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BP 04 (A) Birtouta Alger
Tél: 0663.18.12.10
Email: kheddoucir@yahoo.com

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Rabah Kheddouci

THE VICTIM

NOVEL

Translated by:

Belkacem Meghzouchene

Publications of EL-hadhara

WORKS

Novels

The Victim (1984)

The Strangers (1990)

For adults

The burning of birds (1988)

The world dictionary of proverbs and maxims (1994)

The cow of orphans and other stories (Damascus, 2001)

Memories of a witness (2002)

Encyclopedia of Algeria's popular proverbs and sayings (2003)

Encyclopedia of Algerian scholars and writers (2003)

My trips to the cities of loveliness (2011)

Faces and phenomena, sour honey (2014)

Dictionary of Algerian writers and scholars (2015)

Short stories for kids

The race of animals (1992)

Collection of Algerian tales (7 tomes, 1994)

The wonderful gift (1996)

The mountain of monkeys (1997)

Collection of Algerian celebrities (1997)

The clever boy(2014)

The orphaned girl(2014)

The car Ti-ti(2014)

The garden of wolves(2014)

The girl who sells the bread(2014)

The amazing old man(2014)

My mistress the butterfly(2014)

My friend Mimi(2014)

The little girl and the mouse(2014)

The rooster and the sun(2014)

The king Antar-net(2014)

Playwright,

The cry of freedom (2015).

1

Every evening, necks craned to speakers with longing and excitement, while ears pleurably grasped talks' gist inside the only makeshift store of the village, wherein the elites huddled, making believe to know everything about life and the happenings of the future. And every speaker engaged in convincing the listeners, save Mahmoud, the son of Sheikh Yahya, who, amongst the youths, disgusted the grown-ups when carrying too far the events. His only goal was racking up the roof of glory, after Salem's track, who was studying at the town's high school. Mahmoud was so influenced by him that he went to ape his talking and walking manners, and even clothing, out of the good character of the successful student. Mahmoud was looking forward to propitious opportunities, to getting closer to him, but his shyness from the men who clung to Salem, whom he fed with bags of news or explanations of Koran's hidden matters, hampered him.

Once, they came across each other, and Mahmoud borrowed from Salem some books and notebooks to peruse. He adored his handwriting and resplendent colors, which whetted his appetite to read them through.

On Thursday evening, Salem came back from school and met Mahmoud. He saluted him, and then he asked him.

- Have you studied all my books and notebooks, Mahmoud?

- Yes! Many thanks.

- I just did my duty toward you, Salem said with pride. Knowledge should be given like water and air...

- I'd like to ask you about the meaning of something I'm unaware of, Salem.

Salem readied himself, coughing slightly.

- Yes, please do. In literature? Sciences? Any kind, whatsoever.

Delighted of his willingness, Mahmoud queried him.

- What's the meaning of the willow...

Salem did not wait the end of the question. He involuntarily drifted his sight to the background of Mahmoud, putting his hand on his face as if he were wiping away sweat. Lanky, with some bristles on his chin, Salem was years older than Mahmoud. Poles apart, the latter was short and broad-shouldered, with hoarse voice, stretching out words when talking.

Mahmoud got confused toward Salem's attitude after his question. He then set out to make things plain.

- I didn't mean the willow tree in itself you're gazing at now...

The willow tree was the treasure-trove the villagers had been reveling in; green-leafed, with long and wide twigs, and a big trunk in which was embedded a drawing of a large heart bearing the motto: 'LONG LIVE ALGERIA.' What embellished the tree most, was the fact that it overlooked an abundant fountain, proving fresh water to almost all the inhabitants. The spring was forbidden to both youths and old men, which gave it a paramount dignity. Appealing nubile women used to pour in to the spring to fill up earthenware jars, to gossip at ease, and to swap news of impending weddings and brand-new songs of the season.

Salem's mind went astray somewhere, and then glared dryly at Mahmoud.

- Tell me which willow tree you've hinted at?

Mahmoud answered him rather apologetically.

- The very word you wrote on every page of your notebooks!

- The 'Willow', Salem told him promptly, refers to the name of the high school I've been attending! Have you any other question?

Mahmoud pretended to have been satisfied, promising him before they split up.

- Thanks a lot. Tomorrow, I'll give you back your stuff.

Some of life's wonders could be felt in the healthy air and the quietness the Creator has endowed the villagers' lifestyle with, prettying up the sceneries. One may be bored by listening to their

redundant and unending talks about seasons and harvestings and prices of crops in souks. And their credulity could be taken as a good thing.

The whole family was thinking about tomorrow's twiza, or 'collectively-driven toil', which Hadj Boualem would steer to reap the crops he had sown in fall.

The dawn set in sluggishly, as Mahmoud asked his father.

- How come you let your work to join in his, dad?

- Helping each other is a duty, sonny, Sheikh Yahya offered bluntly.

Mahmoud got irked and stood up.

- Why don't we just help ourselves or the others in need? Hadj Boualem doesn't need our hands.

- I see that you're still a small boy! I thought you were a lettered, empirical man.

The father's words spouted out of his lips mingled with grief.

Mahmoud sat down back and spoke to his mother who was busied with milking the goat.

- These are his words, mom. Whenever dad sees me throwing light upon things, he tags me of ignorance.

- My son, the truth is that we're all tiny in front of Hadj Boualem and his helpers.

- Houria, Sheikh Yahya barged in, tell him about Maamar who last summer declined to take part in the harvesting of Hadj Boualem.

Mahmoud sipped his coffee.

- A brave man he is. May God proliferate his fellowmen! He deserves a free cup of coffee at Hadj's...

Then he stopped talking, while Sheikh Yahya guffawed at first, before he chilled out, sad.

- Go on! Spell it out, sonny. Hadj Boualem's coffee stall! Don't be afraid if I call you a child. You can ask Maamar whose store he buys his food-stuffs from, and whose vehicle he boards.

Mahmoud squeezed his forehead as if he were passing tough exams. Many questions crowded into his mind: Why does Maamar not take the truck like others? Why does he not go to the store? What is the real reason?

His forehead narrowed and eyes widened softly. He looked as if he had woken up from a weird dream. He spluttered to himself: Hadj Boualem's makeshift coffee stall! Hadj's store! Hadj's truck! Enough!

Houria hauled herself up, let the goat munch, and spoke to her son.

- All the village belongs to Hadj Boualem. Even the eggs hens will be laying by soon!

Sheikh Yahya slung the sickle over his shoulder, all beaming.

- Take care of your studies, sonny. What I sowed yesterday, I mow it down today. And what you seed today, will bear fruit for the whole life.

He then stormed out hurriedly, to catch up with the groups of coworkers already heading to the farm works in the field.

Mahmoud sighed remorsefully, and rose at once, holding his small satchel of school paraphernalia, and went out to study, treading along the way with challenge. He felt motion in the underbrush following his steps, as if tracking his footmarks. He paused, turned around and glanced awhile, before asking in the dark.

- What on earth are you doing here? Why did you come?

He did not get any reply, but arcane and faint stares shooting at him. It was a dog. He tried to drive him off with soft words, avoiding anger.

- Out of my way! Go back home, Mura!

The dog felt humiliated, the eyes filled with tears, yet not weeping. Mahmoud saw through dog's gaze one iota of blame. He thereupon patted the dog's head mildly.

- Are you hungry? Have you forgotten that your name is The General? Okay, my dear friend, The General...

Mahmoud rummaged in his satchel for a bread loaf his mother had stacked in to sate his hunger at break in school. He was delighted

to see the dog wolfing down the barley bread, then ran away back home. Mahmoud shook his head astoundingly, mumbling to himself: Starve your dog, and he will follow your steps!

The paths of village between houses and gardens were tortuous. Mahmoud rambled along the morn's silence, his eyes nailed down onto the ground, as usual, as though he was looking for a lost thing. He stumbled upon a clique of his fellow pupils. They started to bother him.

- Where are you pacing like that, Mahmoud?

He was baffled by both their wrong way and question.

- As you see! Say, 'good morning', first, boys! Have you lost your way to school? Especially, today! What's wrong with you, Aziz?

Aziz talked keenly.

- Good morning, Mahmoud. You come with us?

Mahmoud kept wordless.

- We're heading to the twiza, Hadj Boualem's school by proxy! God says in Holy Koran: 'And help each other in righteousness and piety.'

Mahmoud kept befuddled.

- But...!

- Work is honor and right and duty, Jahid chiseled in.

- But you're still children, aren't you? Mahmoud wondered. Have you ever forgotten that we've exam next week?

Jahid talked back neglectfully.

- Everyone will work as he can. Aziz will fetch water, and we'll pick up the dust left by the harvesters!

- What about studies and exams?

- But what is it for? Aziz contested. Results are known in advance!

- Has Hadj Boualem warranted you a sweeping success at school?

They all mocked Mahmoud.

- Mahmoud! Jahid talked. You're the last to know that there is no success this year!

- Why you pretend this?

- Bouzid, the son of Hadj Boualem, told us that the dean of the school informed him that because pupils don't study French language, they will all fail. Let's go, now!

As the pupils slipped away, Jahid spun on his heel, snickering at Mahmoud.

- Anyway, hope you to pass through!

2

The truck slowly drove up a serpentine road, and the engine purred like trees in a frosty night. The sun had kissed goodbye on the forehead of each passenger. The town faded away, and the truck hugged the hills, village-bound. The faces of the schoolboys glimpsed at the truck's cabin, thrilled by winds lashing at them head-on. Yet, a respected man watched over the kids' fooleries.

- We'll reach the village pretty soon, Aziz said.

The teacher produced from his pocket a box of cigarettes, sought for a matchbox in another pocket but failed to find it. He looked about him, and then put the cigarette back inside its box. Mahmoud came up to him.

- Does hope exist, sir?

The teacher straightened up at first, before he arched at the front of the truck where the cabin was.

- Hand me the matchbox, Bouzid!

Bouzid, behind the wheel, gave him the matchbox, and then began to yell out orders.

- Everybody get the fifty dinars ready! We arrive in one moment. They felt that the exam questions were much easier than the trouble Bouzid stirred up. Bouzid was the only son of Hadj Boualem. He lived in the village most of the time. He grew up spoiled by his father, who passed on him arrogance and pride.

Mahmoud did not care about Bouzid's claim. He drew nearer from his teacher again.

- The questions in French matter were difficult. I didn't understand anything, yet I answered what I knew!

The teacher rocked his head, as Mahmoud went on talking.

- I wrote on the sheet of answers that I've never attended French language courses!

Jahid interrupted him, bewildered.

- But can you tell Bouzid that you haven't got money on you?!

The teacher breathed out a plume of smoke, and spoke determinedly and defiantly.

- Listen to me well, kids. If you all succeed in this exam, I'll sacrifice two lambs as grants to the villagers, in such a way that the mayor will learn there's a successful school in the village!

Suddenly, the truck rolled to stop.

- Maybe it breaks down and we'll go on our way by foot! Jahid guessed.

The teacher recited a Koranic verse: 'Nothing will befall us, except what God has ordained for us'

Kouider, who was sitting beside the driver, went down first. He heard the schoolboys singing a melody:

Kouider, when will you get married

Kouider, when you will get married

Kouider, don't zigzag up the hills

Kouider was a stunted man, honey-complexioned. Wrinkles sneaked up on his life despite he was only hitting thirty. Harsh circumstances brought him to the village. For years, the dwellers had known him toiling for Hadj Boualem. He led his cattle to grazing, swept the floor of his makeshift store, and sometimes went with Bouzid to the town aboard the truck. A lot of people used to tease Kouider about his family and asked him where he stemmed from, which made him burst into tears and sent his articulations quivering. The residents refrained, therefore, from reminding him of his family and origin. They even cracked jokes when they nudged him: Kouider, when will you get married?

Kouider lost his speech in the babble of the passengers. The latter fell silent as Bouzid hurled himself down, banging the truck's door shut. Bouzid moved closer, his eyes all afire.

- You all pay me the truck's fare! Right now!

Most of their pockets were empty, for they spent their money at lunchtime in the milkman's stall. Yet, a handful of men kept a few

coins pinging in Bouzid's palm. Seething with anger, he ogled at the pupils in disdain, barking at them.

- Get out of my truck or I'll strip you of your pants!

Mahmoud stammered to himself: Bullying weak people is a sign of cowardice.

- What are you saying? What are you saying? Son of a ...!

Mahmoud talked back, shuddering.

- The distance we travelled doesn't match the fare you've requested us. The taxi driver wouldn't have asked us such a high price!

The kid made Bouzid's blood fizz, who bawled him out in a mix of revenge and threat.

- What are you saying, son of a witch? Did your mom buy the truck with me? Get your ass out of my truck!

- A Sonacome-made truck! Mahmoud sneered back

Bouzid jumped on the back of the truck, and snatched the arm of Mahmoud.

- Sonacome! Sonacome! Down! Shove off, son of a ...!

The teacher held Bouzid back, giving him notes, speaking out.

- Your tongue could throw you into jail. Take this money for all the passengers, and resume the drive.

Bouzid pocketed the money, yet insisted on dislodging Mahmoud out of the rusty truck. The poor kid quit his seat reluctantly, while the truck drove away in high gear. The teacher had failed to win Bouzid over to halt his vehicle.

Mahmoud trudged up the slopes and shed tears, but his brains recalled the exam's question: 'Did really Hitler hate the Jews?'

His thoughts turned muddled. Damn day it was! This dawn, we walked together, and now I'm back home alone. How can I face my teacher tomorrow as he learned that my mother is a witch? He broke off for a little while, took out of his pocket a tiny box containing sugar cubes. He remembered his mother's heed of morn when she bade him farewell: "Sugar is good during exams, don't

forget to swallow these cubes. I stored them for your exams, since your father has bought them last Eid. Don't forget, okay?"

Poor mom! he mused on, if only you knew that I forgot your instructions. He then slipped a cube of sugar under his tongue till it melted down by saliva, heating his body up. The sweet taste invigorated him as he gulped down all the sugar.

Late in the afternoon, Mahmoud almost reached his village, which looked magnificent with its scattered hovels and sky-high trees. He felt bone-tired and sore-throated. He slowed down as he came closer to the entrance of the hamlet, wherein he stepped in a fountain below the willow tree; by joining his two hands, he slaked his thirst. His red face was reflected in the flickering water. He thanked God, and leaned his back against the trunk. He ran his finger over the forehead, cleaning the trickle of sweat off. He felt some relief on all over his moist body. He raised his head to the sky, partly concealed by the ramose willow on which he made out a bird's nest. He climbed up the tree, and beheld the whole hamlet, whispering: 'Over there, is our sweet home. I miss you just for one day away.'

Then he hummed to himself: 'How many houses does a boy grow used to, yet nostalgia always drags him toward the first one. This one is Ali The Taller's house, which he has left for the life in the town, despite its beautiful garden. The next one had once been Hamadane's house, before he exchanged it for Hadj Boualem's plot of land in the town, adding to him six cows as a bonus! I can also see the ruins of Sheikh Hamza's house, which the French colonizers had burned down.'

He perched on a big branch, his eyes combing the entire hamlet. Yet, he knew well that he should arrive at his home before sundown. He murmured softly: 'Peace upon you, land of my forebears!'

He paused a bit, sighing, and then he resumed: 'Oh, dear Ahmed! If you only knew how your house had become since you left for France. It looks like the hut of the dumb woman!'

He felt a pang of regret calling her a dumb, while her son, Salem, kept lending him books, and perhaps he would even accompany him to study in the high-school 'The Willow.'

His mind meandered again, daydreaming. He saw himself attending the high-school, and after passing through to university, he would boast himself in front of the female students. Abruptly, voices reached him up the branches. He peered down the tree, disbelieving his eyes. A young man and a nubile woman met around the fountain. Who on earth are they? How dare he put his feet in a place reserved exclusively to women?

He talked to himself and scrutinized their faces, choked off a laugh. Oh, gosh! Am I dreaming or what? Salem dating Safia, the daughter of Belkacem Bouakkaz?! How they knew each other? One can't love and plays the wise guys!

Mahmoud eavesdropped on their conversations through the twigs, like telephonic wires. Salem sat facing Safia, his back scraping the willow's trunk, and his hand was scrawling on earth with a wooden stick. Safia rose to fill a canteen of water, while her eyes browsed the whereabouts of the spring. Every time Salem tried to look upwards, Mahmoud quailed at the thought of being found out. But to his great ease, Salem's eyes stalled, mesmerized when they caught Safia's smooth eyelashes watching over her black eyes, before he lowered his sight onto her luscious lips, sending him aflutter and amiss.

The two lovebirds twittered their feelings. Safia brushed away her pitch-black hair from her rosy cheek in utter silence, and then she confessed to Salem.

- I learned many things through your eyes!

- And I learned from you the art of life, Safia Do you know, my sweet Safia, that I see God through your eyes!

