able to see his life in the mirror of days, but he was standing here, feeling his mother’s pebble under his tongue, and found no words to speak.

“Why didn’t your fiancé report this incident immediately?” he would have said.

“How was he a man of fifty, who became a young man today?” he would have asked.

“Why did you run away and escape?” he would have asked.

But he said nothing, and the interrogator did not press him for a response. He considered his silence to be a response, and a confession.

“Is this the man who raped you, robbed you, and continues to stalk you?” asked the interrogator.

Shirin nodded in reply.

Emile looked at his watch and asked the interrogator if they might leave now.

“Of course, of course,” said the interrogator, and escorted them to the door of the guard desk.

But at the Albert Restaurant, no.

He slapped her and she shut up. Then when he ordered rice pudding she smiled, and he told her that he loved her.

“I’m engaged, Yalo,” she said.

“I love you,” he said.

“Please,” she said.

The waiter appeared with the bill, but Yalo asked him for another glass of arak. He took a sip and looked into the girl's eyes before closing his eyes for a long time.

"Please don't fall asleep," she said.

"Shut up," he said. "Leave me alone. I'm talking to God."

The girl began to talk, and Yalo listened to her with his eyes closed.

"I respect your feelings, but as you can see, I'm engaged, so I can't," she said.

"That's the shit who abandoned you in the forest and ran away?" he asked.

"No, no, I left him, my fiancé is someone else."

The girl talked, and Yalo listened.

"It's like an Egyptian movie," he said. "It's like I'm sitting in a Ustaz Wahid movie."

She said that she would listen to Arab songs only to please him, and that she respected him. She said that she cherished him, and apologized and said that he was free to slap her because she had hurt his feelings when she had offered him money.

"Stop it!" shouted Yalo.

He got up and mimed the scene in "Daughter of the Nile" where Farid Shawqi slaps Hind Rostom and how the actress falls to her knees and says, "I love you – you beast!" "That's how you should be," he said. "You have to love a real man, not these shits, one geezer your father's age, the other one afraid of his mother."

"You're right," Shirin said, "but what can I do? I love him. He was my classmate at the American University, and we slept together. I took birth control pills, but one day I forgot, I don't know why, and when I told him I was pregnant and we had to get married, he ran away and said he was afraid of his mother. So I took care of myself. I had such a *dépression* and one of my

girlfriends took me to Dr. Said, who made me a *courtage*, and who loved me. He told me he loved me because I'd cried so much. I got to his place, to the clinic, and I started crying. I couldn't speak. I sat on the chair and placed my head between my hands, and I started gasping, and the tears just ran from my eyes, and the doctor didn't say anything. He let me cry and sat there watching me. He told me later that he sat and watched, and that he became infatuated with me 'for my tears' – that is exactly what he said, in Classical Arabic, 'for your tears,' then he took me in his arms. I don't know how long I stood there crying before he said, 'Come on, let's go to the room next door.' Then he said, 'Get undressed.' I took off my skirt and stood there. But he said no, and motioned with his hands that he meant everything. So I took everything off, and he stared at my breasts, and I felt, I don't know why, his gaze penetrating my breasts like pins, and I heard him say: 'Very nice.' But I didn't respond. I was shaking with fear, and I told him, 'Doctor, I'm cold,' and he said, 'Stretch out there,' and I stretched out on that strange bed, sort of a half-bed. I was on my back, with my legs dangling, and the nurse approached me with a needle, while he looked down below, and he had a strange look on his face, I don't know, I was afraid I was in trouble and I tried to speak, but my tongue was heavy in my mouth, like rubber, and after that I don't remember anything. No, before I passed out, I told him, 'I'm cold, please give me a cover,' I was so cold and ashamed, and his eyes were like, they could see everything, and then when I opened my eyes, it was all over. I heard the nurse saying, "Thank God, get dressed and go see the doctor."

As Shirin told her story, her tongue had a life of its own as she talked, cried, and blew her nose, as Yalo gave her tissues and burned, everything within him was inflamed. The half-bed inflamed him, and the doctor's motion for her to take off her clothes inflamed him, and the sight of the nurse as she gave her the shot of anesthesia inflamed him.

