

I

The town was sleeping.

Someone is always up in a big city but in a small town everyone goes to bed around the same time. That's something I found out after I got here.

I was sitting under a towering eucalyptus tree on the main street, on one of those old-fashioned benches with names and hearts carved into its dark wooden planks.

I'd wanted to sit there ever since I came to town, but that night was the first time.

I leaned back.

I looked up at the sky.

They were all sleeping, dreaming. Dreaming together.

I watched their dreams slip out through windows, doors and chimneys. I watched them rise up into the clouds, flaunting their colours; I could almost see them, talking, laughing, sobbing, making love. There they all were, entwined in deep embraces on velvet-curtained stages, in stables and on dark streets, in sitting rooms and by the sea. A neighing horse, two women kissing, a tearful child racing through the night, a horde of golden coins, a glistening knife. Sometimes I caught sight of a man or a woman vanishing from their own dreams to haunt the dreams of others.

I watched the town dreaming.

I wasn't drunk, or at least not from drink.

I had just taken a life.

I remembered it like a dream.

But I couldn't remember much. I remembered an arm – my

arm, though somehow it was severed from my body, wandering far away, beyond my grasp. It was holding a gun. I don't remember pulling the trigger; I only heard the shot. And then I saw a mouth opening, as if to speak, a face contorted, one hand in the air, the other clutching the wound. And then a body falling, but no blood.

What is it people feel when they kill another human being? My body was taut, seized by a fear I had never known before, and then it seemed I had drifted off to sleep.

I left the house and made my way here.

I don't remember thinking about anything in particular.

I sat down. What a careless novelist I was, no different from God.

A good novelist doesn't build on coincidence, or stoop to coincidence to get out of a corner.

But God has a savage sense of humour. And coincidence is his favourite joke. And life is nothing but a string of coincidences.

You see, I was a stranger in town.

I came from a big city, far away.

I stayed there to write a book about murder. And so what if I turned out to be the killer? I'll simply put it down as God's work, another one of his cruel coincidences, taunting his own creation.

The entire town was steeped in dream.

I was the only one awake. Or was I dreaming?

The time has come to tell you what happened.

But the story isn't really mine, and if it is savage beyond belief it is because it comes from the hand of a cruel and indifferent God.

II

I remember everything about the day I first saw her.

We met at a little airport nestled between low hills and the sea.

At first I couldn't really make out her face, blurred by a faint, gauzy light, and I was transfixed.

Later I came to appreciate its beauty, and an almost blinding brightness in her eyes. She knew she was beautiful. When she was a young girl she learned how to use the enchanting powers of her eyes.

I could imagine what happened: she was chased and showered with gifts, which she would accept almost disdainfully, and then, grateful for the attention, she would only receive more – I've met men who gave away their lives.

I never saw her grieve for anything that slipped away; in fact she seemed to collect people and things so that she could throw them away. And I never quite understood how she could collect so much without ever lifting a finger, and when in her heart she really never dreamed of holding on to anything for very long.

She was calm, her serenity drawing people to her. Sometimes it even seemed like she moved objects.

It was raining that day.

Through the window I could see an endless grove of olive trees, turned greyish-green by the rain; their gnarled trunks bursting from the earth, they looked like an ancient army, waiting for the command to march.

Our little plane was late for take-off.

The departures lounge was on the first floor of the building.

The control tower was on the second. Four other people sat behind the broad glass windows that looked out over the tarmac: a crop-duster pilot, two wealthy locals with badly knotted ties, and the woman.

She was sitting alone, listening to the pilot a couple of seats away from her. They seemed to know each other well. And I saw her nod to the other two men.

Then she stood up and walked over to an old coffee machine in the corner, slipping past me like a flash of light.

I was reading a newspaper but I could feel her passing behind me.

On her way back she stopped and put her coffee down on the table in front of me. Then she leaned over and picked my raincoat up off the floor and draped it over the chair beside me.

‘It was on the floor,’ she said.

Her voice was soft, almost a whisper, demanding attention, and I was caught off guard.

She treated people, and men in particular, as if they were children who needed special attention. Sometimes I got the feeling she thought men were disabled in some way. I didn’t know that then.

She picked up her coffee, flashed me a smile and then she left.

I watched her go.

These are the moments we can later appraise with hindsight. Reliving the moment now, I feel clairvoyant. But at the time I had no idea what would come to pass.

Sifting through the past on that bench, I could see how my life veered dramatically in the direction it did.

I dashed through the rain and boarded the plane.

There were only three rows of two seats on each side. Big cardboard boxes had been carefully stowed in the back two rows.

I sat down by the window in the front row and watched her walk unhurriedly towards the plane, oblivious to the rain, her head buried in the upturned collar of her coat.

She seemed amused by how we had raced to the plane.

Through the curtain of raindrops that ran down the scratched and pitted window, I thought I could make out a smile on her face.

She was soaking wet by the time she boarded the plane and she really was smiling.

