

Chapter 3

Narrow Stairway and the Dragon

Columns of light and dark silence incline his way, clamping onto him in the late drizzly evening. The road in front of them lies open, empty, obscure. Stretches of a clean, charted world, freshly deserted, start flashing in the scant, watery darkness—neon advertisements, towering glass buildings.

He extends his hand to help her alight from the sidewalk. A puddle is in her way. She wears sandals; a slim leather strap passes tightly between her big toe and the rest of her wet, short, fleshy toes. On their nails, a faded red manicure is peeling. The upper curve of her foot seems plump, desirable.

In her response to his gesture there was, for a moment, an imperceptible aversion, as if an old fixed determination were behind it. She always had her fixed determinations. She did not extend her hand to his. She did not walk arm in arm with him—not once during their entire six days in the city, which she called “our city.”

He said to himself: It was never our city. Our city is a nocturnal dream of dazzling light, ancient, outside time, cut from the archaic walls of the world.

She had said to him on their first night, some months before:

—I have started feeling this from a number of things. First when you used to put your arm in my arm, and second . . .

In the beginning, when crossing a street—one of those diverse, strange streets they crossed together—he would find warmth and affection in her supple, surrendering arm; he would feel a precious and mutual security. At that time, he felt nothing but a light pleasure, a weightless inner glow.

Later on, he said to himself: The sun, always, rises only once. Not again.

Even now he calls upon the sun. Without interruption. A despair that denies its own existence, a despair that multiplies in ferocity, clamps onto him with a voracity that cannot be revoked.

He said to himself: The sun never responds.

That was their first night in the city she called “our city.” She had said to him, I know it is the city of everyone, but I think of it as our city.

This city was his birthplace.

He had come to it across great trajectories of pain, anxiety, spiritual fatigue. He did not know then that she would be coming to him—as usual—from a world marked by warm fulfillment, by multiple victories that she loved, but that she said contained no significance for her. As if that world were a perpetually air-conditioned world, a continuous luxury of glorified elegance. He had said to her: I can hardly believe that we will meet; she had said to him: Yes we will meet unless a third world war, an earthquake, or a cosmic catastrophe takes place. She had said to him, Help me, my love, in choosing a small gift for an old friend, a truly excellent person, the model of a perfect septuagenarian gentleman, whom I have gotten to know recently and for whom I have great affection. I believe he is very fond of me too. Do you think, for example, these cufflinks are an appropriate present, or what? Choosing a gift for such a friend is so perplexing.

He laughed. She said to him with sudden alertness: Why are you laughing? He said: I am laughing at the entire situation. Yes, shirt buttons, not bad. Or anything you like.

She withdrew inside herself all of a sudden then said determinedly, We have to discuss the tickets, darling, I am afraid I don't have the time. The voices around them were loud, the place crowded.

But now, at last, he was on his way toward her. An impending sense of catastrophe kept needling him. He wasn't sure the entire universe had any significance whatsoever. With savage hands he was strangling a din of fierce joy, yet had already fallen into the ruins of anticipating the very worst. Nothing would happen. The train was entering a world silenced by estrangement and loneliness—a world of low gray houses with rain constantly pouring on them. A world enshrouded by an imperceptible fog.

The jolts of the huge diesel engine shake his heart repeatedly, monotonously, imperceptibly. He senses catastrophe. He will not find her, he will know only the shocks of rejection and oblivion.

Here are the two of them in the street. She is now beside him yet distant, lively with her vivacity that never ebbs. Wearing her black and white long dress. Her bronze-colored bosom in the wide, round décolleté of her dress appears soft, slightly pressured against a light dew—the bosom's tender flesh glistening with tiny droplets. A desire takes hold of him: to bury his lips and face in her bosom.

He said to her: I worry about you in this rain. You are lightly dressed. She said to him laughingly: Don't worry at all. Rain and cold don't affect me any longer. In fact, they refresh me. He said: But your sandals. She said: Don't worry, it doesn't matter. She went on talking, on and on about the market and the scenes they were passing through, about the prices and the antiques, about the weather, about everything and anything. He was enjoying, from within, the clever outpourings and polished, gentle fluency in conversation. He was also angry: he could see through her tone, through the attitudes of old schoolteacher, mother, and tourist guide all at once. This tone angered him, made him edgy. He said to himself: Probably this dis-cursive gushing is nothing but a delicate, shapeless bridge over the dark, open abyss in the depths of her anguished soul and within a heart agitated with passions, torments, desires, and madness. He said to her one or two days later in a definitive, cutting tone: I couldn't care less about facts, statistics, and information. These can be obtained from books and libraries. What interests me is something else. This also happens to be my country. Have you forgotten that? It seemed to him as if he were confronting her with his childish pride. Except with a strange and silent gaze of rejection, she did not respond—a huge contrast to her gushing words.