- God's wisdom upon His creatures! she said with her little husky voice

Safia's arrows tore through Mahmoud's heart, boggling completely his consciousness atop the willow.

Time flew by voiceless for the two lovers, as the language of eyes took over the magic moments of hope. Their fingers interwove shivering prays of love which flushed out heat from their two intimate, juvenile bodies.

She suddenly broke the stillness, relaxed.

- You'd strain your eyes fantasizing too much, Salem!

- How can a thirsty quench these wonders of yours?

She freed her hand from his.

- You know, I'm afraid, Salem.

- What are you afraid of? he asked her, startled.

- I'm afraid of fates. What if the fire of separation turns the good memories into ashes and the wind sweeps them away?

He interrupted her, calmed her down as he could.

- We'll write down the marriage by soon, Safia. Don't worry about it.

She beamed at him with a seductive cuddle.

- Are you going to buy me? Owning my heart isn't enough for you?

- The nest that will bring us together would be the happiest nest the sun shines its light on!

Safia lifted her forehead skywards, all blithe.

- May God's Will prevail. May God's...

No sooner had she looked up than she panicked and downed her head quickly, stuttering.

- Goodbye! Goodbye!

She clutched the half-filled canteen of water and then paced away.

Salem was astonished for her brusque walkout. He gazed up for a clue, and there up, sitting astraddle a branch, he recognized Mahmoud dabbing the sweat with a handkerchief.

3

The storm tailed off when the night unfolded its darkness over the whole village.

Belkacem Bouakkaz was inspired by the scent of dewy leaves, hoping to see his prayers fulfilled. He was sitting cross-legged, his back against the trunk of a sapless almond tree delimited by stones, piling up as the days went by. Ritually, he added his own stone over them, like every visitor to the Shrine of Sidi Rahmoun. He lit two candles he brought with him from the rough-and-ready store. He kissed all the stones of the shrine.

He whispered imploringly: 'Oh, Sidi Rahmoun! We're Muslims. Oh, Sidi, as I'm travelling to a seaside town, cast approval upon me, and bestow health upon my wife, Aziza, and marry my daughter, Safia, a virtuous husband! Please, allow me to take a holy stone of yours, at the request of Hadj Boualem, who will lodge me in the town. I'll strike it rich there, and then I'll have the upper hand over the town and the countryside. Sorry, Sidi Rahmoun, I must leave now!'

Belkacem Bouakkaz moved away from the shrine, the heart brimming over with happiness and self-assurance. Before the dawn broke up, he had already found himself on the back of the truck slouched over the furniture, while his wife and daughter packed into the leather seats beside the driver, Bouzid.

The truck was winding through the uphill road. From time to time, Bouzid touched mischievously with his arm the left side of Safia's body. She barely eluded his deliberate squeezes in the tininess of the cabin. Besides, her fleshy mother took up all the available space.

Safia felt respite at the end of the trip. She goggled contemptuously at Bouzid, who kept feasting his eyes on her body.

The social gap was deep, and their lifestyles were not much the same; the family of Bouakkaz stood in front of an imposing house

unmatched in their small town, with its stories overhanging the blue-painted wall and the garden.

The factotum Mouhouche sprang the garage's grand door wide open, and let Bouzid's truck slide in. They all entered the house. Words emanated from upstairs.

- Welcome! Welcome!

Hadj Boualem appeared in Arabic sleeping suit which consisted of a broad woolen cloak, and his head was girdled snake-like by a yellow turban. He greeted everyone, inquiring about the rural people. Right after, he showed the Bouakkaz family the room he had prepared for them. He spoke to them in immodesty.

-This is your new home. You've every commodity here: electricity, water. Look! (He put his finger on the switch, flooding the room with light.)

- Is the store not far from here? Bouakkaz asked

Hadj Boualem laughed, leering stealthily at Safia.

- Don't worry at all! There're plenty of them here!

Bouzid intervened, vulpine.

- Life in itself is like a store! It sells people either money or gladness or beauty.

He stalled, eyeing Safia, who bowed her head shyly, and he went on talking.

- And others are given characters unworthy of the sons of lords.

Hadj Boualem patted Bouakkaz on the shoulder, assuring him.

- The store is next the house's wall. Don't bother yourself, even if you haven't got money on you.

Bouakkaz showed his gaiety.

- Thanks God! Thank you Sidi Rahmoun for the blessing you've gratified my journey with! Even in my exile, Hadj is here with me, and everywhere! May God enrich him with stores in all over the world! By the way, I'd like to see the allotment you've promised me.

Hadj Boualem curled his moustache, replied him foxily, with a trail of derision.

- My land is yours! Come on! We're associates both in rural lands and urban ones! I think, you heard of socialism, didn't you?

- Yes, of course! I heard of it during the Revolution. Let's sip coffee, first!

Hadj Boualem mingled his words, jubilant.

- Yes, yes! Take a seat! Bouzid, serve them coffee! No, let Mouhouche do it.

Father and son tiptoed out of the room chatting, while their naïve guests were waiting for the opening breakfast.

Safia stood by the window. She appreciated viewing the garden's roses and trees surrounding the house. She peeked down the first floor, where the wife of Hadj Boualem was spying on her husband and Bouzid, talking beside the water basin.

Hadj Boualem's wife, Jawhara, was forty years old, and her youth began to wither away without notice. Good-natured, yet she stuck to her rights adamantly. She did not know the impossible, neither did she believe in failure. She ran after time, and used to bicker with a burdensome guest just paying visit to her to enhance the whitening of her hair! She spent hours in front of her large mirror, talking about hope, willing to avenge the time she had wasted poverty-stricken. The old man garlanded her life with comfort and self-confidence, despite their disparity in age. She was complacent of it. She wore the most glamorous dresses and adorned herself with most expensive jewels, so that she felt herself a flamboyant child having fun in a colorful meadow. Red nights and trips abroad had made up for the twenty-year gap between the uneven couple. Many a time, she admitted to herself that she was glad to marry a rich widower, skilled in marital ups and downs, which taught him the importance of space and time. Nature bequeathed to her keen intuition and cleverness; she was a hell of a woman, capable of ruling the world should she overwhelm her jealousy. At nightfall, a strange feeling would rouse from deep sleep, and her thoughts became blurred as she recalled that life had striped her of the hope

every woman longed for. She was afraid that her dreams would die out. She bent upon meeting her desire and aiming her arrow at the target on the right moment. And Hadj Boualem would not meet her needs until he was bedbound, either ill or safe!

4

On the drive back home, Hadj Boualem felt that the thermal bath rejuvenated him,

- You know, my dear wife, a promenade is a source of vigor and peace of mind and strength. It makes you taste the sweeties of life!

Behind the steering wheel, he ignored the anxiety of Jawhara, who was sitting beside her husband. Her gazes shifted from the road to the visor, which reflected the face of Safia in the backseat of the car. She swung her head, angry at the thought of Safia's presence, yet reined in her fire of envy.

Safia's beauty seemed to have ensnared Hadj Boualem, who prized her rosy cheeks, reminiscent of windflowers. He spun his neck, and then entertained her.

- I think the bath cried for sea's help!

Safia smiled broadly.

- Women build their world in the bath! Jawhara answered him rather casually.

Hadj Boualem minded to wheedle his wife for brushing her fears aside.

- I let you know, Jawhara, that even in Europe you're willing to visit, there is no such a thermal bath.

Jawhara fired back, bragging.

- Take care of driving, and look ahead! We've reached the town now. Besides, don't forget that I travelled to France many times.

In the afternoon, Jawhara emptied all her makeup over her face, sounding a fresh painting jammed with glowing hues, like Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. She dressed up even more than a

bride, highlighting her feminineness, and showing off all her carnal lures to fight the decisive battle at the right moment.

Her husband plopped down on the edge of the bed, agape.

- Tell me, what is happening this night after all the nights we shared?

She drew closer, susurrated into his ear to cut his thoughts short.

- What do you think of my clothes?

- Unfit for your age! he pointed out with a hint of sarcasm.

She became aware that her first step failed, so she switched to another subject. She hit him with a tricky question.

- How do you see a woman?

His eyes delved into her body, clad in a see-through silky tunic. She asked him the same question again, full of fondness.

He retorted with a grin.

- Philosophers say: 'The woman is a beautiful devil'

She warmed his hand, insisting again.

- What do you think exactly about me?

Gingerly, he put his hands on her shoulders, yet blitzed her.

- A girl whose age is older than her brains!

She perceived a fever of weakness in his eyes. She soothed her nerves, settled to defeat him by his own weapons before the fight was over. She stepped away, and then spoke with caring words.

- My darling! You know that I've been loving you for years.

He felt her breath seeping into his deep heart, driving him astir.

- Tell me what you want, Jawhara?

She made out his overwhelmed condition, and tried to glean from her husband a promise. She spoke with a feigned innocence.

- I'm afraid that you'd disappoint me!

- ...

- If you really love me, Hadj, and regard me so highly, bequeath some of your wealth to me!

She then hugged him by the neck, while he was mulling over her demand: Give someone a leg, and he'd ask you an arm, too!

- You're my wife, aren't you? My wealth is yours!

She begged him.

- I'd like to secure my future for the remaining of my life.

- Don't worry a lot. We've a common future. None of us should live away of each other. You get it, Jawhara?

She released herself and slipped into bed, teary-eyed and despaired.

Trying to appease her, he reached out and caressed her face tucked into two pillows, but she pushed him away, holding back a sob.

He withdrew his hand, felt a sticky liquid running between his fingers; the warm tears had washed down her facial painting! As he was on the fringe of suffocation, he inched toward the window and opened it wide for fresh air. He sat erect, staring down into the garden. As his thoughts were chasing worries, he got an earful of a cough wafting out from the room of Bouakkaz. Actually, Safia was pleading the dusk of night for more mercy.

Since Belkacem Bouakkaz had set foot in the city, he was so busy farming the garden of Hadj Boualem; watering the trees, growing the flowers, planting vegetables just enough to keep his pot boiling, and he provided Hadj Boualem's own kitchen for basic foodstuffs. The spared money he had brought from the village, began to lessen day after day.

Safia had been helping Jawhara in cooking, cleaning and dusting the rooms. Safia strengthened, and her beauty spoke volumes, as Hadj Boualem would cram her arms with different presents, eyeing her lustfully, without she noticed that. She was dying to see again Mahmoud. As often as not, she would walk up to the terrace of the second floor, looking for an unknown place. The specter of Mahmoud would float over her while daydreaming. Then, she would sit down and make clean breast of her overcoming feelings toward him, tinted with loyalty and nobleness: How are you? What

have you become after our reluctant split? Where are you now? Are you thinking about me? My warmest greetings to the willow tree! She would focus on the passers-by to spot Salem, to dig the past up; to no avail.

5

The bell rang at the start of the school year. Packs of pupils returned to the school, laden with woven heroic stories of holidays to be narrated between them blow-by-blow.

The large portal of the high school swung open to let them flock in, on to the courtyard, then raced upstairs to the various floors, each pupil looking for his assigned classroom on the doors.

The courtyard teemed with pupils, hailing each other. Friends met again with cheers. Salem jumped from one classmate to another, greeting each one, yet absent-mindedly. A familiar voice shouted his name:

- Salem! Oh great, you're here?

Salem turned around leisurely. He felt as if a hurricane were nearing, when his eyes crossed Mahmoud's, who already prompted a handshake, all smiling.

- I think you're mistaken, Salem! This high school bears the name of 'al-Rashidia' and not 'The Willow.'

Salem shrugged off his remark, and withdrew his hand coldly. Mahmoud felt sorry for him, demanded earnestly.

- Any aches?

- No, thanks God, Salem retorted unfeelingly.

- Any trouble? Mahmoud asked again, tapping on Salem's arm.

Salem flushed, his hands shivering, and then railed against him.

- I've got a cramp in one hand, and the other hand complains of you! Get the fuck out of my way, rotten spy! Should the sun see you when it rises, it'd eclipse!

Mahmoud was stunned, as Salem hurt him at first sight, back from holidays. He tried to get a rationale for Salem's unforgiving move, but the latter walked away, revolted. Mahmoud froze in his place, wondering what

ould do or say. Suddenly, he remembered the day he had perched atop the branch of the willow tree, discovering Salem's dating Safia by the fountain. He clasped his lower lip with his fingers, revealing to himself: Now, I do know the secret behind his writing on his notebooks and books the word 'willow'!

6

On the day of Jawhara's trip abroad, Hadj Boualem helped her by carrying her suitcases, to drop her off at the airport.

She interrogated her husband.

- Why is this old man coming with us?

He murmured to a peculiar response, as his hands were gripping the wheel.

- He'll handle your two suitcases from the car to the airport's hall! Would you fancy holding the two suitcases by ourselves??

She shook her head, silent and reluctant. He ignited the engine into life, and drove away.

At the airport, the unusual couple said their farewells. She waved her hand in the air.

-Bye-bye! See you!

- Have a nice trip, my dear wife!

She inched back to warn him cunningly.

- Stay wise! A precious chance, isn't it?

He understood her hints, grinned as he talked.

- You, a shrewd woman! Bye-bye!

She did not tell him anything more. She left to board her flight.

The plane flew in the high sky, slashing through the clouds, and the car drove back home.

Belkacem Bouakkaz, sitting next to Hadj Boualem, was wondering how his boss had let his wife travel alone to the country of the Infidels. He hesitated a while, then he inquired about this confused matter.

- That's freedom, dear Belkacem! A woman toils for us the whole life, and she deserves, at least, one month in a year to live in happiness.

Bouakkaz seemed mystified, then quizzed his chief further.

- But, is happiness just away the conjugal home? For one month?

Hadj Boualem cackled jeeringly.

- You really are thinking backwards! You must know that close hearts don't care about the remoteness of bodies!

Bouakkaz understood just the word 'backwards', asked his boss, ever credulous.

- Is the allowed sum of money she has taken with her abroad sufficient for one month?

Hadj Boualem hid his antipathy inside his heart, then explained him rather theatrically.

- Didn't I dub you a 'backward fellow'? My wife is amongst the most respected ladies abroad. She can get the money whenever she needs it. Moreover, she is staying in our house there. Do you feel better now, Belkacem?

Bouakkaz kept hushed, resigned, and regretted he brought up the issue in front of Hadj Boualem, issue of which reminded him of his backwardness. He told himself: 'What a shame that thickheaded people don't understand well the meaning of talks!'

The car belled home by noon. The two men went down. No sooner had Bouakkaz drawn away from the car than Hadj Boualem halted him to hold him out the notes, making his eyes rekindled.

Yet, Hadj Boualem shot his orders.

-

Look, Belkacem. The harvest time is too close, and I see you're the right man to steer the operation. This money will help you live well. I trust you.

Bouakkaz beheld the money for a moment, then he stashed it inside the pocket of his slacks, feeling it rounded out for the time being. He showed him words of thanks and gratitude.

- Everything will go well. Tomorrow, I'll head up to the countryside.

Hadj Boualem shone like a mirror, and considered the moment ripe to strike the iron as it was hot. He grabbed the swarthy hand of Bouakkaz, begging him.

- I've got a wee favor to ask you, my dear Belkacem!

Bouakkaz cut him in, without even waiting the nature of the demand.

- Granted! Granted, Hadj...

- Promise me to meet my need.

- You've my word, Hadj. I can't turn down any demand of yours, sir.

Hadj Boualem talked in a pitiful tone, yet pungent from within.

- You know, I'm getting old. Being at home alone is hard to me to cope with. Cooking meals and household, and all that stuff. I wish your daughter, Safia, could stay in the house until my wife is back from travel!

Bouakkaz remained unspeaking.

The Hadj's handgrip became stronger, and he chimed more coins in his other hand. Bouakkaz could not apologize, nor could he refuse the extra notes. The deal had been sealed. Hadj Boualem smiled his victory of the day. His thoughts coined: 'Money oils the rails. Open up your fat wallet, and your flaw is fixed up!'

The following morning, Hadj Boualem got rid of Bouakkaz along with his wife as he drove them up toward the village. He was seemingly enthralled by the rural landscapes.

7

The final exams were just two week away, and the school year was thus drawing to its end.

All year long, Mahmoud and Salem would exchange distant remorse-ridden stares. Yet, Mahmoud would show empathy and support toward Salem, who kept for himself, curled up in his isolated corner, far from his mates and closest friends. Salem did care about anything whatsoever its worth; he would look at people distractedly, as if he were gazing at the sea which might have stolen him a golden ship.

Even teachers had remarked the dropping of his level, unusually, and they tried to understand the whys.

A teacher spoke to him.

- Salem, you've lost this year your energy and dynamism.

He shot him a childish look, as he answered him back.

- 'A looser could never be a giver!' You taught us this adage, didn't you?

- Where is the spirit of hope you would display in front of us?

Salem lowered his head, and then replied with measured words.

- The spirit vanishes when the life ends. And my spirit withered when the sun of my life has gone down.

A teacher of Arabic intervened.

- I dare say that Salem is enamored of someone. You know, love and perfume can't be veiled!