She said she had taken off all her clothes, and drew what seemed to be

circles around her small breasts. He smelled the fragrance, the fragrance of nakedness, but he was like a paralyzed man. She talked and he listened, and his eyes felt as heavy as if he were on the verge of sleep. She spoke of the bleeding she suffered two days after her abortion, and how Dr. Said al-Halabi took her to his private clinic, where she spent three days until she was better, and how she had fallen in love with him by the third day.

“I let him sleep with me without feeling any real desire. No, he didn’t really sleep with me.” She said that on the third day, at about six o’clock in the evening, when she was alone in the room, overcome with sleepiness and craving a cigarette, she saw him coming in the twilight that obscured the room with gray, making everything uniform. He sat by her on the bed, and said, “It’s done. Thank God you made it through. Now you’re able to go home.” He pulled the blanket off her so she could get up, and took her hand.

“When he held my hand, I felt that I loved him.”

She said that she loved him for his hands. His long fingers, like those of a piano player, were interlaced with hers, when she fell in love with him.

“He put his right hand on mine and ran the other through his white hair, and I fell in love.” She said that she loved him, and was hoping he would pull her against his chest.

“I told him, ‘I don’t want to go – I’m so comfortable with you, Doctor.’”

Describing that evening, Shirin said that night crept up on them and she had no idea what happened after that.

“I don’t know what happened, I don’t remember. You know, I never remember these kinds of things, not just with Dr. Said, but, like, with anyone, with you I don’t remember either, and I don’t remember with Emile. Of course, I remember the room and the doctor beside me, and I did sleep with him, but I don’t remember the details. Why does this happen? Do you know?”

“How do I know?” said Yalo.

“That’s strange. I don’t remember a thing,” she said.

“You mean now you don’t remember how you slept with me?” asked Yalo.

“...”

“You don’t remember the second time, when you said that you could smell pine, as if there were pine trees in the room?”

“I said that?”

“Of course!”

“No way.”

“You were talking about the pine smell, and I felt as if my spinal column were coming apart.”

“I never said a thing,” said Shirin. “It is just not possible. When I was with you I was dying of fright, anyway, please God, let us forget.”

Why did she forget everything?

She had forgotten how she had told him, in the Albert Restaurant, about Dr. Said and her new old fiancé, Emile. She sat like a stranger, and from her small eyes gleamed something like the savagery of youth on that day that Yalo had decided to forget, and had indeed forgotten. They dragged the three men to the cemetery, and crucified them on the ground under the cypress trees in the cemetery of St. Demetrius. They crucified them before shooting them, then they began to curse them and spit on them. Terror haunted their eyes. That day, Yalo vomited, then started to cry, then went home, then . . . No, he did not want to remember now. He closed his eyes.

She said that she had kissed the doctor, she lifted her head a little for her lips to meet his, and she fell in love with him.

“I let him sleep with me but with no desire, but he didn’t . . .” she said.

The doctor told her that the complete sexual act was forbidden, for now.

“So he slept with my breasts,” she said, crying and blowing her nose.

“Like how?” quavered Yalo.

“Like this,” she said, tracing with her fingers a line between her breasts.

“And I didn’t feel anything,” she said, “except, of course, I felt hot.”

She said that she started a long-term relationship with the doctor, that he had strange ways, and that he “always slept with her that way.”

“What do you mean ‘that way’?” Yalo asked.

“I mean, here,” she said, and traced an invisible line between her breasts.

“Always like that?”

“Pretty much,” she said. “He said he liked my tits.”

“Don’t say that word,” said Yalo. “It’s not nice for women to use words like that.”

“Fine, so what am I supposed to say? I’m talking facts.”

“Say *sabro*.”

“What does *sabro* mean?”

“It means ‘moon.’ You’ve forgotten? I taught you that word when you were at my house, that night.”

“I told you, I don’t remember anything.”