His mind filled with indissoluble, heavy dregs from the last months, weeks, days, hours, as if they were infinitely scattered points of waiting and suspension, of denial and mad expectation, of joy destroyed by basic, intractable doubt, that of the recently experienced moments of loss, that of total and complete despair when he missed her but could not find her. The savage determined resolutions that he undertook a thousand times, had repudiated a thousand times, as he roamed the streets. The curses and waves of destructive hate and aversion. The final resolutions—final each time—not to lose everything. Yet he loses the one thing of value and significance in the whole world, the only thing he loves and wants more than anything else. Instantly he returns to the agony of infinite possibility tossing him in all directions; having lost everything, he loses his bearings. He is burdened with a strain that he feels is inhuman. Then the shock of

encounter, unexpected, after he had inured himself, out of bitterness, to an attitude of carelessness. As if his heart, torn, ruined by stabs and fractures, is no more able to feel joy or anything else. Facing the wonder of this sudden event—her appearance in front of him, totally unexpected—he moves with depressed gait. She . . . is beautiful, strange. How beautiful, how strange. As usual, she gushes out her mixture of half-lies and half-truths.

In his mind now are these strata of fresh black mud that paralyze his first steps in this city she had called “our city.” She said, I thought it was our city.

His own shoes, tight on his feet, were hurting. He felt uncomfortable about himself—not properly dressed, his clothes not suitable for him, his face shaven in a hurry, washed with cold water. Rainy weather in the summer evening, quasi-hot. Alertness and anxiety make his steps unsteady. Wanting to be finished, he said to her: The first thing I’m going to do is buy a dark gray chamois jacket and velvet trousers of the latest style, of heavy striped black velvet, along with a snow-white polo-neck pullover. He entered for a moment into the game of conversation. Half the game was to escape, to challenge the anguish, burden, and anger he was trying to stifle. The other half was to jocularly present intentions he could not fulfill. She glanced at him, a strange look that continues to rob him of sleep—as if it were permanent, ever present in his heart, this look of astonishment, of distancing and distance. She said: You? I cannot imagine you, I cannot see you in black velvet trousers and a polo-neck white pullover. He laughed, and said, as if talking about someone else: You don’t know me. Twenty years ago, here in Alexandria, during my vagabond and boisterous year—

Jokingly, she cut him off: Oh you had boisterous years? Confess. He said laughingly: Not really; it was, of course, innocent joviality when I used to spend all day and all night in streets, cafés, and cinemas. There was a café in Saad Zaghoul Street called Friskadore. We used to spend most of our time in it, and we used to go to the movies two or three times in one day, taking with us small whisky bottles, Craven A or Pall Mall cigarettes, with a big paper bag of mussels. In the darkness of Cinema Metro we used to drink whisky and laugh at Hollywood melodramas, while nibbling on mussels and throwing the shells at the side of the open paper bag lying on the stately red carpet—with some of the audience ready to give us a drubbing. She said to him: I don’t believe it. Surely you must be inventing it all? He said: Not at all. In those days, I was going through a crisis. He hesitated before he said: It was the emotional crisis about which I have spoken to you.

Then he spurted forth heatedly about the days of despair, loss of faith in everything, suffering romantic disappointments of which no one was aware. He

said: Why do I always associate romance with bitterness and unbearable experience? He laughed to cover up his fear of admitting the old, continuously renewed, striking calamity. Was he sensing it repeating itself now with all its violence and the ferocity of its power? He said, I used to have, in fact, a printed blue silk shirt. It had red, yellow, and white patterns and dots. Also, I owned a pair of black velvet trousers. Those clothes formed a sort of challenge to despair and darkness, a way of dashing into the indifference and derision of everything, but basically of myself and of that which was most precious to me.

She said, with a distant tone—strong, calm, very polite, as if she were on another level, the same tone of reception she reserved for his heated and naive confessions: I can't believe it. But we will buy for your sake the velvet trousers and the white polo-neck pullover.