A teacher of natural sciences teased Salem.

- Love is like flu, can't be concealed! A lucky girl you have a crush on?

Salem grinned as he responded.

- The heart isn't a dining table to spread out to every guest!

- A man of faith, like you Salem, shouldn't give up believing in the Mercifulness of God. And you do know that well. Your little beard proves that! You're the leader of Muslim Brotherhood in this city.

- See it as you like it. A dry pond doesn't need fish in!

Salem went distressed and surrendered to straining of his brains. He was so wrapped up in brooding over and over, that he did not feel his teachers pacing away. He had stayed alone for one hour.

The cold night had fallen. Salem dragged his feet to the dormitory. He stretched out his body, hoping to bed down easily. Nonetheless, tiresome thoughts stripped him of sleep and the fatigue made him twirl as if he were lying in the eye of the tornado or sitting above the epicenter of an earthquake.

Salem sat up in his bed, looking around into the darkness, cracked only by the snores of his mates, granting him company in his lonely night. Two warm drops of tears spilled down on his cool cheeks, sending a chill over his body. Believing himself destiny-stabbed, he went on speaking alone, heavy-hearted: 'Oh, damn it, this life! Damn it, this destiny which deprived me of seeing my father and silenced my mother! My ears can never grasp the most suave words coming out from the best lips ever. Yet, I thought that, at least, destiny couldn't take on Safia. Where are you now, Safia? When can I meet you again?'

He felt cold, and a headache crept into his head. He sank down on his back, insomniac and lachrymose.

8

The longer, hotter days of summer made the ripened ears of wheat and barley weigh down, while the peasants chanted altogether in the fields, accompanied by the strident songs of cicadas.

A harvester stood upright and avowed to Belkacem Bouakkaz.

- We're fed up of this lifestyle, Belkacem!

Bouakkaz's back was still arched like the sickle he was holding tightly.

- Life in the city, Jahid, isn't easy. You must buy everything there. Comes the day when even the air is for sale!

- Is the man for sale, too?

Othman rose, tied up the bundle of ears, then bantered around with a trail of annoyance:

- What a trifling question! The man has been sold in the countryside ahead of the city. Just ponder on your case and mine. Aren't we ourselves goods? That is to say, money spinners for Hadj Boualem during summer and fall!

Jahid butted in, mollifying the irritated reaper:

-That's the Decree of God!

Bouakkaz shouted his orders:

-Guys, resume labor now! Labor, I said!

Straightaway, Bouakkaz intoned religious eulogies, followed by the peasants in chorus and their melodies were echoed back by the hills and ravines. The trees rocked gratefully as they used to do since many generations, save the willow tree Salem would keep company with while the women were cooking diner. Under its shadows, he would call back the moments he shared with Safia. He strived to get over his personal thorn-studded wall of ordeal and pain, and to stand up to the storm of despair. However, failure stuck to him, leading him to breakdown and drowning in the currents of torture

and bitterness of hopelessness, amidst a maelstrom of hallucinations. His hope dried up inside his soul like burning trees. He would attempt to stand on one foot, just to lose poise, staggering anew. He would own to the willow tree, athirst of the inexhaustible water of the nearby fountain. “Oh, fresh pure water! Do you hear my? God has breathed life into creatures by using water. Please, infuse life into my lovely queen, be my emissary to her heart, and craft out of my tears a rain to flow over her forehead, watering her soul with exquisite scents.”

9

Both the long, twisting road leading up to the village and the growl of the car's engine, made Safia plunge into a slumber. As a hand was fumbling with her shoulder-length black hair, she woke up, and smiled out of coquetry.

- Where are we, Hadj? Already arrived?

Hadj Boualem beamed at her widely, and responded her with delicate words.

- Have you forgotten your own village? Look around!

She caught sight of the whole village, all prancing.

- You see over there, it's our house. The clothes still spread on the wall!

Then she went on glimpsing her village through the trees, till her mesmerizing eyes met the willow tree, hung high in the sky, as if its branches were calling on her urgently to mend the bruises of past. 'The willow tree is still...' She stalled, the words failed her, her traits altered, and her round head bent down, peering at her gorgeous breasts and into her thighs.

Hadj Boualem pulled up his car and his mind was already crowded with many issues. His field was aswarm with harvesters, yet he just cast a quick look the time he needed to count their numbers. He made out Safia shedding tears. Surprised, he stroked her shoulder.

- You're crying? Tears of joy and homecoming, I hope?

She leaned back onto the seat limply, sighing.

Hadj Boualem figured out that her tears ought to hide a secret. He tried to soothe her, probing the genuine reason of her sudden plight.

- Why are you weeping, Safia? You used to show more courage. Does the town miss you even before you set foot in the village? You did suggest this trip, didn't you?

She finally talked back, steady.

- Let's go back town right now!

Hadj Boualem did not think twice. He ignited the engine, while Safia leaned forward, cupping her forehead, weighing up the new situation

The car veered toward the willow-shadowed spring wherein he parked it.

- Go down, Safia, to wash black tears off your cheeks!

Her sight swerved between the twigs of the willow tree. She called back the last day she met Salem.

He opened the door for her, convinced her to get out of the car.

- Please, Safia! Down! Sponge your pain with fresh water! Your beauty hasn't been created to wane in sadness.

At last, she stepped out of the car. She inched toward the spring, feeling it blaming her. Where's the promise you've once made here? With her fingers, she touched the water, and a wave of tremor ran through her body. Abruptly, her sentiments were primed, as she heard a voice calling her name cravingly, making her heart flutter.

- My sweetheart Safia!

Salem showed up behind the willow tree. He moved forward, belying his eyes. He stood in front of her, beholding her.

She spoke with a soft voice.

- Salem? Am I dreaming?

She struggled to keep up her composure. Their eyes took fire; coalesced their stares for a while. He did not feel time and space. Meanwhile, Hadj Boualem slammed the door shut, and scurried down toward them, thundering like in Hell of Dante.

- What on earth are you doing here, son of the dumb woman? Don't you know who I am?

Safia lose control of herself in that moment of perplexity. Salem reached out to snatch her arm, yet Hadj Boualem inserted himself between them, clasped Safia with one hand and pushed off Salem with the other hand, threatening him.

-You'll meet your punishment, son of a bitch!

Hadj Boualem hauled semi-conscious Safia away. They got back in the car, driving off in haste.

A few children were gazing at Salem in silence. The car was heading back to the town, with its two occupants still bathing in unconsciousness.

10

One afternoon, the makeshift store seemed quiet and motionless. The smell of the rotten grapes assaulted the noses of the store-goers. The wall oil lamp glistened shyly, and its smoke mixed with cigarettes', blackening the ceiling along the years.

Before he closed, Bouzid spread over the counter the notes to assess the day's cash receipt. The hearts throbbed, as villagers who were inside followed the operation almost breathlessly. They swallowed their spittle as Bouzid pocketed the counted notes. He laughed off, and some silent faces put on fake smiles. He even nudged them, by the way.

- You're sad for a dead donkey? Hundreds of Palestinians are being slain, and the Arabs just shut up their mouths!

Cold eyes feasted on Bouzid's face in absolute silence, save Sheikh Yahya who broke up the quietness.

- The eight children are starving after the death of their donkey!

Bouzid chimed in, derisive.

- The forest warden made a mistake when he pushed the poor donkey down the cliff. He had punished his owner, Maamar, by handing his donkey over to ravens to devour the poor quadruped!

- That's cowardice of a man with a stony heart!

Then Sheikh Yahya walked out without bidding any farewell.

Mahmoud managed to win again Salem's trust, as he sided with him in his throes and showed kindness toward him during his faints. The ice of hatred Salem niched inside his heart melted down, and therefore began to tell Mahmoud what was saddening him most.

They saw each other one week after the incident of Maamar's donkey.

- You see, Salem, bad times make us meet again after we had parted company in good times!

He paused, to let it sink in, then talked on.

- Maamar lost his only donkey when back from town. The forest warden threw the poor animal down the river! Do you know that the donkey died with a load?

Salem was startled.

- Was the donkey laden with coal?

- No! The donkey was charged with semolina and oil. All the goods poured down into the river. The children of Maamar wept for hours. It's a real scandal as we turn back to the dark ages in this century.

Salem sighed.

- Poor Maamar! He lost his capital and earned the heat waves of summer, and the fire of coals!

- Yet, Maamar refuses to be enslaved by Hadj Boualem or to keep the sheep of the forest warden.

- He's a rebel! Salem snapped.

- His rebuff occurred in silence. He rejects the modern slavery.

Salem sat on a round stone, called 'The Banner'. The stillness enshrouded the village, and the full-moon deflowered timorously the darkness of night. He told Mahmoud what had happened the week before in the spring of the willow tree. How he had clashed with Hadj Boualem in the presence of Safia. His words came out as though slitting out of his throat. Sighs followed up pains of a broken heart.

Mahmoud felt for his friend, was afraid he would pass out. He intentionally shifted the matter of discussion.

- Do you ever know, Salem, what had occurred here?

Salem fell mute, as he did not know the whole story.

Mahmoud straightened, then he narrated to Salem the story.

- Scores of events took place here. I mean, a Revolution that saw the national flag furl high in the skies, reliving the village, while

the French banner spread on muddy ground. A real story my father would tell me at every occasion.

Salem shook up his lungs and heaved a long sigh of guilt, interrupting his pal.

- French colonizers of old! Our heroes taught them an unforgettable lesson! But what irks me now, is the new form of exploitation with older manners. The exploitation of what we cherish most: the land, your father, and Safia! Even our ideas are suffering from invasion, having quit the fields but not the brains!

- You've brilliant ideas, Mahmoud butted in. Yet, you can't pretend to defend Safia until you ask her hand for marriage, and save her from the tyrant of Hadj Boualem.

Salem smiled a bit, felt his heart lighter then. Shortly after, his eyes riveted far away, rubbing his smile out. He beheld the beaming moon, and spoke to himself: 'Engagement ... Wedding ... Studies ... Military service.'

Mahmoud patted him on the shoulder.

- What do you think about it, my pal?

- The idea of engagement seems good, but it's too early to do it.

- This project of union ought to be blessed by the Seven Heavens, Salem.

- You push me, Mahmoud, to wonder about the day the Heavens will decree that Muslims must reunite their rows.

- The Day of the Last Judgment! Salem ironized.

Mahmoud stood up, giving his word to Salem.

- My mother will go with yours to ask for the hand of Safia in marriage. And my father will be the first to persuade Safia's father to accept your engagement with his daughter.

- If God wills to grant my wishes ...

11

Hadj Boualem flattered Safia with heaps of presents. He immersed her in a reality she would only see in dreams or read in the tale of One Thousand and One Nights. Their relationship got so closer that she had some cheek to ask him cook dishes or clean the windows, using the fact that she was either in the shower or combing her hair.

Playing around with naive Safia, Hadj Boualem was only too pleased to carry out these domestic toils. He pretended disregarding the game, and Safia was eager to teach him the rules.

She fancied herself a smart teacher, lecturing in front of an apprentice. She sat on the carpet, tucking her right leg under her left thigh, and vice versa. Then she set out the rules in full.

- Five pebbles, the ground, the palm, and the back of the hand. You get it, Hadj?

He kept his eyes peeled for her bare knees, muttering.

- Yes, I do. Go on, Safia!

He talked to himself, cook-a-hoop. 'The field is clear now, you can lay eggs and cluck aloud!' He effortlessly started playing with the five pebbles he tossed up before they fell down into his palm, and he let himself lose on purpose, to be punished by doing the washing-up and tidying-up of the two beds!

He sensed pleasure as she won, and he was looking forward to losing a new game the day after!

The following day, the game kicked off with enthusiasm. Hadj Boualem suggested the reward of the winner be diving in the bathtub and the loser rubbing the back of the winner!

Safia went red and denied the proposed trick.

He then lured her with two lavish dresses.

-That's cleanness and fun! And wardrobe!

She shrugged her shoulders, taking the bait with a short-lived grin.

- Provided that the water is lukewarm!

The pilgrim of Mecca donned stupidity, and let the rural stunner win the carnal game. They rushed to the bath, like a fox and a hen chatting altogether. They forgot the game's rules as the old man was plucking the chuckling prey in sheer gullibility.

12

One month of summer had already gone by. All the cereals had been reaped, stacked in the fields. That morning, the village celebrated the storage of the grains, and Hadj Boualem gave his blessing to the agrarian spree. The sun rose and put the countryside ablaze, and the eyes of the numerous peasants riveted toward the entrance of the village, awaiting the arrival of Hadj Boualem from town. They were holding empty sacks, matching their hungry eyes. Belkacem Bouakkaz leapt from one spot to another with unabridged zeal. He could not decode well their countenances as he stood to address the peasants.

- The more you revere Hadj Boualem, the more cereals you can earn. Keep quiet! You just think how you'll be welcoming Hadj Boualem.
- The heat flayed our skins, Sheikh Yahya ranted on, and Hadj Boualem has yet to show up!
- The absentee should have his own reasons! Bouakkaz guessed. Can't you wait two more hours much as you waited for one year?

All of a sudden, all the harvesters bolted to their feet, screaming in unison and agitatedly.

- Hadj Boualem is coming up! He's coming up!

The stares followed the car lurching along the village's grand boulevard, on to the fields.

The peasants gazed at Slimane as he spoke, aghast.

- You see, Hadj's car is larger than my house! God bless him! When will God grant me a Mazda?

Afterwards, nobody cared about him, for they all pricked up their ears as the noisy engine closed in on them. Their hearts were thumping wildly.

Bouakkaz greeted the land-owner heatedly.

- Great salute upon you, Hadj Boualem!

Hadj Boualem shook his head, playing down the theatrical welcome. He talked with unintelligible words.

He's so stingy that he refrains from saying hello to us! Sheikh Yahya thought, sickened.

Despite the fact that Hadj Boualem was bloated with pride, he put up with the avalanche of kisses on his cheeks. Poor peasants, aged the same as he, reeking the smoke of consumed wood, did not notice his repugnance. They even inquired about his health and mood with childish innocence.

Hadj Boualem rubbed with fingers his puffy eyes, for he had slept late last night, busy as he had been with Safia's games. He focused on Bouakkaz, snorting.

- Explicate to them, Bouakkaz, that handshakes are better than embraces!

- God Almighty has spoken the Truth! Bouakkaz nodded, apparently out of lunch.

(The daughter's hug was much appreciated by Hadj)

Othmane barged in, too, apparently annoyed.

- What Hadj Boualem has said isn't Quran, Sheikh Bouakkaz!

Foaming at the mouth, Bouakkaz came up to Othman, and then fulminated against him.

- You, lousy man! How do you know Quran is better than your master, Hadj Boualem?

- God is our Lord, and we're His subjects! Sheikh Yahya retorted, as he squinted at Hadj Boualem crossing the field toward the heaps of grains without even removing his shoes.

The reapers wondered, mouths agape, how he dared trample on the boon of earth.

Othmane whispered into Slimane's ear, disgusted of the demeanor of the boss.

- Failure grows in the depth of his arrogance.

Hadj Boualem perceived the brazen looks of the farmworkers.

- Where is the remaining wheat yield, Bouakkaz?

Bouakkaz kept close to the boss, pleading.

- Don't blame them, Hadj. You know, an ear of wheat reunites the peasants and a word splits them up.

- Rather, a drum brings them together, Hadj Boualem rectified sardonically, and a stick sends them for cover! Is the harvest prosperous this season?

Bouakkaz motioned with his hand to the sacks of wheat, boastful.

- Thanks God! Better than the previous years. We separated the grains into three threshing floors, as you see. The first threshing floor contains most of the grains, and in the second one we put in the remaining grains, and the third one is made up of the chaff.

The truck, driven by Bouzid, made a shrieking stop. He came to load up the grains.

Hadj Boualem ordered the grains of the first threshing floor be taken away home. The threshers waited, spellbound, the share of their seasonal sweat. The land-owner told Bouakkaz to divide the second threshing floor into two equal parts: a half to the gleaners, and the other half to be offered to the forest warden and the mayor.

The master displayed his bounty and gave the chaff to the threshers! He then got back into his car, and sped away, town-bound.

No sooner had the chief cleared off than Sheikh Yahya and Slimane and the other peasants bolted for the second threshing floor to the fill up their sacks.

Bouzid and Bouakkaz skimmed at them amusingly, yet afraid that the peasants might empty the whole grains into their sacks.

13

The village lived the summer days unperturbedly, far from the ado of the town, overwhelmed by the boisterous life. The peasants took their rest after a tiresome seasonal farm work.

Salem got back to the high school, the final year of his.

Belkacem Bouakkaz went out pastoral home, heading to the town, meant to either prepare his comeback to the life of the city or bring his daughter back to spend the upcoming Eid days with the whole family. He stood straight up in the flag court, awaiting with a few if peasants the damn truck to transport them to the town. They killed the passing time prattling, as Bouzid the driver kept churning out volleys of snores.