Before she could sit down next to the pilot she had been speaking to earlier, a young man with headphones around his neck emerged from the cockpit and called out, 'Come on, we can talk on the way.' And he saluted the young woman with a nod before the two men disappeared into the cockpit.

She hesitated for a moment then sat down beside me.

She felt like she had to explain herself: 'I'm afraid of flying.'
'But you seem to know all the pilots,' I said.

'I do. They're actually teaching me how to fly. The pilot you saw in the airport is giving me lessons in his crop-duster. His name's Tahir.'

'Aren't you afraid then?'

She shrugged.

'I am.'

The plane lurched forward as she took off her raincoat and placed it on the seat behind her.

As the plane lifted off the runway, I saw her clutching the armrests; her knuckles were white.

'Don't be afraid,' I said.

'I'm getting used to it. I actually like the feeling. It's just that I talk a lot when I'm scared. Is that going to be a problem?'

It was hard to hear her over the roar of the engine.

'No,' I said.

'What do you do?'

'I'm a writer.'

'What do you write?'

'Novels.'

'And your name?'

'You wouldn't know me.'

'Probably not. I don't read much any more. Though I read a lot when I was a kid.'

She paused and then smiled: 'Everyone you meet probably says that they read a lot when they were a kid. Is that true?'

'That's right,' I said. 'I don't meet many who read any more.'

'Is that heartbreaking?'

'What?'

'That people don't read your books?'

'I'm getting used to it. I like feeling disappointed.'

She laughed.

Now I realise it was the way she laughed just then that hooked me. I liked her quick reaction to my joke about her fear.

The plane shook and she grabbed my arm.

In that moment I knew my life would never be the same. It's hard to explain, how that laugh and then the way she held my arm seconds later was the beginning of it all. I could just feel it.

There are those moments in our lives when we feel that nothing will ever be the same again. In retrospect we say that somehow we could feel the surge, the sudden change in direction, though sometimes it is a false alarm and we forget about the moment altogether.

But this was something seismic.

That moment I knew I had succumbed. I could feel myself being swept away, dragged into an abyss. And I wanted to be taken.

For me, exhilaration is the most dangerous emotion, and I felt it then: the expectation that she would teach me things more perilous than love.

I was drawn to excitement, leaping at any opportunity like an animal taking the bait, though fully aware of the impending disaster.

I thought I was the only passenger on the plane on the evening flight back to town. But drifting off to sleep, I saw her reflection in the window. I turned and saw her standing above me, holding all the novels I had ever written. Otherwise I might have forgotten all about her.

They constituted my Achilles' heel, pinched by God when he dipped me in those magical waters. My novels, the weakest and most sinister aspect of my person.

I looked at her hands wrapped round my books and the letters in my name between her fingers. I looked up at her lovely face, like an inlaid Seljuk coin. I could almost feel the warmth of her breasts beneath her blouse and cotton jacket, the warmth of her navel and her thighs.

Seeing my books in her arms made me feel pathetic – a forgotten prophet prepared to worship anyone who will follow, building temples, shrines and altars for the few disciples, and drinking magical elixirs.

'Where did you find those?' I said, like we were old friends.

'In a shop that sold books,' she said, laughing and then sitting down beside me.

'Do they still sell my books there?'

I had assumed they were out of print. I couldn't remember the last time anyone had read one of my books.

'I'll read at least one of them tonight,' she said.

'Do you think you'll like it?'

'Let's see.'

'How about this. You read one and if you like it meet me tomorrow afternoon at the old restaurant near the station.'

'All right,' she said, buckling her seatbelt. 'I'm exhausted. I'm going to sleep a little. Is that all right?'

'Of course.'

Laying her head on my shoulder, she was asleep within minutes.

She trusted me and felt safe on that trip, and I never would have thought that a woman sleeping on my shoulder would have such a profound effect.

III

Vineyards and olive groves blanketed the mountainside above the town. Pale-green olive leaves, flickering in the wind, blazed like a giant lamp, and a yellowish light from the vineyards fell over the hill. Cypress and plane trees cast long, dark shadows, their wisdom and dignity lending the setting a solemn air.

At the foot of the mountain there was an old, brick-built wine factory with wisteria cascading over the walls. Locals grew contraband cannabis in the fields behind it – everyone around here seemed to smoke weed – and everything in the area bore the faint scent of marijuana.

Below the factory wealthy residents lived in large, two-storey, sand-coloured houses with broad terraces that looked down on the town through flower gardens. The town itself was a cluster of stone houses and walled courtyards veined with narrow streets, built on the plain at the base of the mountains. A row of palm trees ran along the coast where the town met the sea, and between the palms grew oleanders with red flowers that seemed to have been planted by a tasteful gardener. Then there was a golden beach that stretched along the shore.

In the centre of town there was an old train station with a yellow brass roof, but the tracks had been torn up. I always liked that station no longer visited by trains. There were little shops inside, which smelled of tobacco and steel. Next to the station was the Çinili restaurant, with its shaded garden. The tables were covered in white tablecloths – it catered to the grandees in town – and it always smelled of anisette and dried mackerel.