He did not tell her how he used to doze on the earth—green with wild grass—and inhale the air of the wet, concealed soil, the yellow flowers filling the eye of the sun—large as it is—and the bees stabbing the open core of delicacy, their hostile buzz receiving an absent reception. He did not tell her about the feeling of the Nile bridge's soft soil in which the bottoms of the feet plunge, so that every footstep finds a slight solidity resisting yet welcoming the print of warm steps. He did not tell her about the splash of rain drops on the jacket and the shirt opened down his neck unto the shivering hot skin and the swarming of a regular, light pouring of water and salt on the face and chest amid wind-blows full of vitality and chill, and the warm, helpless tear-storms. He did not tell her about the cries when running on the street's asphalt among the lonely eyes and the fires of fear, rebellion, amid the anxiety of the wounded falling next to the iron wheels, and the chains gnawing the sidewalks and the lawns of public gardens. No, he did not tell her about narrow, metallic mouth-vents spitting out brief, dry, final bursts. Then the screams of running people carrying across the white stones between the sea and the street amid the indifferent, watching crowd. The cars that had run silently beneath the calm autumn sun—no, he did not tell her of the hands holding to every brick, to every projecting bulge in the seawall, the scraping of knees with the body glued to it begging for help and clambering up with the force of a last, desperate effort, looking with insane hope for the sensual grapes, their minds holding onto the dark, sourish juice spurting from the brownish, sandy, rounded skin of their beloveds' breasts. He did not tell her about the light sea waves drowning the many shoes, filling them with water, plunging them down into the soft sands of final oblivion. The demonstrations, no, he could not speak of them.

He said to her once, at lunch, toward the end of a story, no end as usual, not a real one, as they'd been conversing in a disciplined, calculated way, the way that estranged friends talk to each other:

Yes, the ideal tone . . . The golden mean . . . This is always the rational solution, always logical. It is more persuasive; as it were, inevitable. One has to accept its soundness. This is the issue, in essence. It must be confronted. The Aristotelian solution. That is to say, I am Aristotelian.

She said to him: Yes.

He said smiling, self-deriding: I used to think I was Platonic.

She shook her head as she contemplated him with distant light-green eyes in which there was nothing but utter silence, enunciating nothing.

He said: Am I not Dionysian, as well? I used to think I was a follower of Dionysus.

She said: You? Dionysian?

He said: Not even Platonic?

She said: No. Rather, you are Apollonian.

She pointed to her head in a definite final gesture: Everything for you passes through here.

He said smiling: All right. Fine. As long as you are convinced of it. As long as people seem to agree on it. What can I do? Possibly this is true. I have to accept it—God will take care of it. Frankly I am lost among all those Greeks.

She smiled—a complimentary, polite smile. She did not tell him: You are pretentious without the need to be so.

Weeks before, she was talking about her friends: writers and poets. The day before, they had been at a reception in the Soviet Embassy, along with the artistic guests, devouring food, gulping whisky non-stop. She said: These poets, how can they? I can hardly imagine. I suppose it's because they spring from Dionysus. He did not say: Dionysus?

He did not tell her of the shadows quivering in and out of an ancient thicket of trees in deep summer, napping in the midst of a crowded day along whose edges ran the life of the strange city. Nor did he tell her of the pleasant fear while the burden of Being depended on the delicacy of a branch, quivering, warning of being smashed. Pliant, it moved up and down, never separating from the muscles of the hard, firm wood. The dust of upper-story leaves rained down gracefully on the perspiration of sticky dewy hands in the grip of a life that threatened to fall into a bottomless hole. He didn't relate to her the pleasure of rising up among a thousand holes in the blueness of the skies, of the leaf of living wood and green sycamore closing in on its raw sap, of the cries announcing in awe, expectation,

and pleasure: the danger of the catastrophe. He did not tell her about revolving in gentle valleys, falling in the embrace of death from pleasure, rising slowly at first, then quickly, then feverishly toward new excitements, new compliant waves with a thousand encircling arms, a thousand embracing legs. My heart fulfilled with two shining eyes, dripping affection. He did not tell her of the dazzling, nocturnal sun in which flames danced and licked the parts of his soul as if a tongue were licking the surrendered, rare milk of compassion. (He enjoys these old wounds as they never burnt the heart.) He did not say: Dionysus? The Dionysus of Scotch whisky and gourmet Auberge Hotel dinners in air-conditioned halls? Dionysus of Berlin elegance bought for the lowly price of blood and rhetorically glorified base-ness? Dionysus, where exactly do you come from?

Dionysus of intoxication with the wine of facile cravings, loose sentimentality, and spruced up poems?

Dionysus walking on the roads' asphalt, half-dark and half-lit by advertising neon and turned-off lamps, shouting on the stage in front of the semi-bourgeoisie, semi-literati, semi-progressives, semi-traitors suffering from the guilt of cheap verbal ripples.

Dionysus of washed goblets and china plates on ironed table cloths made in Shubra al-Khayma.

Dionysus of eager copulations following dances played by the plaintive music of recorders whose timbre has deteriorated, accompanied by the rattle of the electric tape player, radio, pick-up, or the electric band, whose name might well be Black Cats, Forgers, or Chat Noir. All of them nothing but a mark on satin.

Dionysus of Cairo, Berlin, and Moscow, emptied of everything but bottomless greed and crammed with food, drink, talk, sex—all of it forged, manufactured?

Some Dionysus!