- If you go to wake him up, dear Belkacem! one voice suggested.

Bouakkaz replied with a half-smile.

- We can hardly find someone cleverer than you, Amrane. You know Sir Bouzid well!

Slimane shook his head and cast him a contemptuous glance. He could not hinder his bad temper.

- Why hell calling him 'Sir'? Have you taught him something of interest?

- Not at all! Bouakkaz talked back, but he studied at the mosque of....

He faltered, having forgotten the name of the mosque Bouzid might have attended.

Othmane saved Bouakkaz from stammering, ironically speaking when he joked.

- Yep, Slimane. Bouzid surely graduated from a zoo!

A laughter thundered amongst the men waiting the rusty truck, save Bouakkaz who turned fuming like an ox, as he squeezed on his stick, having in mind a rousing vengeance.

Amrane intervened again to loosen up the tension.

- Indeed, Bouzid studied, but his knowledge didn't help him, nor did the people get some shine of it. Did you ever see him reciting Quran during funerals? Does he lead the prayers on Fridays? Open your eyes, my dear Belkacem! Bouzid is the son of Hadj Boualem. Not belonging to our lower class, after all. Why do you defend him, for God's sake?

- I defend the truth, Bouakkaz chimed in. The mere truth!

The truck's engine vroomed, slashing the quietness of the village. As the truck was driving nearer, the passengers readied themselves and picked up their bundles.

Bouakkaz looked blissed out to a great extent.

- Here he is! If you're bold men, don't get aboard. Otherwise...

As he spoke on, the wheezing truck drove on without stopping, thrusting dust onto their disbelieving faces.

Kouider, sat beside the truck driver, gave a cheer to the move of Bouzid.

The peasants felt frustrated, and they decided to rely on their own feet in sheer silence, all despondent.

Amrane was humming a miserable refrain: 'On foot we move forward... Our train eleven... Train eleven!'

14

Belkacem Bouakkaz knocked on the door. Both the garden and the house seemed still. He hit the door many times. At last, he heard paces on the floor. Meanwhile, he thought that Hadj Boualem was rational, and he would thus accept the engagement of his daughter Safia with Salem should Hadj Boualem back it.

Hadj Boualem grumbled and broke free from her. Who's this animal? Why doesn't he use the bell?

He slipped into a white cloak and hid his head in a red tarboosh. Before he went out, he peeked at Safia, promising her to come back in a jiffy. She was well-nigh naked. Her tender skin was in a light hip-length gown. She slid her fingers over her velvety belly and slim waist. Her feminineness was outstandingly captivating. The incessant taps on the door sent her greatly scared. She jolted out of bed, clothed herself, and hurried to the window, overlooking the house's entrance. The blood froze up in her veins and her hands shuddered.

Hadj Boualem quavered all over when he opened the door to stumble on the mug of Safia's father, who candidly asked about the health of the boss.

- All right! Good! Hadj Boualem stuttered. How are things doing back in the village, Belkacem?

- Thanks God, everything is okay. But I'm angry today.

Hadj Boualem trembled again, stricken with fear that the sheikh might have found out the truth. He pretended he did not understand the meaning of his anger.

- ...

- Your son, Bouzid, refused to carry us on the truck.

Hadj Boualem sighed in relief, serene.

- How're you? Bouakkaz needled him unintentionally. Is your wife back from the country of miscreants?

The question shook Hadj Boualem up once more. He flushed, pondered for a short moment, to come up with a white lie.

- Oh, yes! Yes, she was back two weeks ago. She went to the souk to buy potatoes!

The two men were standing in the middle of the living-room when Safia walked out from a small room.

-Safia, my daughter! My sweet daughter!

She kissed her father on the forehead. She smelt the fused odors of wood's smoke and animal droppings. She recalled the countryside, her mother, and her neighbors. The coy pastoral life in the village. She regarded down at the floor.

- Why are you pale-faced? Are you ill, my daughter?

She held her tongue, as tears welled up in her eyes.

Bouakkaz hugged her affectionately.

- What's going on, my daughter?

Hadj Boualem sensed cues of looming danger, then interfered to save his reputation.

- Tell him, Safia, what's up with you! How much you missed your parents. Why are you late back home? Tell him, you like sleeping in your mother's bosom!

Safia stepped away, wordless. She sat down in the next room, eavesdropping.

Hadj Boualem neared Bouakkaz as they slumped onto the same couch.

- Look, Belkacem, I bent upon something you should know. Actually, I've found a husband for your daughter: Mouhouche, the orphan! What do you think about him?

Safia received the verdict like a thunderclap. She bolted to her feet and ran to the living-room, screaming out.

-Dad! Dad! Dad!

Bouakkaz rose up and seated her on the couch, all flabbergasted.

- What's up? For God's sake.

She shot Hadj Boualem a supercilious stare. She called on her father again twice.

The master of the house beat the floor with his feet, disquieted.

- Reassure Safia about her mother, Belkacem! She's afraid her mother died!

- She's fine, my daughter. By God's Will, you're going to see her within a few hours.

- She has had a nightmare last night, Hadj Boualem fibbed. It was just a dream, Safia. Your father's fine, and so is your mother.

- You're weeping because of that? Bouakkaz wondered naively. You're a silly woman. Go and make us two cups of coffee.

She looked at her father sadly and ashamedly. She felt the sin she had done on his face. As a matter of fact, she realized she had killed him in his life twice. Poor dad! You accuse me of naivety and silliness, and yet you did teach them to me? What a silly shepherd you are! You befriend the wolf who has devoured your lamb!

She displaced her withering sight from her father to Hadj Boualem, who was brewing a cynic grin behind his lips. Their eyes met and conveyed betrayal in his eyes. Her feet barely dug a hole in the floor, holding back her tongue, on the brink of spilling over the beans. Her eyes spoke volumes. Vile traitor! You dare marry me your manservant? After you've stripped me of my virginity. Didn't you promise to take me as your wife? Why are you smashing my hopes? Why are you making fool of me? Two tears got entrapped by her eyelashes, and concealed them to Hadj Boualem. She left the living-room, unbelievably fast.

The two men sat down back on the couch, bemused. Bouakkaz was brooding over something unfathomable. Hadj Boualem diverted sheikh's attention from Safia's woes.

- You surely do remember, dear Belkacem, our childhood. A wee thing made us laugh or cry. That's the case of the youths, too.

Bouakkaz turned to him, teasing him with a smirk.

- Yet, in the past, you would avoid our company, Hadj? The more the sons of Caid's like you kept away from the sons of peasants like me, the closer we got to the sons of European settlers.

- And how do you consider us now, Belkacem? Hadj Boualem demanded, triumphant.

Bouakkaz touched the knee of the former Caid's son.

- Well, I see that God has shown you the right way!

They both sniggled loudly.

Hadj Boualem stretched out his legs and leaned his head against the leather couch, contemplated the chandelier hanging from the high ceiling.

- What do you say about Mouhouche?

- Never heard of him. Who's he?

Hadj Boualem drew himself up and then took the hand of Bouakkaz in his.

- Have you forgotten him? Or you try to forget him? The young man who'd helped you last fall in pruning the trees!

- Oh, yes! Bouakkaz remembered him now. Isn't Mouhouche, your lad of the stable of cows?

- Yes, indeed! Do you see in him a flaw which could hamper him from this marriage?

Bouakkaz called back Mouhouche and the talk held between them the last fall...

Mouhouche was on the tree holding the scissors, smiled down at the sheikh.

- You know the boss in a long time?

- Yes. And you? What's your name?

- My name's Mohammed, and they call me Mouhouche. I work in the stable of cows since the death of my father inside it.

Bouakkaz came closer to the trunk of the tree. Wrinkles of his forehead shrank sorrowfully into shapes reminiscent of the Hoggar Mountains.

- Who's the owner of the stable?

Mouhouche jumped down.

- It's the stable of Hadj Boualem. I see that you're ignorant of his properties. And you don't know my father, either!

Bouakkaz shook his head. The young man looked mystified.

- It turns out that countless things you're unaware of, sheikh Belkacem. You should know all the people before choosing those to make friends with.

- ...

- I mean, the information of the employer prior the work!

Bouakkaz leaned his back against the apricot tree.

- Your new fledgling generation is baffling us!

Mouhouche reached out his hand to the hair Bouakkaz, and chased a black creepy-crawly away.

- You're right, sheikh. Our generation is perplexed following the Independence.

- What don't you take part in rebuilding the nation, thanking God? Bouakkaz asked, in high spirits.

- Good idea, sheikh. But we met many hurdles. How to cope with them? Our fathers had expelled the hellish French colonizers, yet they left behind them loyal liegemen. Those men who've been trammeling our progress.

- Do you study, Mouhouche?

- You said 'studies'? The school of life taught me, in a couple of years, much more than any school could teach me in so many years.

- Thus, you're still studying?

Mouhouche gazed at Bouakkaz, full of sorrow and pain.

- Not any more. It happened that my mother died when I passed the final exam back in the primary school. Afterwards, my father married my aunt, meant to bring me up in good conditions.

- Did you find a difference between your mother and your stepmother? Bouakkaz asked, curious.

- Kike the difference between candles and ashes! The stepmother treated me ruthlessly, a far cry from my affectionate and warm-hearted mother. Yet, God punished her, as she's barren; stripped of motherhood, that is. Even my father swigged from the cup of misbehavior of his new wife. Poor man! She was used to humiliating him in front of me. She doubled his misery. You know, every evening she would blame him for his poverty.

Bouakkaz looked disgusted about the pungent story of Mouhouche.

- She's not a good wife. Nor a woman. She's...

Mouhouche motioned with his hand to make him stop talking more.

- Don't say anything foul, sheikh Belkacem. You're under the influence of her husband! She could take revenge of you if she knew what you've said.

Bouakkaz looked lost, did not understand the intricate riddles.

Mouhouche got him out of the confusion.

- She's Jawhara herself! Hadj Boualem's new wife!

Bouakkaz disbelieved Mouhouche's story, as he turned extremely flummoxed. His hair bristled with fear.

- Your statement is very weird, Mouhouche.

- Wait to know the whole story, first. Actually, she's my aunt. Once, she had been the wife of my father before he died. And now, she's Hadj Boualem's wife! You get the picture clearer?

Bouakkaz took time to gather the evidence. Mouhouche continued talking.

- A long time ago, we woke up on the death of my father. We found him lying dead between the legs of cows. Jawhara informed Hadj Boualem and the latter brought in immediately the police. My father had been declared killed.

- Really killed? Who was the murderer? Bouakkaz stressed, awed.

- Killed by an animal, not a human being!

- After all, Bouakkaz said, a murderer must be called a fierce beast.

- It was indeed an animal, sheikh. Not a human being. That was the conclusion of both legal medical report and police. A bull, the culprit! The two-horned bull butted him right in the belly. Blood smeared one the two horns!

- God the Almighty! Bouakkaz sighed, aggrieved and stunned.

Mouhouche resumed talking with regret.

- It was presumed that the bull's instinct might have flared up and wanted the cow my father was feeding with hay, and then the enraged bull removed my father out of his way! An animal is devoid of mind. That's all.

Bouakkaz nodded in agreement.

- 'Like a child and a mad person, they can't be punished.' That what Hadj Boualem has told me one day. So, your aunt is Hadj Boualem's wife?

- Yes, she's his wife. After some months of my father's tragic death, she joined his house as a special domestic. Then, she wed Hadj Boualem, who was divorced one month after the death of my father. Jawhara built up her happiness on the rubble of my unfortunate father. As the saying goes: 'Each woman should one day become husbandless!'

Bouakkaz swayed his head in fondness.

- Tell me, man, what have you become after your father's death and aunt's remarriage?

- As you see, I toil in Hadj Boualem's fields and cows' stable. I gave up high school on the doorstep of baccalaureate exams. The man who'd been caring about me had passed away. I would sleep on comfortable bed, and now I snore on hays, watching out the cows!

Bouakkaz touched Mouhouche's hand, still meditating.

- Did Hadj Boualem help you out? Did he add you to his family?

- I don't know why you keep calling him 'Hadj', Mouhouche talked back oddly. He even changed my name from Mohammed to Mouhouche, as a hint of despise.

Bouakkaz inquired more pryingly, pondering anew.

- Indeed, I've noticed that you didn't call him by 'Hadj'?

- Oh, sheikh Belkacem! It's a long story I'll tell it you one day. Now, it's time I feed the cows!

Mouhouche ambled away and then exited the garden, leaving Bouakkaz musing over what he had learned. He didn't know if all what Mouhouche had told him was true or not...

Bouakkaz's face metamorphosed its complexion many times, as he was thinking over and over, utterly impenetrable by his interlocutor...

Hadj Boualem surprised him, as he cut his remembrances off.

- You're a wise man, Belkacem! You think at length before you make your mind. But this time, you mused over very deeply. What do you say as to Mouhouche?

Bouakkaz gathered up all his patience, in order to seal off his two lips, yet he leaked out one word, almost reluctantly.

- Excellent!

- Yes, Belkacem! This way you've won a son-in-law dwelling in the town. Your daughter will live with her husband in this villa, and you can come over to see her whenever you'd like to. Then, shall we go to mosque to make the deal sacred?

Bouakkaz showed discontent.

- But another young man has asked for her in marriage, Hadj!

Hadj Boualem felt at loss. Annoyed, at that.

- Who can afford Safia a happier life here other than Mouhouche, uh?

- Salem, the son of Bekkoucha, Bouakkaz let him know, with lassitude.

Hadj Boualem stood up, astonished and irked.

- What did you say, Belkacem? Salem, the son of the dumb-and-deaf old woman? That poor boy doesn't know well both his present and future. Even his past! That dirty monkey to wed your graceful

gazelle? No, no! Impossible! Are you mad, Belkacem? You overlook this villa and money? I purchased for your daughter the stuff of wedding, dresses and fabrics and jewels, to name a few. Are you crazy, sheikh Bouakkaz?

- As to Salem, I and her mother have agreed to the engagement.

- Strange to marry Safia a vagrant, living in a hut. He rarely manages to eke out a living. If his mother hadn't been sweeping the floor of the school, they'd have starved since long.

Hadj Boualem saw his pride offended, and thus he exhausted himself to find a way out. I must take the bull by the horns, he thought, amused.

- The last word is Safia's, sheikh Bouakkaz! She'd deny Salem's marriage for sure. She's accustomed to living lavishly. And the miscellaneous suitcases of chic clothes I've bought her? Will they be bitten by the mice in Salem's hut?

Hadj Boualem paused to let it sink in, and then whispered into the ear of Safia's progenitor.

- Are you crazy? Don't you know that Salem was born a bastard, without a legitimate father? She wouldn't accept Salem's poverty. Serve us the coffee right now, Safia! (he spoke loudly).

- You know better than me, Bouakkaz ceded, nearly defeated. Yet, the last decision must be taken by Safia. She's...

Bouakkaz's voice blew out, swallowed hard and his eyes bulged, as Safia stood over their heads in different clothes. The two men jumped to their feet, nonplussed.

- What are you clothed this way, Safia?

She was shedding bucketful of tears, soaking her scruffy clothes, those she had put on when she had come to town for the first time. The jubbah to her wrists, and the brown scarf covering her head and half of her back. Her hands were bare from any jewel. She had gotten rid of all Hadj Boualem's gifts. She spoke in a trembling voice, on the verge of sobbing.

- Let's go back home, dad!

Hadj Boualem approached her, appalled, but theatrical.

- Why, Safia? Why?

As he reached out his hand to pat her shoulder, she yelled wildly, skirting his breath.

- Clear out, filthy traitor!

Her father neared Safia, anxious and manic.

- What are you saying, my daughter?

- He's villainous! A despicable dog!

Bouakkaz lashed out and did not feel his hand slapping the cheek of his daughter. Hadj Boualem stood itched, did not know if he should talk or shut up. Safia flounced out weeping, dragging along her pains and throes. Her father followed her steps outdoors.

Father and daughter reached the village by sunset, as the western sky was painting the horizon with a ruddy dye. Safia's heart was heavy with pangs, broken, and gloomy.

15

- If only I could go back to my youth, you'd see what I'm up to? Middle-aged Slimane claimed, vaunting.

Othmane stopped working, lit his cigarette. He emitted coils of smoke, exorcizing his sufferance.

- Give me a cigarette, Othmane, and I'm going to tell you the story of my youth. If only I went back to the juvenile years.

Othmane handed him a cigarette, a bit grumpy.

- If only! If only it were the key of the devil!

Slimane restarted to ramble on his story for the umpteenth time. He savored the sweetness of repeating it to every man he met, untiring. He recalled his young days in a dazing way. He remembered keeping the cattle of The Caid, the father of Hadj Boualem, in return of not paying the yearly taxes by his father. He suddenly burst into peals of laughter.

- How funny it was the day Hadj Boualem, a child then, fell off the horse. The Caid punished his son by locking him up for three days in the stable without any food and water.