I arrived late one summer afternoon. I'd been on my way to the Taurus Mountains, hoping to find a mountain village where I could live for a while.

Through the heat haze rising from a stretch of highway, I noticed a narrow road, and a piece of wood hammered to a stake. The faded letters on the sign read: 'sea for sale'.

I turned without even thinking.

I like driving down roads I've never seen before. There is almost always an adventure that lies ahead. In the end I usually find my way, but then again, that never really happens, and the adventure lasts a little longer than you expected.

I was hungry and so I stopped in front of a köfte restaurant on the road that ran through the centre of the town. There was no one else there. I sat down under a willow tree in the garden and ordered something to eat.

I was tired and restless.

I had been wrestling with ideas for a new book, a murder mystery, but I hadn't managed to start. I was wondering if I would ever write again. I needed a miracle to jolt me back to life, and back to writing, something that would stir the creative juices that had grown still in the dark cave of my soul. I was dead to the world, and no one knew. Writing would bring me back to life.

I was served a plate of grilled meatballs, a bowl of hot sauce and a tomato salad. The food was actually quite good.

The proprietor came over to my table and asked me if I wanted anything else. He made me feel a guest in his own home.

'Thank you. I'm fine,' I said.

He hovered over the table, a bored look on his face.

'Where to? Your car's filthy, by the way.'

'I'm heading south.'

'It's burning up down there.'

'Burning up right here.'

'Much hotter there.'

I agreed with him in the hope that he would leave me alone.

‘A cold beer is what you need,’ he said. ‘Goes well with the grilled meat.’

‘Why not,’ I said obligingly, and in a flash he was back with two beers.

‘Beer’s on me,’ he said, sitting down at my table. ‘I hate this time of day. Everyone’s at home, avoiding the heat, cars hardly ever pass by and if they do people aren’t hungry, and I can’t just close up and go home, and if I stay I get bored so I wait, hoping someone will stop by . . .’

‘Ah yes, now that’s it,’ he said after taking a swig of beer and nodding to an imaginary friend in approval.

A burly young man, neatly dressed and with his hair combed back over his head, lumbered into the garden. ‘How’s it going, Uncle Remzi,’ he called out to the proprietor.

‘Slow and steady, Sultan,’ he replied.

‘Uncle’s called me over.’

He greeted me with a nod and left.

‘Not a bad kid,’ said the proprietor.

‘Seems like a polite fellow,’ I replied.

‘Polite, eh? A real killer.’

‘What?’ I said. I thought I had misheard him.

‘A murderer,’ he said, as if telling me the young man was a cobbler.

‘Did he shoot someone?’ I asked.

‘Shoots them all the time,’ he said, ‘but he never gets caught. He’s Oleander Ramiz’s nephew.’

I looked him straight in the eye, but the expression on his face was grave, almost sad. ‘When he was a kid, his uncle ate the oleanders in their garden and poisoned himself. Imagine that. That’s how he got the name.’

‘What’s his uncle do?’

‘Him? He’s a killer too.’

I leaned back and looked at him again. Sad and tearful eyes. He seemed troubled by stories he had never shared and mysteries that would never be solved. His shoulders were hunched, like

a man resigned to his fate. I felt that he would either become a good friend of mine, or a calculating enemy.

‘I saw a sign back there, sea for sale,’ I said.

‘Oleander wants to sell the beach.’

‘It’s his?’

‘How could the beach be his?’ he said, looking at me as if I was a fool.

‘Well, how can he sell it then?’

‘He can’t . . . But he wants to.’

‘Give me another beer, will you?’

The expression on his face brightened and then I knew that we would become friends. ‘And one for you,’ I said. ‘This round’s on me.’

Over the second beer, he told me about the killers in town. Yugoslavian refugees had come ‘eons ago’ – as he put it – and fought with the locals, even killed each other.

‘What’s the issue?’

‘Land, marijuana sales, women . . . This place now has a real reputation. They even go elsewhere to kill people.’

‘But it seems like such a peaceful place.’

‘It is,’ he said.

‘I’m looking for a quiet place. Any places for rent around here?’

‘We could find something for you. Not many people are looking to rent around here.’

That evening I rented a two-storey house with a large veranda that overlooked the town.

That’s how it all started.

IV

Sitting on this bench I'm wondering how I ended up at this dead end. What's left? Am I here because I befriended a pot-smoking restaurateur? Or was it that strange sign along the road that started it all? I marvel at how the seemingly impossible is precisely what I was dealt.

If I had only ignored that sign, or left the restaurant without saying a word, I would now be leading another life. I might be living in a mountain village, working on a novel, my only real concern labouring over the right words for the last sentence of a chapter.

But now I'm sitting on this old wooden bench, listening to the breathing of a slumbering town. I am watching all the dreams up in the sky and considering all my options: I could run, spend the rest of my life in jail, or I could take my life.