She said to him: I can't imagine you, for example, walking barefoot just for pleasure.

He said to himself: For her I am but a formula, a type, a kind, a mold. She always says: You, as an intellectual; You, as a rational logical person. You as mature adult. He said to himself: Who am I? What am I? Have I really managed to transform myself into a formula and a stereotype? He laughed silently.

Later it occurred to him that her reference to the Dionysians was a kind of provocation to drive him to reveal himself, to spur him to break the coffin crust enveloping his being. He recalled her eyes. Truly she knew nothing of him except the coffin crust. Who could blame her?

He said to himself: There is another story.

She said to him whispering in the last uneasy dawn, as if she were talking to herself:

You don't know how much I need love and how much love and pleasure I can offer.

But I do indeed: I know something about myself.

Yes, darling, but what do you know about me? Do you know the extent of my pain and desolation? The extent of my love?

Infinite, boundless, without end.

He said to himself: When will this pain stop resounding? When will this desolation clear away? An answer cried from the abyss of his darkness. In her arms, in her eyes when they shine, when my face is on her breast, when she recognizes my love, when she says to me, 'My darling,' and I know she means what she says. And that she says it to me. Only.

My darling, you'll never know how much I love you, how much I need you. Answer me. Do you love me?

Desolation, formerly tainted with a tincture of hope, seems total now. Its inevitable face fixes me with unblinking eyes. No way out from this silent horror.

Rama. Rama. How did I lose you? Have I lost you?

What do we know about the suffering of others even if we loved them? You know nothing of it. What then? Do you know the grief of confession? Who will ask pardon for my suffering? Shall I say: My blood has been shed? Shall I say: This slow death with its strangling hands does not remove, raise, or slacken its grip from my throat, holding on until it breaks the last disc in my fractured bones?

Rama. I love you yet I hate this love, wishing like a child to die.

I reject this wish, saying to myself: I am not a child and this love will not ruin me (while it is ruining me).

... because you do not love me, and I will never know what love means to you.

You have given yourself, yes, and we have mounted to the climax of pleasure and fulfillment, and fallen embraced, together and naked, unto the soil of infernal frustrations. We have laughed together and you have wept because of me and for me. And I have lived with you for six glorious days. Yet I don't know, I don't know who I am for you.

Silence everywhere.

In his confused exuberance, he said to himself: Then what? Then what, my agitated soul? She does not love you. This is hardly news. This is a daily story, a shabby, repetitive narrative. Nothing new in it, yet how distressful it is.

The world will not break down. What is the meaning of all this? Simply nothing.

He couldn't believe it.

Mikhail had sent a telegram with the date of his arrival. As he was walking, wracked by anguish, distraught with dreams and fears, imagining what he would do if he were not to find her waiting for him, if she were not to honor the rendezvous, how he would avenge himself and his love with a thousand vengeful acts. Then he discarded his fears, and imagined her smiling, welcoming, receptive — the glory and the beauty of the world in her — embracing him in the station. Her image resists despair. He will find her in the corridors welcoming him. The throbbing of his tired heart in an agitated rhythm as he carries his luggage in both hands, rushing in the station while feeling as if he is not advancing.

The first shock arrived, lightly but threateningly, carrying a warning within it: she was not there. He asked about her at the Information Desk. When, with feverish anguish, he approached a police officer in the station's headquarters, the man gave him an unwelcoming look. His worries — dense, heated — had driven him to these police. Did she have an accident? What happened? The officer, who was not busy, began to handle him gently. Mikhail started looking into the register of messages and the index of names: under the letter *M* then *i* then *kh*. One letter after another, as if distilling the letters of his name, one after the other. He was in need of an echo, a response, waiting in vain for a voice. Could she be in that hotel he had never gotten the name of, in Zizinia, beyond Abu Qir Street? She had drawn a small map in his notebook with the address; it all seemed so recent to him, yet distant as a bottomless past. She might be at another address. She is waiting for him. She will come tomorrow or the day after. Nothing. Then he searches for her at the gate, in the station square that seems empty in a strange way, and at the taxi stand. Nothing.

She said to him later: I had barely arrived, only minutes before, from the archaeological site at St. Mina's Monastery. I asked them in the station to write you my message. I contacted the station manager by telephone twice, and I took my precautions: I asked them to put my message under the letters *M, i, kh, a, i, l*.

He said to her with despair, not knowing if any of this had actually happened: I searched for your message under all those letters. I didn't find a thing.

He silently told her: You are the first letter and the last.

The taxi took him to the address. The last moment and the first moment arrived. Now he is here. After he puts down his heavy suitcase and the lighter luggage, he asks about her with a voice that he tries to steady while his chest quivers within.