Othmane motioned with his hand to make Slimane shut his mouth. As the laughter petered out, Bouzid turned up, maddened.

- Tales! Unending tales! And the work is left undone!

- We can't even smoke a cigarette? Slimane sneered at him. At least, a single minute of rest! Too much, you find it, Bouzid?

- Add all the wasted minutes up and you'll score hours and days of gossip! Bouzid explained away caustically. That's all big money squandered from Hadj Boualem's finance.

Slimane shook his head, unimpressed. Othmane murmured to his coworker.

- Could a spilled sip lead to the drying-up of the seas? How the man is stubborn, not seeing with his huge eyes the loads of mistakes he commits!

The two loggers resumed work, and the wood-saw cut through the willow tree back and forth, giving off a shearing noise. Finally,

the tree was cut down, making a bumping sound upon touching the earth, putting therefore a sharp end to its centuries-old life. Afterwards, the saw cut branches off, as though a strong bomb blew up in the heart of the willow tree. The willow tree littered the ground, silent and bereft of vitality, like a menopausal woman having lost her children. The sap oozed out from the cut twigs akin to tears, and the buds bled out. The willow tree became history.

The same saw sentenced the village's trees to death. The trunks painted white had been used as a clue of cutting them down, for Hadj Boualem's pleasure. The forest warden could not help clapping his greased palms.

Once, the forest warden asked Hadj Boualem what he wished more.

- Stones! Even boulders I wish them transformed into polished molds to build you a castle in heart of The Square of Martyrs, Algiers!

They shook hands briskly, then they tee-heed aloud.

The forest warden took his hat off, rooting through his hair.

- I allowed you to saw off the village's trees, with the exception of young ones...

- Wait, man. Why do you give a damn care about bringing all the trees down? Mainly the willow and pine trees. Anyway, the state will make up for them by offering olive and fig trees. Let me wreak havoc in the woods!

The forest warden put his hat under Hadj Boualem's chin, and the latter cast different notes in.

A few seconds later, the forest warden descended Hadj Boualem's car, complacent.

- The forest is yours! Burn it down if you'd like to. You're our lord!

16

Safia goggled at her erect mother, Aziza

- I've yet to make up my mind.

- Does it need so much time, my daughter? Your father gave his consent to Sheikh Yahya about Salem's marriage demand.

Safia mumbled Salem's name twice. She moaned, pondering if it was about Salem of past or Salem of present-day. Where can I find him? Or rather, how can Salem make out Safia of maiden days? Is he really aware that the true Safia killed herself on the altar of short-lived lust? A human is so feeble, always defeated by irresistible desire. The same human strives to rule the world, the slaves, and the empires! How is the human so coward in front of his own strong carnal urges!

Aziza was far from probing her daughter's winding feelings.

- You know what, the engagement took place a few months ago. Your father hesitated, waiting your approval. How come you don't agree on one of the best affable and most intelligent young men in the village? Oh, If only Salem belonged to my generation, he would do the impossible to make this innocent yet teary girl happier.

Safia suddenly collapsed onto the bosom of her mother, weeping despairingly.

- Mom, mom! Enough is enough! Don't torture me anymore! Indeed, I'm a trifling innocent girl. I don't deserve Salem. Please, mom! I'm feeling dizzy. And the headache is tearing my nerves up. For God's sake, have pity on me!

Safia felt constrained, her sentiments a jumble of delusions and doubts. She very often admitted to herself that she sinned, even coerced her consciousness to face the reality, bitter it was. Nevertheless, Hadj Boualem denied the truth, did not worry himself to share with her the anxieties and the obsessions. He had turned a blind eye to her fears. Day after day, she plunged into

dungeons of ghosts and disturbing incubuses, unaided, left to herself.

Safia kept deliberately for herself, in complete loneliness and reclusion, dodging her parents. She complained of her surging troubles and tumults to God. From time to time, she would vomit and feel giddy. Involuntary movements stirred up inside her womb. The illegitimate fruit she bore from Hadj Boualem. She felt it as a thorny creature, stabbing her heart, bleeding it day and night.

The mother perceived bizarre behaviors of her only child, following her comeback from the town. Yet, Aziza fought the temptation of interrogating her. Though, one day she asked her husband, Belkacem Bouakkaz.

- Why is Safia not as talkative as previous years? Could she be sick? Or is she just used to the luxurious life of the city?

He did not react.

Aziza went on accounting for their daughter's abnormal mood.

- Every time a woman is asked for marriage, she's stunned at first, as she doesn't know the right way to choose. Thinking a lot makes her speak less. The more she comes of age, the less she talks. She's up to a newer life. Safia, the girl we brought up spoiled and dignified, is scared about leaving us alone. Isn't she? May God side with our daughter!

Safia got used to being confined to her tiny room, lying down on her makeshift bed. Her four limbs went numb, and her body was devitalized. The two legs failed to withstand two beings put together unwillingly. She spent her solitude beholding her delightful, glittery body, yet turned frigid. She quizzed herself. To whom is meant this beautified body? Mine? Really mine? If it's mine, why do they decide on my behalf? Am I a merchandise for sale in the market of fortunes? They throw my body on the bed they fancy about? No! No, I'm no longer Safia people happened to know. Nor the innocent Safia was Salem, the most cherished man on earth, dating under the willow tree.

The conversation under the willow tree rushed into her memory. An undertow of torture pushed her back towards that fountain. Salem had once promised her by the spring: 'The nest that will bring us together, would be the happiest nest the sun shines its light on!'

She became aware of her belly, rounding out as the weeks moved forward. She wept on. How I changed into a subdued device overnight. No, no, a device is subject to scientific rules, not to human's whims. I surrendered straight to a man. I sank into the abyss with great deception. And deception is the lowest in the echelons of knowledge. What are you bearing, my sick body? What are you hiding, my swollen belly? In which records has the fate written down this strange fruit? Is he a male who'd grow up a manslayer to kill people as his father did? Or a weak female in the troughs of waves to be spat out on the shores of doom and loss, like her webegone mother, whose bed is like ember, and blanket like magma? You, who sleep in my entrails, am I the culprit? You, bit of banned meat, do you see that I'm going to hurt you once delivered into horrendous life? Or rather, you're the wrongdoer, as you entered my life without consent? I can't stand up to the Hell I live in. The sweet taste of honey turned sour.

17

The fall set in, and the blowing winds harbingered impending rains, warning the villagers to make necessary provisions.

Bekkoucha, the mother of Salem, headed home with a bundle of firewood on her arched back. She was in her fifties, twiggy and her skin covered with many furrows. She walked with a limp, and the stigmas of neediness and ordeals were visible, even made her look aged ten years more. The fall was the season of gathering firewood to spend a warm winter. The fall...The fall. Oh, my God! The fall had once made me cry, sickened my heart, and bled it out. Yet, a previous fall made me shed tears of joy.

As the memories came back, Bekkoucha's face conveyed smiles here, and frowns there. Tears would trickle down her cheeks, collected by her smiling mouth. She stared far at the foggy horizons. The peaks looked like goliaths rising from earth to perforate the sky. She saw them wavering vertically every second she blinked in that direction. Her broken heart fluttered like a bird's clipped wing.

All of a sudden, she wiped the tears with her hands, to make sure she was not gawking at ghosts. Defying the fringes of fading away fog, as the sun glared down, she squinted at the moving dots. She detached the rope around her neck, and let the pack of firewood slither down her back onto the ground. She then craned her neck scrutinizing what was going on. At last, she made out that the dots were growing bigger into human outlines. She tried to cry out, yet she could not as she was a mute woman. She hassled to pick up the pebbles. She went crazy, calling back the follies of the Revolution's years. She waged war against the approaching ghosts. Her steps crushed the ground, zeroing in on the three human ghosts with uncommon intrepidity.

The three soil-skinned men spotted her from a long distance. They were scattering about seeds onto the earth.

- Bekkoucha is running toward us! one voice bellowed.
- She's good at sports! another peasant joked.

Bouزيد was on the top of the tractor, continued plowing the soil. He was mocking her, as well.

- She'd take over Renault in international car race!
- Hey, Slimane! Clear out my way of this damn heap of stones. And remove the stuck wax on them to light up my makeshift store in the evening...

Before he even put a full-stop to his sentence, Bekkoucha was already standing in front of him, in real rebelliousness, her hands packed with pebbles. She motioned to the accumulated stones under the tractor's huge tire. She waved to make him understand that he must drive away of the wax-layered stones. He did not grasp the meaning of her vivacious gestures. He reignited the tractor's engine, shunning her urge. He was on the cusp of challenging her by running the waxy stones down.

- Ignorant old women worship every tree and take to visiting every stone like pagans. Candles, incenses, and all the holy shit they believe in!

- There's no doubt, Djilali butted in, that Bekkoucha asks these stones to grant her a handsome husband!

The three men burst into barren laughter.

Superstitious Bekkoucha flung herself onto the soil, hugging the stones like a mother holding her toddler in arms. She breathed in hysterically, her gruff voice as if strangled, and the lips kissing the stones in a devoted manner.

Bouزيد's ear lobes reddened and he looked as black as thunder. He jolted down from the tractor. He gripped the poor woman from her waist like a basket of vegetables and heaved her away. He then got back beside the tractor; the latter wailed for the dramatic move of its driver. He irascibly looked down on Slimane and Djilali, jabbering about.

- A dumb woman beat you! I guess, your two wives might be cocksure spreading you out much like a donkey has a pack-saddle on! Whom the foxes piss, is always humiliated.

The tractor's engine reverberated and the tires forged ahead mounting the stack of stones, and before the plow reached them Bouzid vibrated behind the wheel, and then fell down instantly on the ground. He was twitching half-conscious, the blood streaking his face and chest. Bekkoucha had tossed stones onto his head, hitting him well.

Several minutes later on, Bekkoucha found herself alone. She looked about her, as though she was searching for an ephemeral dream. The ruts of the tractor were still there, gone away in the meantime. The trampling of the holy stones failed, and she saw a couple of stones striped with pearls of blood. She considered them, interrogating the bruises of past, or rather the havoc these stones had brought about during her life. Her tears swamped both the stones and the soil. Her eyes sparkled as they were bathed in sunshine.

She collected herself, taking a deep breath. That day, she was determined to make it unending. She slipped her hand inside her garments and produced under her waistband a matchbox, to light the half-consumed candles on the stones. She beheld the flickering flames, thought over her martyrdom. She smiled at the melting wax, akin to the droplets of her tears. She felt that the burning of wax matched the burning of her guts. She found in it perfect consolation. Bekkoucha had knelt down beside the stones for one hour, busy with keeping on the candles lit.

Brusquely, a foot of the mayor kicked the holy stones, scattering them all around. Bekkoucha was so terrified.

- Put this mad woman in jail! he barked to his men.

The incident between Bouzid and Bekkoucha had spread in the village like plague in middles ages. The tongues speculated, somewhat feeding rumors: Bekkoucha killed Bouzid!

Back home, Belkacem Bouakkaz, incognizant as to his daughter's pregnancy, parroted the rustic gossips, almost awed.

- Lion-hearted Bouzid slain by Bekkoucha? A gray-haired mute woman!

- In head-butting, his wife Aziza chimed in, the mute ram wins the combat. Furthermore, she's Salem's mother, right? Your next son-in-law!

- I know this. But, thanks God, we didn't make any official deal! The forest warden has burnt down their hut. Where will they live in the village?

Aziza rose up with her mouth agape.

- I forget to tell you something...

- What's more thrilling other than Bouzid's movie? Bouakkaz overreacted.

Aziza was scared as she unfolded him the story.

- When I heard the roar of the tractor outside our house, I went out to check out what was happening. Well, I found Djilali parking the tractor behind our house, and he mumbled, all shaken: 'My God, cover up for us!' He then shrouded the tractor with the leaves of maize! Didn't you notice that?

Bouakkaz did not give her back any answer. He looked as if stung by a snake. He rushed out to the rear of the house. Shortly after, he came back in, pale-faced and astonished.

- Did you see it? Aziza demanded.

- A Disaster! A disaster! It's the tractor Bouzid was driving during the incident.

Aziza worried about the move.

- But why they drove it exactly here, much like a man having leaked out of a prison?

Bouakkaz scratched his cheeks, damned.

- Don't you know that the tractor belongs... Oh, no need to tip it off to you.

He curtailed his sentence mid-way.

She grabbed his arm, determined to know the truth.

- Tell me, to whom does this tractor belong?

- It's not important to know it, woman.

Sometimes, it is presumed that some women are the cows of Satan!
Bouakkaz thought.

One week had elapsed since Bouzid had been lying in hospital between life and death. In the village, the news snowballed here, tinkered there, framing the nonchalant people's minds and opinions.

The village's imam, Sheikh Dahmane, stood in front of Bouzid's closed makeshift store, brooding over before he talked.

- That woman broke the law and the Sharia and must be severely punished.

- I didn't know, Maamar said, that you're skilled at law.

- Umar bin al-Khattab was simultaneously an imam and a judge.

- Could every judge identify himself to Umar or an imam viewing himself Ali, The Prophet's son-in-law?

Othmane had had his say, too.

- Had Umar been buried standing, the law would have kept on standing nowadays. Anyway, a loved wrongdoer will soon be proved innocent.

The impassioned men huddled there had killed a half-day prating on and on. The fever of the debate had soothed their mixed feelings. Before they went their separate ways, they heard of blare of a nearing car. The eyes were riveted down to the opposite road. The car turned out to be a taxi. It stopped abruptly, sending the onlookers confounded, as Bouzid emerged, the head bandaged, clad in a white jellaba. His features appeared yellowish like saffron. They showed disbelief, for they had been thinking Bouzid arrived in hospital deceased. A miracle in its own!

Sheikh Dahmane recited his prayers, quaking.

- Forgive me, my God! There is no power nor might save in God!
The son of Hadj Boualem himself comes back barefooted!

- But we've been told that he was dead! Has he risen from his grave?

Bouزيد shot them a cranky gaze, and then he spoke to them hostilely.

- Yes, I'm Bouزيد, flesh and blood!

Soon afterwards, Bouزيد rushed back home, as if the death were hunting for him.

Many days later on, the villagers knew well why Bouزيد had broken free from hospital.

18

The courtroom was crammed with dissimilar people, come in droves. The whispers spread between those standing and those sitting down. A halo bounded the national flag, draping the wall ostentatiously.

Three leather chairs were occupied by the trial jury. They were carefully listening to the potbellied lawyer, who wore thick-framed glasses, while his sharp eyes were staring up the wary judge. He was pleading his customer's case with showiness.

- First, I must acknowledge, Your Honor, that I'm just the loudspeaker of my client. The humble man I've the honor to defend today, asks for your justice against this wicked woman, who pitilessly assaulted him while on farm work. This tongue-tied woman matches well the saying: 'A cripple is always scary.'

The lawyer went on displaying his rhetoric skills, making the listeners subjugated by his finely honed argumentation.

Bekkoucha stood up like a statue. Yet, she defied the audience with her gazes and tears.

The lawyer of Bouzid looked at her cynically and quite bizarrely.

- Tears are women's most favored weapons! The faucet they turn on whenever they like to let water flow. How come a woman dare raise her hand against a man? Damn it, the days we live in!

The lawyer mopped up his sweat and sat down, almost out of breath.

The judge called on Bekkoucha, but he soon realized that she could not talk.

- As she's a mute woman, who can speak on her behalf?

He waited for a little while, and nobody present there turned up...

At this very moment, Hadj Boualem came forward, taking the compact audience aback. He seemed outraged.

- Your Honor, it's time to make it plain to her that we're indignant at her horrible act. We totally ignore where this woman stems from. Her parents had thrown her away the day she brought shame on her family. She then took shelter in our village along with her illegitimate son. We had accepted her, though. And now she rewards our goodness with badness.

On order of the judge, a policeman coerced Hadj Boualem to back off in silence. The disarrayed eyes homed in on Bekkoucha, who kept shaking her head in disapproval, as though she understood Hadj Boualem's allegations.

The judge caught sight of her finger motioning to the upper part of her left knee.

Bouزيد's lawyer clambered to his feet again with slanting eyes.

- What a shame! What do you expect from this woman? Does she take us for teenagers? I admit that women's tricks are formidable.

The judge summoned the two eyewitnesses of the incident to the stand. He interrogated Slimane, first.

- The left knee of Bekkoucha bears a wound, having necessitated a hospitalization. Did Bouزيد beat her the other day?

Slimane knew then why Bouزيد had escaped from hospital.

- No, Mr. the judge!

The judge asked Djilali the same question, and he heard the same lie.

Bouزيد's lawyer opened anew his defensive, misogynic mouth.

- These are mere scars this woman tries to make us believe relevant for the current case. In another word, she 'makes a mountain out of a molehill.' You know the women, sometimes they spit up, yet no sign of pregnancy at all!