What if I hadn't seen that sign along the road? What if I hadn't stopped at that restaurant? What if I had just finished my meal and quietly left? How believable is a story that begins with a plate of köfte and a pot-smoking restaurateur? But then consider God. His stories are beyond belief.

I confess that I'm a little jealous of God.

He's killed millions but not once did he ever stop to consider the consequences. No one ever blamed him. Or at least he was never tried in court.

Years of human history but not one of his chapters was ever truly criticised or judged, all his coincidences never challenged by the law.

How does he get away with so much?

By killing off the unbelievers?

I've also taken a life.

But this doesn't make me a lesser God. I am a murderer.

I can see the walls of the houses swell and fall with the breath of those who sleep within them, I can see the entire town as if under a thick cotton quilt. I know most of the people there but I can no longer imagine what they are dreaming. No one knows what another dreams, and even the dreamer doesn't know what lies ahead. The hidden meanings in the dark world of dreams have always frightened me, images fluttering ceaselessly through my mind, indecipherable, only partially revealed to me in sleep, perhaps veiled to my waking eye but wandering quietly in and out of my mind, leaving behind a trail of crippling devastation that I can hardly comprehend.

The town is silent.

Everyone is sleeping. Sleeping together.

Do they know that they will wake up in the morning to the news of murder?

What will they say about me?

What now? I should leave now. With every passing minute they're more likely to catch me. That is if I want to get away.

I'm paralysed.

Exhausted.

God must be exhausted. Killing takes so much out of you.

But does he ever feel remorse? Regret for having brought me into this world. Or was I created expressly for this purpose? But why choose me for the crime? Why give life only to later snuff it out?

I am alone tonight, with only God to grapple with or blame.

What would I say to him if he came and sat down here beside me?

'Why did you do it?' I would ask. And he might say, 'The crime is yours. You took that side road, stopped at that restaurant, settled in this town, and then you committed murder.'

But who really took that life? Me? Or was it God?

Why should I go to prison for his crime?

And why worship God if he granted me the power to kill?

It is the eternal question: 'Why me?'

And is the answer simply: 'Because I had a plate of meatballs?'

That's hardly satisfying.

Our lives are made up of moments, like seeds we choose to water and that sometimes sprout and grow. Later we're surprised to see what they have become, and we call them God's coincidences because we believe God scattered these moments, these seeds, over the course our lives, and that he watches to see which ones we choose to water. But then again, doesn't he already know so much from the very beginning?

I watered the wrong seed.

Are you amused?

Are you suffering beside me? Steeped in the same fear? In the same overwhelming tide of helplessness?

But can you feel these emotions?

Or do you only know them by observing this mortal plight?

You created us so you could taste emotions that you would otherwise never know. To see and feel desperation, weakness and fear from your own creation.

So here is my description of helplessness, something I now know all too well: a human face pressed against a wall by a thousand hands, fixed in place, unable to breathe, no escape and no salvation.

But how can I convey these feelings to you? I am dying to do so but these are things you will never know.

I am God's teacher but this pupil of mine will make me pay with my life.

He knows my suffering.

And my fear.

A fear that makes me cold, like a block of ice on my back. I am shivering from the cold.

But it was a magnificent journey that led me to this moment of abject terror. No one would have believed it. I never would have expected so much if not for that black speck of foreboding

that took shape in my heart, laying there in the shadows, and I chose not to watch it grow.

Nobody wants to see the truth, so why should I?

But now I was face to face with it, and it was staring me in the eye.

God was revealing inescapable truths.

I saw the truth.

Horrified and full of fear, I saw the truth.

V

I rented a really nice place. It was fully furnished, and decorated like the home of a nineteenth-century aristocrat, with carved cabinets, large mirrors, velvet wingback chairs and beautiful carpets. But it didn't feel overcrowded and the arrangement of furniture lent the place a peaceful air. A mountain breeze was always drifting in through large, bright windows, fluttering the curtains.

I always had breakfast on the veranda, between carved wooden columns, looking out over the sea, which was light green where it met the golden sand of the beach. It grew darker in the distance, occasionally flecked with white. The palm trees and the red oleanders and the station dome shimmered in the sunlight.

The caramel-coloured floor tiles helped keep the house cool. In the morning I would walk through the house barefoot, looking out every window, gazing at the olive groves, the mountains, the vineyards. I would look out over the town and the sea, taking in the palm trees and the oleanders, and then I would wander among the jasmine, the roses, the bougainvillea and the lemon trees in my garden; it was a paradise without an Eve.

Remzi and I became good friends and he rushed over whenever I needed help. He even found a woman to take care of the house. As Hamiyet fluttered about the house, cleaning and cooking, she wore a smile that was always changing but never absent, one of those smiles that I could never quite define, a smile that intimated a secret sin, never shared in either happiness or grief.

But she spoke to the furniture.

She would whisper to cabinets, tables, chairs, sharing her secrets with them. Once I caught her arguing with a broom. But when she wasn't talking to the furniture she would give me all the gossip from town. More and more I started to feel like I had come to a den of sin, and as I got to know the people I could put faces to the stories.