From that moment everything seemed to be taking place in another world. He would believe nothing of it. Voices were very clear, very distant, as if from behind a barrier. Surprise. Denial. Negation. The moment of loss that does not end. The faces of strangers and the running to addresses given by strangers. No. Sorry. Not here. No, no, nothing. You have come too late, no, we are sorry. The suitcase feels very heavy, the weather has this worrisome mixture of humid heat and cold. The winter sky starts to cloud up in the openings between low roofs and beautiful lofty columns. Empty décor, and the suitcase almost slipping from his hands. A silent, suppressed madness in his boiling blood. He feels the sweat on his face. He has another address in Sidi Bishr and a telephone number. She had said it was her cousin's. Should he go there now? Should he call and inquire? Is she sick? What happened? Not there? Has she come back? No. Indeed she suggested she would never go there unless there was a cosmic catastrophe or a war. At last, he decides to give in, no matter what, to the last address recommended by a stranger. He has no other address. A hotel called Victoria in Zizinia, in a quiet alley shaded by trees. The bell rings. A pleasant face signals to him to push the door. As he starts to ask if—suddenly, in this address that he came across by sheer chance, he hears her saying in a low voice: There you are. At last.

She comes to him. In the midst of this incredible derangement. How beautiful she is. How strange her eyes are. How wonderful the roundness of her beloved body that he knows—no, that he doesn't know.

The first surprise was this supple, obedient, alert body that confronts him and attracts him—always as if it were the first time—with irresistible charm, with invisible fine threads that never snap. How she gushes with conversation that never ends: how she waited for him, how she left her new address at the other address. How she confirmed it once and again. How she asked here and there. How she took all precautions, how she called the station by phone. How she spent a night in the Archaeological Rest House at al-'Amiriya. How she traveled and came back, how she saw the doctor and will be seeing him again, how she came only this afternoon by train, how she sent him a message via the station's information desk, how she was about to get up and call again, how she reserved a room for him, anyway—And how are you doing? How was your trip? How she almost gave up hope of his coming today. And where is your luggage? Is that all? Let me help you. I'll carry this for you. No, it's light. Let me. I'll carry it for you. Come. This way.

He's still disoriented from the shock. His footsteps move in a still desolate place, as if he has lost all capacity for joy and wonder.

He climbs the narrow stairway behind her as she mounts the crooked steps. Distracted, he almost stumbles beside the faded red carpet, surprised by the elegance of a hotel he did not know. Her dynamic strong back bends in front of him. She pants as she climbs, exclaims then returns to him, her chest rising and falling, vibrating under his eyes. She says: We climbed the wrong stairway. Not this way. You made me take the wrong way. Let's go down from here . . . Come along.

The yearning for her, the suffering because of her, narcotizes him. Suddenly his anxious, mobilized footsteps are charged with a repressed and unexpected briskness that he cannot explain.

She told him later as she was remembering: You seemed exhausted, tense, completely lost.

By chance he knew, later, that he had the wrong telephone number, even though she had repeated it twice in front of him when he had been writing it down. He also learned that the other address that he had was incomplete.

Did everything, then, happen by sheer chance? Was she really intending not to meet him? Everything points to it. Could his perplexity reach this point? Did she accept him as he was with his shortcomings when he appeared, as she would accept something that happened by chance, as a fact of life? Did she take him along her way without hesitation since he had arrived anyway through strange coincidence? Is he no more than a stop-gap, an exterior filling for her, not really needed? If he is not totally rejected, is it because he comes like that, without her insistence or rejection? He is convinced neither by this nor by its opposite. He turns the matter in his mind continuously. The unending ravings of perplexity.

My darling. My earth and my heaven. Forever my glory and my defeat. I carry you inside me. When will we meet so that our encounter will no longer carry the crack of permanent separation—when we meet and we stop being I *and* you? Where there is no before and no after . . . When tomorrow becomes a shooting star that our embraced hands will not let go of.

Such were his moments in the city that she called “our city.”

When he climbed the last narrow stairway, and she opened the door of her room, he found himself suddenly alone with her.

After she put his suitcase down on the floor, she stood in front of him with all the glory of her presence. She was looking at him with curiosity and an imperceptible smile, waiting. There was tension in his body and soul from jittery and sharp exhaustion, from boyish worries. He said to her: Rama . . . Rama . . . I can't believe it.

He stretched his hands to hold her face between his palms. Her eyes were still waiting.

He dashed to her. In a second, she was in his arms.

He felt her round back and all her chest filling his arms, her face under his lips.

Before suffering had departed from his flesh, a new, heavy sense of peaceful juice was penetrating his body, descending unto the dark region.

Rama . . . Rama . . . I can't believe it.