The judge made a great effort, by waving his hand towards Bouزيد, in a bid to drive Bekkoucha to bear out if Bouزيد had really injured her leg.

She laid her eyes on Bouزيد for a prolonged time, shook her head many times. The judge asked her again, through gestures, who had bruised her.

She burst into tears, her hand aimed at the prosecutor. She mumbled impenetrable syllabuses. The judge found himself compelled to smile, unsettled by her gesticulations. The crowd bubbled with laughter and chat. The judge thumped with his hand the desk, and demanded utter stillness or threatened to evacuate the courtroom. The prosecutor cupped his cheek in puzzlement, contemplating Bekkoucha. She edged closer to him. The policeman tried to thwart her, but the prosecutor moved his hand up in consent. All the onlookers expected, wrongly, the prosecutor to slap her face. She stayed behind his desk, stretching her hand toward the national flag in the corner. She then touched the flag and kissed the red star sewn into it, and gave it a bear hug. She muttered sibilant words. And before the judge rose to end the session, Bekkoucha plummeted over a chair, unconscious, the flag swathing her neck.

19

The dusk of night enshrouded the village tightly, and its residents were already sending out panoply of snores for some, and moaning for the others. The diurnal animals called it a day, while the night-time creatures sprung up from their holes.

Belkacem Bouakkaz and his wife had fallen deeply asleep in the next room to Safia's. Safia suddenly felt pains creeping up on her body. She was nearly smothered and her firmly fabric-belted belly was on the point of discharging its bowels. Her spasms doubled up, and she was dripping with sweat. In her bed, she reeled on her back many times. She choked back her cries, for fear of disturbing her parents in their makeshift bed. Mom, what should I do? she writhed in pain, alone.

The cramps amplified in intensity. She tore her clothes and hurled the pillow in the dismal, dark room. She mused over letting her mother know about her illicit pregnancy, but she dithered about it. What will I tell her? How can I face dad if he knew I'm pregnant and I'm going to deliver an illegitimate baby this very night? How can I put up with his neurotic stares? May God forgive you, dad. Why did you leave me in a house of wolves everybody is scared about? My God, take revenge on Boualem the beast!

The surge of aches overcame her. She inserted her hand between the teeth, biting nervously the four fingers with her teeth till blood gushed forth. She felt her body being chopped up into infinitesimal bits. She messed her bed up with her shuddering legs. She even ripped the knot of an amulet her father had fetched from the imam of the village, Sheikh Dahmane. Safia did not forget that her father had told mom before he slept: 'Tomorrow, I'll take her to see a doctor and drop her off at Hadj Boualem's house until she recovers. In the town, Hadj Boualem knows many doctors treating patients for free!'

Her whimpers swelled up, mingled with delirium. ‘Ouch! No... I don’t see him... No... All of you... Mom... My God.’

The temperature of her joints diminished, then the chilliness crawled into the limbs. She tried to get up but she failed. She banked on the wall to move, felt dizzy and wanted to vomit. Her two legs were faint and twisted out of emaciation. She opened the door tryingly and crouched down on hands and knees, inching outdoors. The coldness of the gentle breeze of night wafted into her burdened face. The rustic houses turned out amorphous black silhouettes, as the sound of insects came out of the crevices of the earthen walls. She was hemmed in by pack of neighbors’ dogs, not barking. She recovered a bit of her spirit and stepped forward without knowing the direction she took, nor did she feel the blood trickling from her hand and the lower part of the body. The wet dress she donned clung to her legs. The night was pitch-dark, and the quietness was nearly complete, save the bray of donkeys in their stables, breaking the rule. The further Safia moved ahead, the harder she suffered. Her entrails gargled aloud and her limbs juddered, and there she fell down wiggling. She could not crawl on. She rolled a lot over the grass. A putrid odor assaulted her nostrils. ‘No, no, I don’t want to drown in the quagmire of human piss... No, no...’

Safia bordered on the talus and rolled her body down to a shallow place. She did not feel the thorns grazing her skin. She was not far from the running spring. The pains intensified again, and there she passed out.

As the dawn hatched its hues, she woke up feebly, the fever setting her guts aflame, and her throat went sere. She budged on her back, muttering some words with a guttural voice. She could not cry, for the thirst got the better of her. ‘Mom... Water...Mom... Water...Please!’

She shifted into her left side, and then curled up twice. She touched the water with the tips of her toes, then she trundled closer till her visage dipped into water, gulped it abundantly. The current drifted her tousled hair, staining the water red. The drink invigorated her to some extent, looked about to distinguish a living phantom with two

wandering eyes, yet silent and sad. It was her dog, having followed her steps and scents. She did not know why the dog had tracked her there. She sought to draw near the dog, but her heavy body disenchanted her. Her teeth stridulated, before she open her mouth, screeching. ‘Ouch: Mom! Dad!’ Her limbs convulsed anew. She nipped at her lower lip. Her hand groped for something to hit the ground with. She sensed the trunk of the willow tree, and the reminiscences rushed back into her agonizing mind. She ran her fingers on the trail of the saw-teeth, and with incredible strength she threw herself on the cut trunk of the willow and clinched it closely, asking for help with a depressed tone. ‘What have you become, dear willow tree? Where are your spring’s days? How did the beast rape your twigs?’

She shed heavy tears on the willow trunk, the tongue sighing. ‘Where are you, Salem? Please, forgive me.’

Her body drowned in sweat and blood, with a demoniac overall fever. She was dying: the eyes drifted away, the face turned yellowish. No one was there to respond to her moaning calls. The words melted away on her fissured lips. The body spread out in torture, for a long time, and she lastly yielded to death.

The soul slinked away out of her body, like a creek’s flow.

20

Salem and Mahmoud came back to the village after an absence of one quarterly. Salem had goose pimples as he saw again the cradle of his birth. He rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

- Look over there. You see?

- Strange, indeed, Salem.

It took them a long while to discern the new aspect of the hamlet, looking blatantly dreary, etiolated and lackluster. They stood rooted to the spot with incredulity.

- Where's the willow tree, Mahmoud? It has vanished!

- Our village became nude, stripped of its veil.

- They've made it bare! Salem lamented on.

They strode on in haste, seeking for the rationale behind the alteration of the hamlet from an ever-green haven into a long-lasting, blond summer. A bleak desert, after hundreds of trees had been brought down, bereaving the houses and the paths of their far-reaching shadows.

- A crime against our hamlet! Where have the men been, meanwhile?

Salem did not get any reply from the cohort of youngsters who decamped. He shouted at them, one by one; to no avail.

- Rachid... Abdelkader... Miloud... Aziz... Where are you going like that? Tell me, Mahmoud, why they took to their heels?

- Not only did the village change but also its people. Let's go to my house to know the truth!

- I'm looking forward to seeing back my mother, Mahmoud, after three months of separation. I drop round my mom, and then I'll join you at your house.

- Me, too, I come along to say hello to Bekk

- Mahmoud faltered, and shifted the course of conversation.

- I'm curious to know through her gestures the response of Safia's parents about your marrying her!

- If only you knew, Mahmoud, the flaming longings I'm feeling toward my beloved Safia! I pine for dating her again. Move it now! The alleys of the village were strewn with fall's withered leaves of bare trees, spinning about houses' doorsteps, heralding the forthcoming winter.

Salem and Mahmoud traipsed on, heading for Bekkoucha's shanty. They came across Sheikh Yahya, Mahmoud's father.

- Where are you going, my sons? The old man wondered with a quavering, cheerless timbre.

The two teenagers kissed Sheikh Yahya with eagerness, querying about his health.

- Thanks God. Salem, come with us!

- Where to, sheikh? Salem wondered, perplexed.

- To my house. Actually, your mother isn't in the village.

- What happened to her? Is she hurt? Salem asked, anxious.

- She's fine, don't worry. I'll tell you everything once in my house.

- Wait for me five minutes, Salem said. I leave my luggage at home, and I'll come back to you.

Sheikh Yahya shook his turbaned head.

- No need, kid. The tyrants have burned your dwelling to ashes!

- What hell was that? Why? Salem screamed out in despair.

Salem read through Sheikh Yahya's dim eyes a hidden calamity. He cast down his luggage, and scampered off to the ashy home. Mahmoud and his father ran after Salem. Once arrived, Salem stood appalled in front of oodles of ashes and burnt wooden beams, beholding the flattened walls.

- What are you looking for, my friend? Mahmoud questioned Salem.

- ...

- Salem?

- I'm looking for the odor of mom, and the fragrances of my childhood. My toys, as well. I'm searching for the berry tree I've planted. I'm after the willow tree which granted me generous shadows and catered for my feelings of love.

- Who has wreaked havoc in our village, dad?

- It's obvious, Mahmoud! Who else? It's him! Bouzid!

Their expressive looks crisscrossed, yet tongueless. Salem's eyes were athirst of the truth behind that tragedy. He seemed astray and damaged. Sheikh Yahya feared that Salem would crack up if he told him in detail what had befallen his mother.

- Tell me the truth, sheikh! Was mom burned alive, too? teary-eyed Salem urged him to answer.

- She's in the hospital, kid. Under medical care.

Salem stepped near Sheikh Yahya, grasping his qashabiya.

- Is she in critical condition? On which parts of her body did the fire catch?

Sheikh Yahya palmed Salem on the shoulder affectionately.

- Don't worry at all, kid. She wasn't inside the house when it took fire. As a matter of fact, she had been away from the village. Now, let's go to my home to sip some coffee. Will you?

Shortly after, the three men quit the spot of ashes and headed back to Sheikh Yahya's house. Bashir, Mahmoud's younger brother, welcomed them by kisses and hugs. Bashir held back some news, as he got used to announcing to Mahmoud when he came back from school after a long absence. Bashir had been Mahmoud's Associated Press. He scrutinized their visages, then he said:

- Do you know Mahmoud?

- What's up, Bashir?

- Safia is dead!

Mahmoud and Salem were taken aback, almost staggered, looking back at Sheikh Yahya for confirmation. The latter nodded in agreement, so sorry. He recited a Koranic verse.

- 'All that is on Earth will perish.'

Salem's blood froze up at once. The bad news knocked him dead. He was skeptical, though.

- Safia herself died? Impossible... A lie...

Then Salem lost his balance and he nearly collapsed had Mahmoud not been beside him. After a while, Salem collected himself, as if stung by a scorpion. He wandered the village's passageways, asking children about the cataclysm.

- Is Safia really dead? Mom is also lying in the hospital?

They answered him in unison.

- Yes! Yes, Safia passed away!

- No way! You all lie! You all lie!

At first, the children were dazed, but they soon beamed at him puerilely. Salem went on asking everybody he encountered.

Salem clinched Bouzid's arm, harassing him with a flurry of questions.

- Bouzid, is it true Safia died? Please, answer me. What happened to Safia and mom? Did you hurt her? Did you burn my house down?

Bouzid brushed Salem aside. He looked down on him, injured him with harsh words.

- Clear out of my way, son of a bitch! Enquire about your father before you worry about Safia...

Salem did not listen anymore to Bouzid as he sloped off, raving. Lies. Rumors. He hurried to the whereabouts of the willow tree, his heart crushed to smithereens. He belied his weeping eyes. He stood with arms akimbo, virtually wordless. 'You, too, have disappeared?'

The saw had left concentric rings on the cut stump. The lifeless branches littered the neighborhoods of the fountain. 'Oh, the tree of lovers, what you've become. Where's my sweetheart, Safia? What's this curse falling over both of you?'

Salem paid a visit to the village's mosque. He popped in as Sheikh Dahmane was poised to call on worshippers for the prayer. He told him the uncut story.

- Believe me, our imam...

- Take it easy, my son. God has said in Holy Koran: 'Despair not of the Mercy of God...'

- Where's mom?

- In the hospital. May God heal her very soon.

- And Safia?

- The daughter of Belkacem Bouakkaz is deceased.

- Where's the willow tree?

- I don't know about it.

- And where's my genuine father? Who's he?

The imam bent down his head.

- Astaghfirullah! May God forgive me! I've no answer to this, as well

- You should know it. You're an imam, no? Am I a son of a...?

- That's the running rumor.

Salem confronted the imam in a daring stance.

- String of lies! Sheer slander! Sheer slander! Sheer slander! 'For surely, suspicion is in some cases a sin.' A sin, Sheikh Dahmane! You're in the know. These are the words of God, not mine!

Mahmoud caught up with Salem as the latter darted away of the village, graveyard-bound. Salem hopped over the primitive fence, looking for the tomb of Safia among the numerous tombs. He glimpsed a tomb with fresh turned-over earth. He squatted down beside it. He was sobbing: 'Dad, mom, the hut, the willow tree, they all have gone away. Even you, my great love, you who would keep me company and appease my sorrows, you, too, have left me forever. You're torturing my soul by dying without bidding

me a slight farewell. How can I follow your trail, now? I'll escort you to the Hereafter.'

Salem cuddled the tomb and then kissed the gravestone stuck in the middle of the grave. His tears drenched the earth, brokenheartedly. 'Why? How it happened, my God? Safia, answer me, please, I'm Salem...'

Mahmoud tried to remove Salem away from the tomb, but the latter stained his face with earth, went hysteric and his joints convulsed achingly. 'Why nobody informed me to say goodbye to you? To cast a last glance over your face. I'd like to rest in your tomb, to stand in for you at the Last Judgment. Why didn't they tell me to send with you a letter to God? Why?'

Mahmoud ran hotfoot to home, informed his father.

- Dad, Salem passed out and he's agonizing!

Sheikh Yahya bolted to his feet, shocked.

- Sonny, hand me the key, fetch me a jug of water, and you, Bashir, move right now to warn Sheikh Dahmane about the matter.

Othmane, Mahmoud and Sheikh Yahya converged on the cemetery, tackled a few minutes later by Maamar. The sun was about to retire. Salem was lying down beside Safia's tomb. They all failed to make him feel better.

A half an hour had elapsed, and there arrived Bashir, panting, holding in his hands the talisman Sheikh Dahmane had concocted to ward off bad luck. They wrapped the talisman around Salem's neck, and then they hoisted him, taking him away to Sheikh Yahya's house. From time to time, Salem sighed and raved. Mom... Dad... Safia... Ouch! Ouch!

- Astaghfirullah! God, forgive me! Sheikh Yahya let out. Let's get a move on, men. Don't you see his face's turning pallid and he's stifling?

- Why ought we to do? Maamar questioned.

- Mahmoud, my son, go to see Bouzid and beg him for driving us to the hospital with his truck. Tell him, we'll pay the traveling expenses.

Mahmoud hastened toward Bouzid's crude store.

Minutes flew by in silence.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Yahya shoved his hand into a sack of clothes and produced a gray blanket. Salem was stretched over it, the time the truck appeared. His eyes were looking up at the ceiling, his teeth grinding as though he were a jerking, slaughtered bird.

Mahmoud came back, his eyes pouring down disappointment.

- Where's Bouzid's truck? Othmane queried

- He refused to help us out, Mahmoud replied in regret. Bouzid said: 'Even if I inherit half of the Earth, I'm not going to let Salem put his muddy buttocks back in my truck, because he's a son of -'

Then Mahmoud dropped his chin, and his mouth clogged up, while Maamar polished the sentence in rather soft words.

- Because he's a son of mute woman, Bekkoucha. She had sent Bouzid wounded to the hospital!

Mahmoud shook his head in disagreement.

- I wish he only talked me likewise. As the adage goes, 'The stabs of a tongue are more scarring than those of teeth's bites.'

- Now, I make out what the brainless Bouzid was hinting at, Maamar deplored. 'Barking dogs can't change the direction of clouds.'

Othmane straightened to his feet, confident.

- Within a few minutes, I'll disentangle the issue by God's Will. Wait for me!

They wished him good luck with devoted prayers.

Shortly afterwards, he turned up with a horse burdened with a basic yellow stretcher made up with two wooden poles.

- What's it for?

- Time's running out, Sheikh Yahya. I learned this trick back in military duty. When we're short of ambulances, we resort to animals!

They hauled blanket-Salem up over the stretcher placed on the back of the saddled horse. Othmane knotted the two poles tightly,

helped by Mahmoud who accompanied him to the hospital. The two walked on either side of the horse, and made sure Salem would not be overthrown off onto the rocks.

21

Belkacem Bouakkaz and his wife Aziza went through a bad patch during three weeks. They mourned their departed daughter, Safia, in consternation. Bouakkaz refrained from eating except the bare minimum to stay alive, lying down all the day on his bed. Even the sunshine did not seep into their house. They closed the door up, and nobody was let in.

At the end of the fourth week since Safia's burial, Bouakkaz slipped out of the house up with lark, without telling his wife where he was going. His steps pressed on, town-bound. He had just paused mid-way for a while, to drum up breath.

Bouakkaz saw the gate opened, passed through. He found a sentry standing, wiping his face with a handkerchief, and shook his head in salute.

- What do you want this morning?

Bouakkaz caught his breath at will and then slumped into a chair.

- They've killed me! They've slit my throat, officer!