Hamiyet was a tall, powerful, busty woman, and she wasn't shy. She'd roll her skirt up over her calves when she mopped the floors; and when she leaned over to pick something up, her breasts sometimes slipped out of her blouse. She never seemed to mind.

I was full of energy when I woke that morning.

Hamiyet was prattling away with the plates and the tablecloth, and the eggs she had made for my breakfast. It had rained the day before but the sun was shining in a bright blue sky, and the scent of wet grass and dirt, the fruit trees and the flowers was in the air.

I'd told the woman to meet me if she liked my books but I was beginning to have regrets.

I hadn't had a meal with a woman for such a long time. I was a lonely man. It seemed like no one in the world knew I still existed. And there wasn't even a splash when I released a new book. I was unhappy and angry, but I did my best to stay in touch with people. I tried to make peace in the hope of driving away a grudge people didn't even know I carried in my heart. But I had walled myself up in a monastery, and I was reluctant to venture outside. I had settled into a life of seclusion.

I was weak and fragile and this made me angry. I was full of anger and self-loathing, and I felt sorry for myself. Swinging back and forth between two very different states of mind, I either wallowed in defeat or I was drunk on the dream of an imminent victory, a commander setting out on one last adventure, rallying the troops, crying 'I'll show the world yet!' But then I would suddenly find myself steeped in the sadness that comes with inevitable defeat.

'If you like the books . . .' I had said to her, because I wanted

her to read them, someone to read them, someone to say something. I wanted to end this oppressive silence. A buried resentment drove me to say it.

Normally I'd never mention my books to a woman before the first date.

I was frustrated for having told her, but no one notices the anger that rages inside me, the ungrounded fear and loathing. The bravado of a beaten man.

It wasn't easy facing these truths. I was on the verge of giving up and just not going.

But I was dying to see if she'd come.

I wanted her to like my books, and I missed those conversations you have on a first date, when every word is loaded, and anything can happen. I wanted to feel alive again, I wanted someone to admire me, someone who could lead me back to the world of people. I wanted to break down these walls built by arrogance and fragility. I needed someone, but I was afraid to admit it.

In her presence I knew that I'd become another man, whose confidence would rise with every sentence. A woman's voice would change me. I would become a garden swirling with all the scents that come after rain. I knew that much.

If she came everything would change.

The hours dragged by. I followed Hamiyet around the house. I collected fruit in the garden, watched the doves build nests above the veranda and flicked snails off the trees.

I arrived early and sat down at one of the tables under the magnolia tree in the garden.

Slowly the place filled up with customers. Bigwigs in dark suits alighted at tables like black birds. They were both a frightening and comical sight to behold, with their dark suits and loosened ties and enormous bellies, sweating in the heat. From time to time they'd look over at me suspiciously, making me feel like an outsider. I felt like a zebra among lions.

Then everyone turned to the door. She was there, looking out over the garden.

The black birds were staring at her hungrily. But she didn't seem to notice.

She greeted everyone in the garden as she came over to me, even exchanging a few words with some of the men, and for a moment it seemed their lust was compassion. They were calmed by her innocent expression, the coy and child-like look in her eye, her grace and the polite distance in her voice. They even seemed a little ashamed, and they wanted to protect her.

I felt the same compassion too, and the lust.

She had the power to tame these savage birds. In an instant. It was impressive to watch.

But I saw something else.

She wore two different smiles on her face, one on top of the other, and when she moved her lips you could almost see the other smile – a self-satisfied, ironic and belittling smile, the real emotions hidden beneath a gentler smile.

That's when I understood her most dangerous ability: to suddenly inspire compassion. Unhappy with his creation, God sent prophets to spread compassion and to preach against the dangers of lust. It was one of their main messages. But it went unheeded because God, master of contradictions, planted in the human heart a wild desire, a spark left by his awesome powers, that humans were destined to battle – God wanted so much to happen – and most were overwhelmed in the face of this power; if only in their dreams, the most pure of heart, committed the sin in their dreams. And although we could not obey the prophets' words we learned how to act in the face of sin, we learned how to face it down or take flight, if we do not eventually fall prey to it.

Compassion is another story.

Closing the doors on lust, God flung open a door to compassion. We travel easily on the road to compassion, with no doubt in our heart, determined and never afraid.

The enigmatic smile on her face told me she knew the power of compassion. Her compassion was a kind of Trojan

Horse – a God’s compassion – and doors were flung open and she rode in with a conscience veiled. All lustful thoughts had been banished.

God wouldn’t say it but I will: ‘Be careful of the compassion of a beautiful woman.’

Some conceal selfishness and beauty with compassion, and they have the power to devastate and destroy.

It was an idea I wanted to include in my new book, a new message from a prophet, and I wanted God to know.

On second thought I realised that if I did a reader might issue his or her own Godly declaration.

‘Mortals, beware the conceit of authors.’