He could not—even in this intoxicated mood that her presence triggers, in this slow whirlwind of merging and inner chaos—he could not forget as he said to himself: Here she is in your arms, with you alone, what more do you want? He did not forget that perhaps everything happened by sheer chance. That he is only accepted as he is, just as things that befall one accidentally are accepted. Why is love fused with his very being, his physical being, his stature in the world, with the position of his feet on earth?

She said to him: We will meet in few minutes. I'll go to my room; you relax for a while, wash your face. You must be very tired.

He did not recognize the tone of disappointment and forbearing. It was barely there, to the point where he did not sense it except days, weeks, and months later. In the ravings of his dreams that bring back all her presence—her image, her looks, her intonation, her words, her touch-again and again without end, mixed with an indissoluble bitterness.

She was sitting on the narrow bed. The large and small suitcase lay scattered on the floor, on the cushions, on the other bed. She leaned on the smooth dark mahogany screen. Her face was radiant with light tan, the opposite of the light coming from the room's window, half-veiled with a white curtain, revealing cold and strange ceilings, tips of trees behind the glass—green, ripe, sparse leaves hanging on the black trunk with its ripped, hard bark.

He said to her: Wait . . . Wait a little . . . I haven't forgotten.

His voice indicated real joy, dismissal of burdens, a drawing in toward his beloved. In an agitated hurry, he opened the small suitcase and drew out a little green-eyed, green-robed doll.

He said to her: I haven't forgotten . . . Look . . . Look into her eyes . . . Doesn't she remind you of something?

He put the doll next to her face and looked at them side by side. The hazel-green eyes that appear to him in dreams and wakefulness, in life and death, shining brightly in his darkness, always open, always missed. He asked her once, as he was looking at her eyes—spellbound as ever when he looks at that special, non-earthly charm, at that enchantment in which he finds himself falling weightlessly

toward a depth he can never reach, with no hope of hitting bottom: Rama, what is the color of your eyes?

She said: Their color changes all the time, as I am told. Hazel, I believe. They are dark when I am nervous, anxious, or sad. In the changing light, they change too . . . Like the eyes of cats.

He said: Hazel. Honey. Green. I don't know . . . They have strange dark rays . . . Emitted from the peripheries of the cosmos.

She said: Hazel? No. . . . I don't think so.

She said to him: Oh, how beautiful. My doll . . . Thanks, my love.

As she was raising the doll in front of her face in the light, she said: How lovely she is. She held the doll to her chest and gave Mikhail a quick kiss of gratitude—with childlike pleasure.

Later, he said to himself: . . . then forgot all about it with childlike cruelty.

Smiling, playful, as if looking for another kiss, he said: Wait, I haven't finished yet.

She said: What else?

She said it with the same slight curiosity, as if she were finding him somewhat unusual, while having a good time.

As for him, he was indeed taking the matter seriously even though he was in a light-hearted mood, experiencing a rare joy. It was not a gift, rather a symbol, despite the fact that the distinction was not exactly clear to him.

He removed the light paper and opened the elongated, dark card box and brought out a bracelet and a necklace—modern with an abstract design of unusual patterns in colors of burnt rust, glowing. He extended his hand with the bracelet and she gave him her arm silently, with a look of receptiveness, obedience, and contentment, as if it were a look of love. For a moment, he could not understand her look, then he remembered and encircled her surrendering wrist with the delicate plates and fastened the bracelet, then surrounded her neck with the necklace and embraced her.

She said to him: Ah, you have learned what I love . . . I love unusual ornaments.

He said to her: Yes.

Her hands fondled the necklace hanging on her full, cozy, soft chest. His heart was filled with desire and tenderness for her. Suddenly he remembered when he gave her a silver bracelet for her birthday. She had given him her wrist saying: Put the bracelet on me. And she surrendered her hand on the table. She apologized for not being able to spend a long time with him, saying that she had relatives and guests at home. He accepted the unfulfilled dream of spending the evening with

her, the evening of her birthday, celebrating it with her alone. In the dark car as they were on their way to her house, she had said to him: Give me a cigarette from the pack on my lap. He picked up the pack from her thighs, and was stirred as he lit it for her. When he went back later he found the matches in his pocket with his pack. As soon as he left his car, he saw her turning into the narrow, crowded street, next to the bridge in Bulaq. He said to himself: She is going to the old house of her friend. He is her “relatives and guests.” That night, as many nights before, he was torn by attacks of hushed madness, attacks that refuse to lose their claws and whose biting fangs plunge and scorch. Their stings within himself do not heal; they return constantly, again and always. He says to himself smiling: There is not a single part left unbranded. He laughed in silence from the salt filling his eyes.