The policeman looked puzzled.

Bouakkaz fed him with more details, as his eyes were a bucket of Niagara Falls.

- I buried my daughter Safia, illegitimately pregnant! I lost my honor. Even the whole water of all seas couldn't wash this disgrace off. I lived away home for a long time. I left her serving Hadj Boualem in this town for many months. And when she was back countryside home, she seemed gone astray and her stares faded away day after day. I thought that she disliked the comeback to the hard life of the village after she got used to enjoying the city lifestyle. She confined to bed, and I thought she fell sick. Till one blackened morning... Impossible... My daughter Safia... My only child...

- Calm down, sheikh? What happened that morning?

- The women found her dead in the vicinity of the fountain. The pains had besieged her and she fled the house to die away for the second time, as the ordeals she suffered killed her first. Do you want to know who the criminal is? The man who'd deflowered my daughter in the prime of life? Hadj Boualem!

The policeman wrote up the plea of Bouakkaz.

- If that's all you've to complain about, please, sign here.

- I've recalled something else. You surely remember the incident of Bekkoucha with Bouzid?

- Yes, I do. Despite the investigation had been carried out by the gendarmes.

- On the same day, the tractor Bouzid was driving during the incident had been brought behind my house to hide it. He's been there for two months now, camouflaged by grasses. I don't know why they did this. You're the representatives of Law on Earth on the behalf of God. Please, I demand be dispensed justice.

Then Bouakkaz stood up to go out, but the policeman stopped him awhile.

- I ask you to transmit the clues you've given me to the National Gendarmerie in the grand boulevard...

Once in the facilities of the Gendarmerie, Bouakkaz repeated to them the story. The gendarme noted on his report the new information about the case of Bouzid and Bekkoucha.

- I guess, you're heading back to the village, sheikh?

- Yes, sir.

- Can you hand this summons over to Salem? Do you know him?

- Yes, Bouakkaz mumbled sadly. Actually, he was my deceased daughter's fiancé.

At first, he tried to turn the summons down, finding a strong pretext.

- I can no longer face Salem. I don't want to see any dweller of the village. My name is tarnished.

However, Bouakkaz was so shy that he accepted to bring with him the summons to Salem. He then exited and returned to the damn village, towing his painful sores.

22

Salem recovered and was used to paying a visit to his bedridden mother in the women's pavilion of the hospital. He would sit down beside her for hours, feeling for her, and she would smile back at him with overflowing affection. His brains spewed a myriad of questions: 'What hurts you, mom? Is it true what people have been gossiping? Why all this silence? The silence is the sin of approval. They're dirtying your days, mom; your honor. Their talks preceded me everywhere. Let me know everything, mom.'

Salem's sharp eyes broke off the border and smashed the uneven horizons. His mother's mute looks expressed grief. Maamar had once narrated to him the incident of his mother with Bouzid, and the death of Safia, and the execution of the village's trees.

The spring holidays came to an end, and Salem got stronger and felt a willpower propelling him ahead. I must uncover the secret of my swirling world. I'm not going back to school until I restore my ruined honor. I must find out the truth of my father.

Salem's distress went deeper every time he thought that his mother did know the truth of the past, but she mysteriously held it back to herself.

- Why do you know about my father, Maamar?

- All I know is about your mother. She had arrived in the village with you when a toddler. A few days after the Independence, back in 1962; those early days of solidarity. We've built a hut for you two. We've clothed her to change the blue outfit she had on.

- I must start digging out the truth from scratch, Maamar!

Mahmoud went to see Salem in the hospital.

- How're you, Salem?

- Fine. Mom's getting better.

- There's an issue, but I'm afraid that...

- What's going on, Mahmoud? Why do you hesitate once more? What bothers you? Don't worry, as my heart is bruise-ridden. When a human loses everything, he becomes bold to defy the devil. Mahmoud gave him the summons.

- Read it now.

- Military duty! Military duty! Salem spoke out.

He shed tears of joy and hugged astonished Mahmoud.

- I do exist! I take up a tiny space in my country!

- I didn't think you'd pleased by this piece of news. The exams are at the doors and your mother needs you at her side, you know. Have you forgotten that she'll appear in the Court?

- I resolved to let everything down to track my missing father. I'll hunt for the truth, even if this would cost me the eggs of seven camels!

- You give up studying, Salem? And your own mother?

- I'm just interested in the unknown truth, Salem said with raised eyebrows.

- Yet, the reality and the truth you're seeking for, shouldn't distract you from your expectations.

- I've made up my mind, Mahmoud. Irreversible. You get it?

The two friends kept silent for a couple of minutes. Prior to bidding him goodbye, Mahmoud proposed him something.

- I've got an idea on my way to visit you here. Maybe it will lighten your burden.

- Whatever your idea is, Salem admitted apologetically, it will never make my mom talk again. Nor could it resuscitate the dead people!

- Then, you're taunting my ideas? I see, you haven't confidence in my friendship, either?

- I didn't say that, Mahmoud. Come on! Why doing things the hard way?

- Do I really make things harder to you? I think, you do set hurdles by yourself, Salem. You're in the intersection of exams and illness and mom and military duty! The lost truth? Let's start paving the shortest path altogether.

Salem gazed at him in admiration.

- I didn't know you're a philosopher, Mahmoud! Now, disclose your brilliant idea!

23

Holding a small satchel under his armpit, Mouhouche walked up the stairs of the Court to reach the second floor. Awash in perspiration, he avoided to collide with throng of plaintiffs, going down and up. Despite it's just half past eight in the morn, the Court is teeming with people like ants around honey, he thought drolly.

The doorkeeper halted him.

- Where are you going like that, Si Mohammed?

- Do you know me? he wondered with a grin.

- I don't think we shared the same bed last night! the doorkeeper teased him.

Mouhouche ignored him and while he started to climb up the stairs leading to the third floor, he felt a thick arm seizing him by force.

- Where to? Don't you know it's the office of the Prosecutor, and he can make you crave for the sunshine for weeks? Perhaps, you think you're entering a stable?

- You surely don't know who I am! Please, let me see the Prosecutor.

- Go back home, man! The opening day is only on Sunday.

- Sunday? Mouhouche repeated in despair. We're in Monday, and it's too far away. You are always the same; even the strongest cyclones could never heave your sea waves!

- You don't understand! the edgy doorkeeper added.

Mouhouche climbed down the stair, cursing. 'You don't understand... You don't understand... All the people tell me that I don't understand at all. What's the real meaning of understanding? Where to find it out? A drunken doesn't know he's swigged wine, and a king doesn't know the extent of his wealth!'

Mouhouche zipped along to the police facilities. He addressed the policeman.

- I'm Mouhouche, the manservant of Hadj Boualem. I didn't want to come back here, but I couldn't wait until Sunday.

The official agent stayed confounded.

Mouhouche's cheeks crimsoned and his forehead let sweat trickle down. He produced from the satchel a knife, and went on straightforwardly.

- Here you are! That's the lost item you've looking for since ages! The policeman held the rusty knife, considering it for a long time.

- What's the story of this knife? Where did you pick it up?

Mouhouche looked backwards to the past, when he was searching for the secret of a play seen its curtain went down a long time ago. A play whose main characters were real; they pocketed the due money, save one character deprived of the due wage, and now he asked for his share. It's me!

Mouhouche took a chair and sat down in relief.

- I found the knife in the stable of cows, hidden beneath one of those concrete-made water basins. Had I suspected its cache, I would have combed the stable...

He paused, as anger was brewing. He talked on, intermitted by profuse tears.

- This damned knife ripped through my father's entrails, and then it disappeared as if by magic! The file of the case had been closed and then archived for lack of evidence calling for the suspicious murder of my father. For ten years, the eye of the Justice hasn't blinked. But the Heavens have decreed that Justice must be fulfilled, awakening your consciousness. The same call of consciousness struck the only eyewitness of the crime: Achour!

Mouhouche was about to leave when the policeman stopped him for more details.

- Fill me in on the full names and addresses of you and Achour the eyewitness, please?

- My name's Mohammed Said, nicknamed Mouhouche. I live in the stable of cows belonging to Hadj Boualem, the son of the former Caid. I took over my murdered father, believe it or not,

officer. Who knows, maybe I'll hand down the job to my son. And so on for our family line! As to Sheikh Achour, he's spending his remaining days in a retirement home, because that criminal of Hadj Boualem had exploited him young, and after many years threw him up all aged bones.

24

The taxi pulled up in front of the great green gate of the casern. Three occupants got out. Mahmoud stepped forward to the guard. Bekkoucha did not know where she was, as her eyes riveted toward the gun-wielding guard. She focused on his uniform and weapon, as if looking for something special.

Salem filled out the registration form, and then handed it to the second soldier who entered the great building. Salem and Bekkoucha waited for the soldier's return, while Mahmoud got back to the taxi.

Bekkoucha did not feel the minutes fly by, for she revisited bygone memories; still, she did not lose sight of her actual condition.

The soldier came back, and asked the two to follow him, before he let them in. The hall was roomy, emblazoned with military photos and national flags. The soldier walked through a long vestibule, then knocked on one of the doors. He took only Salem in, while he gestured to Bekkoucha to stay outside. The room held Salem spellbound, with its furniture and leather-covered walls and wool upholstery. He looked shy in the presence of the officer seated behind his large desk. The officer was in his late fifties, broad-chested, and the military stripes emphasized his wide shoulders. He lifted his head.

- Would you take a seat, young man. What's up?

Salem produced from his pocket the summons, a little diffident. He handed it over to the high-ranking military man.

The drab-clad officer beheld the document in stupefaction. He then spoke in a mild tone, as if he knew the young man since long.

- Don't you want to grow into a real man, Salem?

- My mother is a dumb woman. Disabled. She can't live without me. She's alone, officer. Further, manhood isn't subject to space and time...

- Enough! the uniformed man ordered. You're just trying to avoid taking on your imperative responsibility.

- But, sir...

The officer banged the desk hard, loud-mouthed.

- The youths of November Revolution didn't care about feelings! They didn't worry about their families, either. They had crushed their feelings, to wage war against the French colonialists. Bravely. Then, the former fighter rose, steering his head to the wall. He stared at a glass-framed black-and-white photo, featuring two armed men in regimentals.

- Look at this martyr standing beside me on this photo. He was my closest brother-in-arms. I would hold him dear. He had joined the ranks of revolutionaries before the end of his honeymoon. Parted his wife.

Salem was frustrated as he called back what his comrade Mahmoud had prescribed him. Your idea turns out fruitless, philosopher of our time! Salem thought.

- Everything grows up and then degenerates, save the mother country; it stands small, in need of all care. I hope the youths, like you, don't spare their biceps and sweat!

Salem supplicated the officer.

- My mother will certainly be lost. Please, let her in, to see her condition by yourself.

The officer pressed on the button of a bell, and at once a soldier showed up in salute.

- Usher the old woman in.

Before Bekkoucha got in, she removed her shoes behind the door. She burst into the bureau barefoot. The officer was writing with a pen on some papers. As he lifted his head to tell her take seat, he remained for a while stunned. He scrutinized her features. He did not believe his parched eyes. He stood up swiftly. He put his palm on his forehead, voiced involuntarily.

- FA... FA... FA-TI-MA! Oh, my God!

Salem naively looked around and across the office to spot where the woman named Fatima was lurking. Three seconds afterwards, he astonishingly became aware that the only woman present in the office was his standing, tear-filled mother. A smile betrayed her dolor.

The officer stepped around the desk closer to her, grabbing her arm, moved by seeing her again.

- Fatima in my office? Am I daydreaming?

The daze detached blood-boiling Salem from the chair. How do they know each other? Are Hadj Boualem's allegations true? Salem wanted to react, yet he felt hampered by what he was miraculously witnessing. He grated his eyes thrice.

The officer waved his hand toward the in-frame photograph, reminiscing bullets days.

- Look, Fatima, at the picture of Ameer!

- Fatima? Fatima? Salem repeated, unhinged.

The officer unclasped the frame from the wall, and gave it to Bekkoucha who flooded the photo with sustained kisses; bosomed it eagerly. She even stammered the first syllabuses of his name.

- A... A... M... M... AM... A...M...

The tears soaked her cheeks, laundering the throes of past. She then forwarded the photo to her son, Salem; motioning to him to concentrate on the man leaning on the shotgun. Salem grasped for fading away alphabet.

- A... M... EU... R?

- He's Ameer, your genuine father! A glorious martyr!

Salem held the photo tightly, as if it spoke with him. 'I'm the hidden truth, sonny!' He hugged his mother, weeping out of joy.

- My mom's named Fatima? What a beautiful name. Fatima... Ameer... Mom... Dad... Dad's a well-known martyr! His soul is alive!

Salem gave the officer a cheerful embrace. The three sat down, comforted.

- You didn't know he was a martyr, right? Hadn't Fatima told you about his martyrdom?

- Dear officer, you also ignore that Fatima's a dumb woman?

The officer's mouth turned a gaping hole.

- What? When did this happen? We had known her fluent-tongued, with a nice loud voice!

- Is it true that my mother had once been talking? Salem demanded, agog. What a pity! I have never heard her buried voice, though my heart would listen to her thoughts.

- Maybe because of the bruises of her past? The poignant misfortune that crippled her vocal cords the day she saw her husband's blood spilling out. You didn't experience the farewell of sweethearts, Salem. Their parting has been an alienation.

Salem sensed that his heart fell to pieces. As the remediless injuries of departing Safia came up in a gale. He forwent the exteriorization of his emotions; he opted for muteness. He preferred listening to the account of friend of his father, who felt for Fatima's condition.

- It was an unbearable blow. Tears shed in honeymoon. Then, they said each other compulsory goodbyes, under the drones of war planes and the ear-piercing blasts of shells. That's life, after all.

Mahmoud had kept waiting outside the military compound.

Surprisingly, he gawked at an officer coming out along with Salem and his mother, the three all smiling like old buddies. They headed to the officer's car. Exceedingly jovial Salem came up to Mahmoud.

- I found it out, Mahmoud! I found it out!

- What did you find out, Salem? Tell me, please.

- Later on, you'll know everything. Be patient!

Salem got back into the car which revved up to pull away, towards the officer's house.

25

The pilgrimage season set in. Hadj Boualem held a hallowed farewell party in the village, before he flew to Mecca for the second time in his life. The courtyard was swarming with peasants, flooded in even from nearby hamlets. The children clad their neat clothes, and the shepherds kept their livestock not far from the feet of the hills, for they did not want to miss such a magnificent repast.

The bystanders chattered on and on. They took on miscellaneous concerns, a way to steer clear of the harsh realities of life. Though, they often halted talking about things, to behold Kouider, the manservant of Hadj Boualem, dancing and singing at the top of his voice:

The farewell celebration
With couscous and watermelon
Youngsters and toddlers
You're the pits of dearth

The standing ovations and incessant cheers galvanized him, as well.

- 'Long live Kouider! Long live Kouider!'

The children rang him, singing along.

- 'Kouider, when will you get married...Kouider, when will you get married...Kouider, don't zigzag...'

He ran after the taunting tots, vociferating.

- I swear to the two-timer hajj of Mecca, Hadj Boualem, I'm going to deprive you of the feast! Unless you all sing loud: 'Long live Kouider!'

Kouider trilled pretty soon after:

Seven roasted rams
Six rams for us
A ram for the ragtag
Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!

The moment of meal arrived, and the peasants formed numerous separate seven-man rings to receive great round wooden plates of lamb couscous they had been salivating at for two weeks...

Coming out from Hadj Boualem's rural house, the couscous-filled plates were being brought on heads. Necks craned to put down those plates containing the greatest slices of meat. Each ring swooped down on the delicious couscous like rapacious birds. Spoons clattered and mouths chewed on.

The shepherds rushed down to wolf down the served copious meals, keeping an eye on their livestock.

The nerves of the guests got alleviated, following the fullness of their once-empty stomachs. Though, the providential satiation got some tongues wagging. Funny anecdotes were raised as the spoons settled down.

Othmane pestered a man who was thirty years older than him, crouching down three rings away.

- Is there any prediction, Sheikh Hamza?

Thick-bearded Sheikh Hamza shoved a spoonful of couscous into his mouth before he joked back.

- Eat first, talk later!

He then swallowed up a much greater bite, eyeing Othmane eerily.

- Here you go, a piece of good news. This is a year of beneficence for those working for Hadj Boualem and Si Zoubir, to name a few.

A few of zealous peasants exclaimed their contentment, wishing to Hadj Boualem a longer lifespan to enjoy his meals for free!

Slimane nudged Sheikh Hamza, for fun's sake.

- I thought you were a crippled man, and yet I see that you've marched quite a long distance to eat the lamb couscous!

Sheikh Hamza freed the bare bone from his fat lips, and then fired back.

- The jackal lies in ambush for one month to prey on sheep, and you're wondering why I've crossed such a short distance to take part in a happy event and to eat for free, let alone it's about Hadj Boualem's festivity!