A lust that inspired my conceit, and her compassion.

We were gladiators in the arena. I knew so much. But knowing so much did nothing for me.

I was helpless.

She was wearing a white dress with dark blue polka dots and chic sandals, red nail polish on her toes. I wanted to have her.

Then and there.

My emotions were locked away behind stronger walls but she could portray a range of emotions on her face whenever she wanted. That was something I simply couldn’t do.

And her counterfeit emotions were displayed so brilliantly that hardly anyone could detect the smallest trace of what she was truly feeling.

When she flashed that innocent, vulnerable smile, even the truth behind was blinding.

As she sat down whispers rippled through the garden like a breath of wind. They were trying to work out who I was.

‘I’m starving,’ she said.

She had a beautiful smile.

The waiter hurried over to our table and she ordered nearly everything on the menu.

‘Is all that for both of us?’ I asked.

‘Oh no, I’m just really hungry.’

‘Hard to believe you’re that hungry,’ I said.

'I love to eat.'

'Seems so.'

She put her bag down on the chair beside her, a small leather bag with a little golden chain on the handle.

'Did you read the book?'

'Yes.'

'And?'

'I'm here, aren't I?'

'It wouldn't be a sin to say you liked it.'

'I'm not a real reader. I don't think my liking it would really mean anything. Does my opinion really matter?'

I wanted to reach out and grab her by the shoulder and say, 'Tell me.'

'Did you like it?' I asked, calmly.

'I did.'

'You hesitated. Did you really like it?'

'I loved it.'

'Then why don't you just say it? Say it like you just ordered all that food. You're allowed to speak about books in the same way, with the same appetite. It's not bad manners.'

A bashful smile fell over her face and for a moment she looked like a little girl.

'I really liked it. You write beautifully. And you have a thing about writers and women. You know a lot about them.'

'What did you like most?'

I wanted to talk about it, her favorite parts, memorable chapters and sentences. I wondered if she had specific comments to make. Did she really think that I was a good writer? Was she a real fan?

I'm not satisfied with light praise.

No writer ever is.

It is easier to accept a flat-out rejection than faint praise, which is much harder to bear.

Beneath a writer's confident and tough exterior, there's a fragile heart ready to break when there's even the slightest absence of excitement in someone's voice.

I can be with a woman who hasn't read my work, I've been with many; but I could never be with someone who finds my writing mundane; and I certainly couldn't make love to a woman who felt this way.

'There were some very touching moments.'

'Which ones?'

As she looked at me I wondered if she pitied me or if she understood that I valued her opinion deeply. I didn't know. But she had really read the book.

'Did you finish it?'

'I was up all night . . . I was very impressed. How can you do that?'

I leaned back and felt the stress leave my body. I had become desperate. I desperately needed this woman, who hadn't read a book in years, to praise my work.

It was pathetic but I was overjoyed to hear what she had to say.

'I undress, stick my head in the fridge and then I write.'

'What?' she said, incredulously, her eyes wide open in surprise.

'No, that's not how I write,' I said, laughing. 'That's what Marquez said. But it seems like a terrible method.'

The waiter arrived with our food and soon the table was covered with salads, stuffed mussels, chicken liver, meatballs, pastries and fried aubergine.

'Are we really going to eat all this?' I asked.

'I'm hungry.'

And she really was. She had an incredible appetite. We settled into a comfortable rhythm as we ate. Almost in a whisper, she recounted what she remembered from the book, as if sharing a secret with me, something that had really happened, speaking about the characters like they were real. 'If you liked it that much, why don't you read more?'

She leaned over the table and said conspiratorially, 'I'm too easily swept away. I get the real world and the fantasy world all mixed up. I can't distinguish what happened here or there.'

It's a jumble in my head.' Then she added, 'You know, it really scares me sometimes.'

I was beguiled by her innocence and her vulnerability and I felt something like love. But at the time I had no idea what had prompted the feelings. She had the power to erase all the preconceptions I had about her. The moment she stepped into the garden she had made me forget.

She could do that.

'I read all the classics when I was a kid. My mother encouraged us to read them. I was lost in *Anna Karenina*. For a while I really believed I was living in a Russian palace.'

It occurred to me that I didn't even know this woman's name. She'd never told me and I'd never asked.

'I don't even know your name,' I said.

'Zuhul. My grandfather chose it.'

There was a ripple of movement and I looked up to see a man walking into the garden. He was wearing a dark suit, long black pointy shoes, a loose tie, and a tough but serene expression on his face. He wasn't handsome but he had that rough look many women found attractive. There was a certain confidence in the way he walked and the look in his eye told me that he was a ladies' man. A group of men trailed behind him, their heads lowered. He was clearly a powerful man and respected in a man's world. Although he was younger than most of the other men in the garden, they all greeted him with respect. Waiters rushed over to him.

He suddenly stopped at our table and put his hand on Zuhul's shoulder, as if I wasn't even there, and asked: 'How are you?'