It seemed to him that she—with her characteristic intuition—knew what he was feeling. She jumped from the bed and said: Come on, let’s go . . . I have to show you the city . . . There’s still time in the day. They went down together, for the first time, on the narrow stairway. Before they went out, the girl in the hall, with the pleasant face, smiled and greeted her. The streets were calm, silent, unfamiliar. His chest tensely and powerfully bore all the burdens of the old stings, barely dissipated.

On her birthday, she had said to him: I have a command of the art of speech. From my childhood, I discovered that words please people and calm them. But inside, I do not feel a thing.

She had said to him once: Why don’t you talk when you are the master of words?

You, Rama, are the first word.

He said to her in the flow of his internal, silent dialogue with her, which stormed him and tore him constantly while he appeared calm among people, friends and strangers, at the office or among crowds:

It is you who master the art of speech. How wonderful your mastery is . . . As for me, I do not know how to talk . . . And when I do talk, I don’t say anything, in fact. How many arts do you master? Do you also master the art of body-offering while keeping your heart intact, unconquered, untouched? From within, you don’t feel a thing . . . Is it a powerful, irresistible force that pushes you toward such mastery? As for me, I cannot stand this splendid art . . . I want madly and desperately, as well, what is beyond words and what is beyond the body. I want them together: the word, the warmth of corporeal love, and what lies beyond them—the blossoming of the heart. In front of accomplished mastery

I am paralyzed, I freeze. Life's waves desert me . . . I watch you admiringly—mad with anger and despair, as if I were an animal in a dark hole.

She said to him once: Don't ever believe what I say. Believe only what I do . . . Lived actions: concrete and real.

What are you doing, Rama, what are you doing? I want to believe you . . .

He said to her once again when they reached the stage in which, wittingly or unwittingly, they were tearing each other through slow torture: For you, I am nothing but a temporary, passing, and accidental event, just like many others.

She did not respond. He remembered that she said once to him: Don't ever have me judge our relationship.

Rama . . . I want to put my two arms on your shoulders, to hug your neck. The tenderness I have for you in my heart fills the world. I want its still, delicate waves—which drown everything—to carry you. I want to bend and kiss your soft forehead, to hold your weeping face to my chest, to get you to relax for a moment between my arms, to erase the pain from your wounded smile. I want you to find with me freedom from perplexity and search, so there are no more questions, my darling. My cheeks open, exposed to the sun of silent dream, the dream of despair, to wallow on the softness of your cheeks. My arms—hanging on the emptiness of tense ribs, thirsting for the suppleness of your breast—demand you. The hard column, taut with the will to plunge into the warm, quivering, moist darkness. Pitch-black waters of the rough waves of tenderness and passion hit bedrock. Multiplied and amplified in their incarceration, the waters inundate and stumble in the enclosed hole of darkness. My lips have suffered dryness for too long. Salt draws lines upon them... The torturing yearning for the dew of your lips and the honey of your tongue. My eyes witness a vision that has never taken place and will never take place, like the splendor of raving: Your eyes kissing me without questioning, without probing, without perplexity, without rejection, without freezing, without despair. A vision not of this world: in your eyes my one and only knowledge. My lips squeezing the taut grapes vibrating with the fullness of their juice, of concealed body wine. My face is attached with gentle pressure to the soft dough. The columns of glory lying on the brown earth under my stretching fingers, containing the whole world. My eyes closed, buried in the supple, round domes. I inhale the scent of elemental fertility. I know by the tip of my electrified tongue the sweet spicy taste. My face in the jungles of your plants wet by the river waters. Their savage scent attacks me. My lips acquire a primitive life in the forests of the body, inquiring, backing then advancing, nibbling and sucking the creamy waters, surrounded by the roughness of the wet herbage, crying in response to escaping cries in the ecstasy of chase and clinging to life. Then

the unbearable tension comes and pushes to the last absence, the stab in the open, tender wound of the world, a dance of the last offering where there is no more hunter and prey, sacrificer and sacrifice. Only the flaring glow amid dazzling music of fulfillment, certainty, cosmic explosion, gushing of astral falls, slumping of burning suns into the heart of the skies' darkness. And I, kissing the sheared-off neck with pleased and pained lips. I hold my slaughtered head between my hands—blood and wine dripping from my mouth. I wipe my lips in streams of hanging, shaking branches of her hair falling on my eyes.

Mikhail had left her after their first night in their city, having satisfied some of her constant and torturing hunger for tenderness and contentment. Half-asleep, half-reposing, she said to him again as he was going out: Don't turn off the light, darling.