“At the time, you asked me what it meant and I explained it.”

“Fine, explain it to me now.”

“Now, no,” Yalo said. “Just don’t use that word.”

She said that the doctor never slept with her, even once. He was content with just playing around, and with “those.” “He said he was afraid of really sleeping with me because we were in the clinic, and I told him, Fine, let’s go to a hotel. He said everybody knows him, and he’s a married man, so we spent the evening in either the clinic or the car, there in Ballouna, where you raped me.”

“I raped you? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, when you took me to your place and slept with me. We were in the car, and he told me to put my head down.”

“Maybe he saw me.”

“No, he didn’t see you, he wanted me to – ”

“He wanted you to what?”

“He wanted me to put my head down, and that’s when your excellency showed up, and we practically died of fright. I don’t know how I held my head up again and how he managed to tidy himself.”

“I’m an idiot!” shouted Yalo. “An idiot! A jackass!”

“Lower your voice,” said Shirin. “Please. The restaurant is full of people. Do me a favor, don’t raise your voice.”

Yalo repeated quietly that he was an idiot and a jackass.

Where was the scent of incense?

Why did Yalo not smell the scent of incense when he saw her sitting in the interrogation room?

At the Albert Restaurant he had smelled that scent. Her incense was stronger than the arak, the fried sparrows, than everything. But here, in the white interrogation room, he could smell nothing. His nose picked up a smell like rubber. When the interrogator forced him to write his life story, he would write about the smell of arrest. He would say that the smell of prison was like the smell of damp rubber. The smoking, burning smell of oil, diesel fuel, and tires.

When he saw her in front of the interrogator, he dropped down onto the chair and closed his eyes, searching for the smell of incense. He saw Emile sitting beside her, and saw her slender, naked thighs and short skirt, and her round breasts, and waited for the incense. But the incense did not emerge, and the other smell grew stronger, like the smell of burned rubber

extinguished with water. A sun penetrating everything and making it impossible to see.

Then Shirin spoke.

She spoke and reached out and clasped Yalo's hand, in the restaurant, before withdrawing it and saying, "Please."

"Please let me leave. I don't want anything from you, I'm sorry, forgive me but let me leave."

"Where are you going to go?" Yalo asked.

"I want to go home and back to my life," she replied.

"Go. I'm not keeping you."

"Yes, you are keeping me, let go of me, and let me go. I'm grateful to you for everything, but you have to understand that this is over, it's all over."

Yalo wanted to slap her again but didn't. The slap seemed logical when she opened her purse, pulled out a handful of dollars, and offered them to Yalo, asking him to leave her alone.

"Take everything," she said. "If you want more, I'm ready to pay, but just stay away from me."

Yalo stood up and slapped her. He heard the sound of footsteps approaching and guessed it was restaurant staff approaching. He put his hand in his pocket and felt his knife, prepared for a fight. But the footsteps grew fainter and faded away. He sat in his place and drained his glass in one swallow. Silence fell, broken only by Shirin's coughing and sobbing.

He gave her a tissue and she put the money back in her purse, and then he fed her a bite of *kibbeh nayeh*. She ate it and they resumed talking.

He described to her the Egyptian movies he loved, because Madame had made him love them. She used to ask him to go down to Beirut once a week so he could bring her Arab movies from the video store in the Sodeco district. She spent her mornings watching the movies, and sometimes asked

him to watch them with her. He did not tell Shirin about the other movies, except that he did not know where Madame got them, but she only watched them at night. Daytime was for the Arab movies and night was for those movies that she only watched with a bottle of Black Label scotch. Yalo did not want to talk about those movies now, because ever since Shirin he had begun to see life through new eyes.

Why did Shirin not believe him?

Why did she insist on thinking that he was robbing her and that his love for her and the songs of Abd al-Halim Hafiz were meaningless?

In the restaurant, when she described her relationship with Emile, he felt a need to slap her again. She said that she had started to believe that Dr. Said did not love her.

“I mean, how can I explain it. I don’t know. Only I just felt that he didn’t really love me.”