Zuhul had sensed his arrival before I had and she knew who he was – that was all too clear. And though she didn't look up, she blushed when she felt his hand on her shoulder.

'Fine,' she said, looking up.

'You're eating a lot. There won't be anything left for us.'

They were roughly the same age, maybe he was a year or two older, but the self-assurance in his voice gave me the feeling that no one there could have questioned his authority; he had

the air of superiority an older man shows a younger lover, almost a fatherly love.

Zuhal had just tamed a garden of savage birds with a smile but now she was a shy little girl.

'I was hungry,' she said, like a student giving a teacher a bad excuse.

'Be careful now or you'll put on weight . . .'

He looked me over for a moment, memorising all the details of my face and the way I looked at him. He would learn everything there was to know about me in less than five minutes, at least everything that was known about me in town.

'Who's that?' I asked, after he had left, unable to conceal the distaste in my voice.

'The mayor.'

'Why does he treat you like you work for him?'

'We were lovers. We met at university,' she said, pushing her plate away.

'And now?'

'We're not together any more.'

She narrowed her eyes.

'But I'm still in love with him.'

Her frank and sudden confession was devastating; I was reduced to nothing. But then again I knew that a woman would never share such a thing with a man she'd just met unless she felt something for him. In that moment she seemed so pre-occupied that she wouldn't have noticed if I got up and left.

We were silent.

I couldn't know what she was thinking, apparently about the man. I wanted to ask her why she'd just told me her feelings for him. A moment earlier she'd been my greatest fan. How could she betray me so suddenly?

She had stopped eating. I asked her if she was finished and she nodded. 'I'm full,' she said.

'I wouldn't take him seriously.'

'I know. I just don't feel like eating now. Ready to go?'

We paid the bill and left.

She walked straight out of the garden, looking down at the ground.

Not one of the men was looking at her now. It was strange. They acted like she wasn't even there.

There was a nervous energy in the air.

VI

'He has a heart of stone,' she said.

Sunlight was shimmering off the train station dome, washing the street in a shower of light, the oleanders glimmering red.

I am fascinated by women. I listen to them like a treasure hunter, poring over a newly discovered map. I listen for clues between the lines, deciding which path I should take and where I should stop to rest, and where I need to dig.

But I had suddenly lost interest.

'Are we just friends?' I asked. 'Telling each other love stories?'

She was silent.

I wanted to show her that I could be as rude as that man who had treated her so badly in the restaurant, and when I was there with her. I wanted her to understand that she didn't have to allow people to get away with so much.

'I'm in love with him but I like you too. Isn't that possible?'

'Of course . . . Why not? But I'd rather you loved me . . . That's more fun. But why do you like me?'

'Weren't we together last night?'

I didn't know what to say. She laughed at the confused expression on my face.

'I was reading your novel. While you slept. So we were together in a way. I was thinking of you, thinking of you writing, wondering what kind of person you were in real life, and which characters were like you, and I was curious to know if those women were your lovers in real life. Were they?'

‘No.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘I never lie.’

‘Then you’re a real liar,’ she said, laughing.

It was like nothing had happened at the restaurant, like she’d never seen that man. Books can work miracles. They create a powerful bond between reader and writer.

‘I want to know how you make love.’

‘That’s easy enough to find out.’

‘But I’m leaving tonight.’

‘When are you coming back?’

‘I don’t know.’

I was silent, feeling the heat rising up from the streets. Little shop doors were ajar, like the entrances to dark caves. I was disappointed.

Suddenly I was a complete stranger in town, like a child dropped off at a boarding school by his mother. I thought about leaving too.

She had told me she was leaving like it was the most natural thing in the world, without hesitation, and with the intimacy of lovers. It made me feel like we would have made love that night if she didn’t have to go, and that we would when she returned. I was falling in love with a woman in love with someone else. But she was closer to me in so many ways.

‘Why is everyone so afraid of him?’

‘They think he’s had people killed.’

‘Has he?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You never asked?’

‘I did.’

‘And?’

‘He thought I was mad.’

‘And you said?’

‘Nothing.’

Now sitting all alone on this bench in the dark emptiness, I can hear the way she said those words: ‘I’m leaving tonight.’

I remember that moment as sheer bliss. Moments like these are unforgettable. They forge an unbreakable bond between a man and a woman, and nothing can overshadow or undermine them. It is an intimate moment that reminds us of animal warmth, the warmth of a woman's skin.

I am a man and my desires are both a blessing and a curse, at least that's how I see it. I have hunted after carnal pleasures, never hesitating to leap into catastrophe. What did I find there? It was always that 'moment' when a woman surrenders. And I'm not afraid to admit that I savour these moments of surrender. That dark maze of lust and sheer desire has nothing to do with the modern world; it is primitive and savage.

I cherish these moments.