In the morning of the following day, when he opened the door of his room, he was surprised to find her—half-surprised as if he had sensed she was there, since he always felt her everywhere, all the time. He will always open his door for her. He will always see her on his path. She will always drop by him; he will always find her waiting for him. She will always come to him, wherever he is. Her presence is a constant fantasy: In the studio in front of his office, in the crowded street, when he goes anxiously to his bed. Her telephone rings, and he will hear her sweet voice, the dearest to him in the world, or he will hear her stiff, dry voice that he hates and whose sternness hurts him. The telephone rings in the silence of the night, before dawn—a persistent, unrelenting ringing. His blood leaps awake in joy and anticipation. Suddenly he is certain that he is hearing the ringing in the ravings of his passion, in total silence. For once, his fantasy indeed had come true all of a sudden. He opened his door, and she was in front of him. The surprise baffled him and paralyzed his heart, making the world boundless.

Now he watches her walking to the hall bathroom, raising her youthful wheat-colored face in the radiating and transparent morning light, in the silence of the stairway. She looks at him with a shy look of obedience, happiness, expectation, and gratitude. She is in a short nightgown of soft cotton, barely reaching her knees, too wide for her strong, supple body. The weak light falls on her delicate cheekbones from above, putting their fine curves in relief. Her wide eyes whose color he cannot see now—with the look that fills his heart—coming up from a different world, carrying on her head the moon, while the python slept.

She had tied her hair like *baladi* women, with a small white scarf. Her plump feet were in the small slippers on the dark red mat. On the stairway, all is strange, profoundly quiet, morning calm. Once again he tastes happiness. Merely her look at him carried with it this rare taste that he seldom knows. He says to her, half-

whispering, his chest flowing with tenderness: Good morning, darling. He says to her: I'll come to you soon. She nodded with her head, smiling sweetly, a smile so pure—so rare, as well. Because it was a smile without planning, without staging, without mastery.

In the afternoon, she said to him: Did the scarf shock you this morning? I like to tie my hair with it. I find it practical and fun. Why not? My mother tells me when she sees me with it: What is this? For shame. I laugh. What do you think? Is it shameful to dress like *baladi* women? I said to my mother: What's wrong with it? Isn't it practical, useful, attractive, and easy to use as well? What do you think?

The white fine fabric on her hair seemed to have acquired something of the air, also the dynamism of her hair, something of her body warmth itself. Its color had faded a little; the fabric had shriveled, become compliant and soft with intimate folds from the effect of tying it frequently on her locks and from such a tight wrap. He embraced her head and kissed her. He forgot for a moment what her question "Does the *baladi* scarf shock you?" implied. He forgot for a moment that she always viewed him as a fixed formula, a formula of rigid judgments and conventions by which he is supposedly bound. A shade in the tone of her question persists in his mind later. The cycles of questioning, recalling, and suffering raise him up and down without stopping, yet he does not land on a shore.

They were in the car, after the end of their six days, after the end of a stifling dusty morning—the last morning choked with quarrels, disputes, anger, disappointments. The harsh and hushed sun was dripping heat and humidity. Traversing the distance to the station was long, very long, full of silent gaps and a sense of bitterness. When he put his hand on hers, there was rejection and rigidity in her touch. But they spoke, though she did not care to show her mastery of speech. He sensed her dismal outlook to the coming unknown days. She said to him: You shouldn't have come with me. We should have said goodbye to each other in the hotel. It doesn't make sense for you to insist on coming with me to the station, when you will be making this trip again this afternoon. Twice in one day. Useless. Do you know . . . you have slain the dragon.

He was somewhat startled and said: What?

She said: You slew the dragon. You know in the old legends, in the tales of courtly and uncourtly love, the knight demonstrates his devotion by slaying the dragon. He goes out to the desolate woods after he gives his beloved a handkerchief or a token. Then he departs alone, surmounts all difficulties, overcomes all trials. And endures the hardship . . . Until he slays the dragon; and you have slain the dragon . . . She quickly emended: And this is neither satirical nor humorous . . . I mean what I say.

He did not say to her: Do I still need to demonstrate my love? I do not want to demonstrate or refute a thing. All of this falls beyond demonstration and refutation. Do you, yourself, need proof and evidence for demonstrating or refuting? You do not cease, time after time, to speak as if you were wondering, as if you were uncertain. Don't you feel that which is breaking loose, day and night, in my inmost? Doesn't it show any signs? Don't you feel that which can never be separated from my life?

A hoarse roar wrecks the chest's rods, an earthquake shakes his insides. Broken, solid stones, cut by nails and claws from the core of his heart, come down. The two hands with their contracted fingers dig ponds dripping blood into his harsh inert walls. The fingers scrape off the petrified heart that beats stubbornly, regularly.

He screams within himself: Agh! Me! He bellows and holds back his parted mouth, agape from the full cry. His scream, never put off, never voiced, fills all the breaches, all the holes, all the wounds, all the gaps in heaven and earth.

I have not slain the dragon. I am living with him. His teeth are piercing my heart in an embrace until death.