She said that her relationship with the doctor ended after that hellish night. “It was like all the gates of Hell opened up. I went to see him at the clinic as usual, around six o’clock in the evening, because he would go home in an hour. We sat and talked, and he moved closer to me and reached out to unbutton my blouse, and asked me about Emile. At that time I’d go home and then go out with Emile. I was so fed up with life, living with secrecy and lies and missed appointments, and anyway, the only way he slept with me was the way I told you about. I got back together with Emile. I won’t tell you how it went when we talked. He said that he felt guilty, and so on and so on, and that he was going to bring his mother and we’d get officially engaged. I didn’t tell Dr. Said about Emile, so I don’t know how he knew. I guess I told him Emile called, but I didn’t tell him I went to the movies with him and that we slept together.”

“You slept with him?” asked Yalo.

“What’s wrong with that, when he’s going to be my fiancé?”

“You mean you were sleeping with two men at the same time?”

Shirin did not reply. She hung her head and said nothing.

“Why so quiet?”

She said that she no longer understood him. He had taken her and raped her and was now stalking her on the phone, and demanding to meet with her in cafés, waiting for her in front of her home and her job, robbing her, threatening her, and now here he was lecturing her on morality because she had slept with two men.

“What about you – how many women have you slept with in the forest?”

“No, I’m not like that.”

“What are you? Who are you? I swear to God, I have no idea why I got mixed up with you.”

“So, what?” asked Yalo.

“So what, what?” asked Shirin.

“You told him about Emile, and then what?”

“Oh! You’re asking me about the doctor.”

She said she was very surprised when she saw Dr. Said’s reaction. When he asked her about Emile, Shirin decided that the time had come to tell him the truth. When he heard that they had gone to see the movie *Scarface*, that they went to an Italian restaurant afterwards, and that they then spent the night in his apartment, he did not get angry and throw her out of the clinic as she thought he would. He began to bite his fingernails uncontrollably, and then he came closer to her and grasped her breasts.

“No, no,” she said. “I don’t want this.”

“I know what you want,” he answered, as he began tearing at her clothes and leading her to his couch. She took off all her clothes and helped him take off his, and Hell commenced.

Shirin said that she didn’t know what happened, whether he slept with her or not. She said that he had an erection, and that she held it, and that

he entered her, but she did not know, perhaps he ejaculated quickly, but there was no sign, so perhaps he had suddenly gone soft and claimed he had finished, and began to try again. He was up against her the whole time, as if he were sleeping with her, but he did not . . . then he said he wasn't able to, because she had castrated him. "You are a woman who castrates men."

Shirin looked at Yalo and asked him, "What do you think?"

Yalo said that he did not understand exactly what happened.

"Neither do I," said Shirin.

"God doesn't test us," laughed Yalo.

"So it's true that I'm a castrator?" asked Shirin.

"With other guys I don't know, but with me, I'd be glad to prove that you're not, right now."

"That's all you ever think about!"

"What do you want me to think about?" said Yalo, sipping from his glass of arak.

Shirin went back to her story, saying that the doctor got up then, put his clothes on, and left, leaving her alone in the clinic.

"I dressed quickly, without washing. I was afraid he had locked the door and left me stranded there, but when I tried the door it opened. I got myself out of there and went home, and that's it."

"That's it?"

"Well, then there was the whole story in Ballouna. He begged me, and I went out with him in his car. And you know the rest."

"What about Emile?" asked Yalo.

"No, no, Emile knew nothing about my relationship with Dr. Said. Anyway, what kind of a relationship is it when it's no fun?"

She said that even with Emile she did not feel the pleasure of things, but she was going to marry him. She slept with him without any real desire, though she felt affection for him, especially since he was so weighed down

by his feelings of guilt. As if he were afraid for her. Shirin said she would marry Emile and wanted Yalo to understand her situation, and to stop harrasing her with his phone calls, because the official engagement would be announced soon.

“Engagement? What engagement?”

“My engagement to Emile,” said Shirin. “We decided to get engaged. So please, that’s it.”