Moments when a woman becomes a mermaid, slipping out of a mother-of-pearl oyster shell silvered by the light of the moon, casting off all her other roles. Then she is only female, surrendering naturally in a soft light. For the most part these moments unfold far from the prying eyes of others, in quiet corners, in bedrooms with the curtains drawn; but some women can surrender in broad daylight, oblivious to the crowds, and with just a glance, a smile, a word; it is a miraculous moment of pure intimacy, a moment of unforgettable joy. These are moments made by God.

Earthly moments that belong to the natural world and to God.

Innocent. Pure. Untainted.

In those moments you enter a world of sin but wearing all your innocence. I have never felt as happy or as innocent any other time. Then I feel the strength of being a man and the complete absence of power that comes with surrendering to another human being. This was such a moment.

Those words changed the direction of our relationship.

We would have a secret life together, in a secret organisation: dangerous and exciting.

We both knew it. There was nothing for us to say. That moment had come and gone, changing us and the world.

Her love for another man had melted in the heat of the moment and I was only saddened by the thought of her leaving that evening.

Suddenly I felt so terribly alone.

Loneliness. God and I know the feeling all too well. It's like he's trying to teach me the feeling, choosing to teach the emotion to select individuals, and using horrific coincidences to make his point. How could someone's mother, father and wife all die in different traffic accidents? You couldn't get away with that in a book. Only God can. I know because I have seen his work with my own eyes. Did he simply want to instil in me a fear of driving? Well, then he got it wrong. I'm afraid of people.

Sometimes I feel like I'm standing at a dangerous crossroad, and I fear that anyone standing next to me could be hit by a car.

Loneliness has taught me this.

But it's really not so bad.

You get used to it. You even start to like it.

It's a luxury to be free from all concerns, living like a turtle. Your home on your back. No worries in the world. Sometimes I think that our desire for possessions has to do with our bond with other people. In the end we have no choice but to leave all these things with someone. I never wanted to own more than I could carry on my back. I never wanted more than that. But I could have more. It's strange to think that I'm rich. Another coincidence. I didn't earn any of my fortune: I inherited it. I simply can't work for money. I like to spend it but I don't like to work for it.

I suppose if I hadn't come into money I'd be a beggar or a con man. You see, writing is a mix of the two: you fool people with your lies, take their money and then beg for their admiration. Sadly I was never very successful. I wasn't able to deceive anyone. I won no adoring fans.

Zuhal was my first and only fan.

My head was spinning with conflicting emotions. I was on

a fast-moving swing: soaring forward, I felt grateful and I wanted to keep her for ever; then swinging back, I felt nothing but disdain and I wanted to belittle her. She wasn't interested in literature, and I knew that I shouldn't take her opinion seriously, but she was the only person I knew who actually liked my books.

As we walked arm in arm through the back streets of town, bright yellow light bounced off the walls along the narrow streets. Some were no more than two metres wide. Women sat on throw rugs they'd spread out on the doorsteps in the shade.

These were houses from another time, with tall, carved wooden doors, and red geraniums bursting out of oriel windows.

Almost everything in the town seemed from another time. We walked in and out of a little square with an enormous tree and a fountain in the middle, children racing about in all directions. Miracles sometimes happen between a woman and a man, and as we walked together I felt us growing closer, as if with every step we knew more about each other, and without even speaking.

Was it real? It didn't matter. I could feel it and that was what was important. An emotion strong enough to make its own reality.

We were both willing to walk those streets together, lingering in each other's company, confessing something, forging a strong and lasting bond.

I suppose that was the day I discovered that this was love: wandering through the streets with someone, side by side. In one of the little squares we sat on stools at a shaded coffeehouse.

'Aren't you afraid of him?' I asked.

'Sometimes. But not the way I fear others. His heartlessness scares me . . . He's playing with me. And there's nothing I can do about it except try to make him angry. Sometimes at night I ask God to save me from him. With all my heart. You know, it's really strange. It's like wishing for death . . . It's like I need to love him to keep on living. I'm pathetic.'

These confessions didn't make me angry any more. Just the

opposite: the more she told me about her love for this man, the closer I felt to her; every word she said about him brought us closer. As she talked it seemed any fear she might have had of being close to me was slipping away. 'Actually I'm afraid of you too,' she said. 'Maybe even more than I am of him. I read your book. You're heartless too. Somehow I just know it. But I don't know how.'

She paused for a moment, a puzzled look on her face.

'Is it that I only fall for heartless men? I can't be that pathetic.'

Before I could come up with an answer the proprietor arrived with Turkish coffee in the handle-less cups you see in miniature paintings, and Zuhail was fascinated by them. She turned to the man and asked where he'd got the cups. They seemed like old friends. He said he'd bought them from a woman in the street market.

And then she started bargaining for them, and having a great time with it. I can't remember now, but in the end she bought the cups for a ridiculously low price, far lower than the proprietor ever would have expected. Then she stood up and walked over to a woman sitting on her doorstep. They exchanged a few words and then she was back at our little table with a gift box and wrapping paper.

After wrapping up the cups, she said, 'All right, let's go. I don't want to be late.'

She left that evening.

Towards midnight, I got a message from her. Just three words. 'I miss you.'