One of the guests jerked to his feet, yelled as he motioned to the hills.

- The jackal! The jackal is attacking the sheep, shepherds! Where're the watching dogs?

The shepherds tossed down their spoons and looked for the missing dogs. The latter were feasting on the bones children would throw to their muzzles

Now, all the guests stopped eating, as the jackal's rash incursion scared the sheep, riveting all their attention. The jackal seemed choosing out the suitable bleating lamb with incredible easiness, but very soon the panting shepherds and rabid dogs barking ahead made the jackal beat a hasty retreat toward the bush, howling out of starvation.

The peasants took to their spoons amidst brouhaha and talk.

Some avowed that the jackal was deceitful and cunning.

A shepherd coined:

- "To meet his stomach's needs, he could wipe out his tribe!"

- The jackal lost the battle! smiling Sheikh Hamza joshed offhandedly.

- It was a tie! Othmane scorned back.

When the lamb couscous had been eaten up, leaving behind scattered bones and leftovers, the empty dishes were taken back to yellow-tiled house.

26

The officer sagged into his comfortable sofa, gazing out across the windows. His eyes welled up as memories of Ameer, Salem's father, spurted out. He was afraid that he could not bear up. He fell quiet, looking back at military days in the woods. Salem felt that the silence had lasted an eternity.

The host's wife came in with cups of coffee, served the two guests. The former fighter sipped coffee; a beverage which thawed his tongue. He recounted for Salem a long story:

"The hard Revolution days which allowed us to come across the most honest and faithful men. You father, Ameer, was a loyal young man. My closest friend. We would trust each other's secrets. I knew everything about his life before he took up arms. He was living with his other, Halima. At the age of ten, he lost his father during the massacres of May 8, 1945.

Besides, in a black afternoon, as the Revolution kicked its second year, the French enemies had bombarded the mountains with airplanes. Halima was in the whereabouts looking high and low with her drifting eyes. She only saw smoke going upwards, whirled by the northern winds. There remained blackened beams amidst heaps of ashes fenced off by rubble which was made up of orange earthen-coated stones, having melted down under the hell of dropped shells. Although your grandmother was fifty years old, she kept on a juvenile gait. Her forehead bore furrows of time, conferring magnitude and self-respect on her character. She didn't believe her eyes, as the calamity had pounded her. She hung round the ashen debris. Shocked, she queried the havoc of the French air raid. 'Has everything really disappeared? How did all this happen? It took only half an hour to dismantle a house built through years of sweat. No, it couldn't burn down like this. This razed house sheltered my happiest days in life. My son, Ameer, grew up in this house, fuming in front of me.'

Halima stepped on a cinder, looked up to the sky, tears streamed down her rosy cheeks. She let her eyes catch sight of the hills set alight by westering sun. She looked back at her consumed house, and then she walked away to rest on a prominence overlooking a slope, located on the rear of Mount Chrea. She looked down the glens, shouting the name of her son: ‘Ameur! Ameur!’

Some shrubs swayed rather gently, as your father, Ameur, stuck out between the branches. He strode toward his mother, finding her sitting quiet, only the eyelashes did move in her body. She was tearful and heartbroken, because of the growing fears since the French war airplanes had flattened the nearby village, burying overnight its dwellers in rubble, transforming it into a cemetery of disseminated human shreds, as if it were the Day of Last Judgment. The French army continued relentlessly the bombardment of the adjacent hamlets in a shower of devastating bombs. And that morning the scared people fled their makeshift homes in a frenetic chaos. Ameur and Halima had already scudded their home amidst of ear-piercing bombing which aimed at the houses, making them mounds of ruins. Even livestock and trees hadn’t been spared by the bombs. They had parted their way, grasping for far-off safety.

Tall and dark-skinned Ameur towered over his sad and pallid mother. He didn’t doubt that their house burnt into ashes. He asked her in eager tone. ‘Are you safe, mom? What about our house?’ She tried to answer him, but she hesitated, murmured to herself instead: ‘I’d better keep silent, in order not to break his imminent hopes.’

I let you know, that Ameur had spent the days and night’ gathering the stones and wooden poles, to build up a new house for him. He and his mother owned only two cows. He wanted to sell them to secure the costs of his marrying Fatima, your mother, as the wedding date was only one month away...

Sobbing Halima wanted to speak out, but she felt a knot obstructing her throat. Ameur’s forehead sweated. He couldn’t wait the answer, and he dashed to the house he had once constructed, unwitting of its fate. He crossed over a hill, to catch a glimpse of his mother’s house. He didn’t expect this extent of wreaked havoc. Piles of

ashes and glowing embers. He felt his guts aflame, too. One of the cows was agonizing, disemboweled, the back burnt, the eyes gazing at the other died cow, blood oozing out of her nostrils. The blaze was consuming the trunk of the gigantic olive tree his grandfather had planted. He would never enjoy its shadows.

Ameur's heart pulsated, almost tearing his lungs. He heard the interminable exploding bombs rocking the mountains. His legs could no longer hold his weight. A shudder ran across his body, the smoky sceneries faded away, the ground swirled, the ashes spread out, as the war airplanes resumed bombarding the whereabouts till the sun sank down behind the crimsoned hills."

"The worshippers poured out of the mosque in a queue after the end of the evening's prayer. They were asking for God's Forgiveness and admitted God's Almightyness, as they put their shoes on. Faith lit up their minds, and the moonlight beamed down on their way back home. The imam Si Salah remained behind to close the door.

The mosque was constructed from stones and clay, whose door was without padlock. It would shelter any travelling passerby, by day and night. Also, the children would every day attend Quran recitation. In a nutshell, the mosque served as place of worship and study and assemblies, and roof for passersby.

When all the worshippers were gone, quinquagenarian Sheikh Tahar-Fatima's father- stood waiting for the imam.

- May God accept your prayer, Sheikh Tahar.

- For all of us, amen, the imam said.

Then they inched their way forward in silence for a while. Sheikh Tahar resumed talking first, straightforward.

- Actually, 'The Prophet is only a compelling message-bearer... He lived bold and intrepid.'

- No! Si Salah cut in. The two latter words are not written in Quran. Watch out of fire! What's up?

Sheikh Tahar sketched a wide smile, staring at the imam.

- May God forgive me! Astaghfirullah! Anyway, you're my guest this night at ten.
- Congratulations! The imam complimented. I guess it's about the engagement of Fatima and Ameer, right?
- We're going to recite Quran for our homeland, too! Along with our fellow fighters!
- ...
- Don't miss the appointment at ten this very night!

27

The wall clock ticked noon. The military officer postponed the other part of his revolutionary tale. He invited Salem and his mother to stay for lunch.

- I don't need food, officer. Feed me more information! I want to know everything about my parents.

Yet, the officer insisted on having them stay for lunch. Shortly afterwards, they headed to a spacious dining room, wherein Souad was setting the plates on the table.

The officer introduced his daughter rather proudly.

- That's my daughter, Souad; the queen of both high school prizes and the house.

Salem blushed and beamed at her, as he shook her soft hand quickly, while Fatima placed kisses on her rosy cheeks...

The stares intersected briefly and segregated timidly. From time to time, Salem would take a peek at Souad, donning her the specter of Safia. That lunch triggered off unusual feelings.

When they all finished eating, the military officer and Salem slipped back into the living-room. He lit a cigarette and went on telling Salem the rest of the poignant story of Ameer:

"It was ten in the night. The house was roomy, moderately furnished, in the middle of which an erect thick pillar prodded the horizontal beams of the ceiling. A butterfly hovered around an oil lamp dangling from the pillar.

Two rows of men had inclined their backs against the earthen wall. The furniture piled up in a corner. Two clay pots were set on the keg of wheat took up another corner behind the door. Two ropes were holding the goatskin of milk to a wooden beam jutting out of the wall. The shaken milk trickled down into a small container.

Sheikh Tahar, the house's master, would go back and forth between the men and his daughter, Fatima, in the rough kitchen. (The officer looked at Bekkoucha, who was following his story and gestures in sheer silence). He ordered to prepare the dinner, as he went out to wait the coming of the imam.

The guests present inside the sheikh's house looked surreptitiously at the weapons put down at the feet of the four mujahidin.

One of the armed men broke the stillness.

- It's already half past ten!

- Are you sure the imam understood the exact time, Sheikh Tahar?

- Of course, I am. He shall meet his promise to come around. Do you prefer I go to his house to see why he's late or would you like I serve you the dinner?

They all hushed, mulling over the matter. And then Meziane, a short, long-mustached man got to his feet, glanced around, offering his help.

- I go over to the imam house. In the meantime, dine your guests!

Sheikh Tahar paced closer to him, whispering into his ear:

- The guard is behind the door, and he won't let you go out, for security's sake. I've four mujahedin in! Unless you tell him the password. I can give it to you, but only if you swear that you're not going to leak it out.

Meziane reached out his hand, made him the promise not to make it known to other people than the guard.

- I assure you, Sheikh, that your secret will abide in a bottomless well forever!

- The password is: 'Islam is my religion and Algeria is my homeland.'

Then, Sheikh Tahar spoke aloud.

- All right, Meziane! You can go fetch the missing imam!

Sheikh Tahar served his invitees great plates of couscous with portions of lamb meat. He then poured the milk out of the goatskin into an earthen bowl. His lips burst into an ample smile.

- In the Name of God, good appetite!

A dark-skinned young man begged the dignitaries of the village to hit the spoons, as they hesitated at first, before they finally resolved to eat.

Soon afterwards, Meziane came back, breathless at the doorsill.

- The imam isn't in his house! Nor his wife and children!

The invitees let own their spoons, replete. Sheikh Tahar brought in the copper teapot. After serving the hot beverage, he rushed out en route for the house of Si Salah, the imam.

Half an hour later, Sheikh Tahar returned along with Si Salah who was wheezing out of tiredness. He apologized for being late, accounting for the nonappearance in despondent tone.

- Criminals! Sheikh Tahar cut in crossly. They want to decimate all he Algerians!

Meziane intervened, too.

- Be patient, Si Salah. By tomorrow, we'll have known if Salem and Fatima are still alive. We pray God they're safe.

- I was sure your absence was compulsory, Sheikh Tahar had told the imam.

One of the four mujahedin jumped at the chance and spoke in an acute tone, making the guests all ears.

- That's their goal... Life and land for them, torture and displacement and death for us. Every new day, they pick up the sweet fruit of our land, watered by the blood of martyrs, to serve them on their tables, soaked by the sweat of famished Algerians. Their dirty feet have been profaning our beloved country, and their well-armed rabid dogs aimed at the chests of our compatriots.

His fellow soldier took it in turn to explaining what was at stake.

- France's striving to nip Revolution in the bud, through tendentious propaganda, sowing discord among the people, but not a chance. The roots of our people are deep, the faith grows stronger. The principles we hold to protect ourselves from the vicious hands of our French foes.

Another dark-skinned brother-in-arms went on discoursing on the unfair war.

- The determination of peoples is invincible. The faith of our fellow countrymen in the legitimacy of our issue, is stronger than the rifles and bombs of the French enemy. We'll teach this 'stupid pupil' a lesson reminiscent of their rout in Indochina.

The invitees nodded in agreement, asking for more patriotic rhetoric.

Revolutionary Lakhdar kept replying to the guests' questions, his hands swinging right and left in explanation, the eyes exploring the expectant visages. He felt silent, to let his speech sink in. He then motioned to his third mate.

- Have your say, Si Allal!

Si Allal peered at them mildly, taking a deep breath, as well.

-The malicious disease propagates its microbes to tear the people's authenticity and traditions apart. The French colonialism understands only the language of bullets and fire. Things taken by force could only be recovered through might.

- Since the survival is for the strongest, Si Salah preached, we're firmly armed with faith of our sacred values.

- What shall we do for this issue? Meziane asked the mujahedin.

- That's what we came for! Si Allal grinned.

The guests cast their eyes on him, who immediately made things clearer.

- You play the hyphen between Sheikh Tahar and us. He'll forward our orders to you, he'll collect the aids you'll chip in, and you, Meziane, will gather the weapons and recruit fit young men ... Also, you must delegate a guide to get in touch with the other hamlets.

- I volunteer to carry out this mission! Si Salah said zealously

The fourth mujahid wobbled his hand, bargaining in.

- 'The religion is a doctrine and the country is a heritage.' Both of which we must warranty their continuity. The steel weapons aren't

sufficient to protect our land. The success of any revolution relies on the deep-rooted faith of people in the goodness of its principles, and that's the bona fide roles of religious clerics of mosques, like you.

The dark-skinned youngster corroborated his comrade's views.

- Your role, Si Salah, is teaching Quran to the children and instilling in their spirits the true meanings of 'Islam is our religion, Algeria is our homeland, and Arabic is our language.'

Si Salah nodded in utter approval. The men looked at each other, and then the four mujahedin stood up, and chanted altogether.

- 'Long live Algeria... Long live Algeria!'

The mujahedin said farewell to Sheikh Tahar, and then snaked out into the woods, while the guests remained still, their looks astray, as though birds were brooding eggs on their heads...

One of the invitees talked in a hushed voice.

- Times are tough. I doubt that...

- What are you doubting of, Aliouat? Sheikh Tahar chided him, anxious

- I doubt that this handful of isolated men could defeat France with all its military potency and war airplanes. Are they going to fight France with only hunting guns, which sometimes fail to hurt a lame rabbit?!

- Be careful of badmouthing the Revolution, man!

Sheikh Tahar whispered into Aliouat's ear.

- Yes, a gun can miss a rabbit, yet it could kill several jackals!

Aliouat turned to him, said before he withdrew.

- Please, don't remind me of the jackals. I'm getting scared of them. Lambs need one year to grow up, while the jackals prey on them in a single night. Have nice dreams, though!

Sheikh Tahar stepped after him, seized his arm, warning him.

- Keep the secret of this night meeting, right? Goodbye, now!

- Deal in secrecy, Si Salah advised them.

Aliouat locked eyes with the two sheikhs, and then strode out.

Sheikh Tahar showed the door to all his guests.

Time to turn in.”

“The time had edged midnight. The moon would be declining from the sky within a few minutes.

The four mujahedin rent the stillness of the vale on their way back to the casemates. The pebbles and dry grass rustled under the crush of their nocturnal retreat. Brusquely, they stopped and swopped cautious gazes.

The dark-skinned man wondered first.

- A light in the midst of the bush? At this time of night we perceive a glimmer of light in the woods?

- Maybe, Allal suggested, one shepherd put fire on a truck or a fire set by the bombs of the enemy?

- Does this phenomenon need all our awareness? Zoubir asked.

Moments of silence passed by before another mujahid talked.

- We must know what’s going on. What do you think, brothers?

They all agreed. They hurried up, drawn by the dim source of light, making little of the world of fierce night animals. The dark-skinned man walked ahead. They soon encircled the suspicious area of fire, pointing their barrels as they got nearer. They were surprised by the presence of ancient graves with headstones between the trees. Lastly, they made out that the light crept out from a hut, old as the hills, surrounded by the cemetery.

‘Who on earth has lit up this strange place? Is there any living being?’ they thought.

The dark-skinned fighter advanced charily. He squatted down a few meters away from the wooden door of the hut. He squinted at the light of the candle fixed on a wall. He caught sight of a human silhouetted against flame. He moved two steps ahead, almost pushed a cry capable of awakening the occupants of the graves, but choked it back, confused and self-talking. The dark-skinned man went then back to his clustered mates, who had been expecting him far from the hut. He told them what he had seen.

- Someone's sprawling out on the ground of the hut as if in hibernation, pillowing the knee of a scarfless woman, whose locks of hair fall on her face, hunching her shoulders over a man lying down on his back. She was weeping bitterly, burning up like their candle. Awful, buddies!

Then he asked two companions rush back to the village, to inform Sheikh Tahar that Halima and Ameer were alive. He remained with Zoubir, eavesdropping to the hollers of night."

28

- Do you know who the dark-skinned man was? Salem asked.

The brigadier grinned back.

- Who's ignoring his name?!

- You were the young dark-skinned man, then?

The officer exhibited his pride.

- Yes, kid! I was the young dark-skinned man, named Lakhdar.

- I see you're dark, but no longer young, Souad punned.

She sparkled laughing among them.

Officer Lakhdar continued his account:

"Sheikh Tahar stood up, eclectic like a hard rock drummer.

- They're Ameer and his mother, Halima, and the fiancé of my daughter, Fatima. How are they doing?

- In the world of souls!

- The air raid hit them?

- Rather, hit by the destinies!

Subsequently, Sheikh Tahar and a few neighbors headed to the cemetery of Sidi al-Mekhfi, to spend the night with Ameer and his mother, alleviating their catastrophe. In the morning, Ameer woke up from his sound sleep. They helped him walk village-bound.

Ameer and Halima were lodged with one of Si Salah's relatives.

Days later on, Ameer recovered his dynamism, and he thought about the wedding, confided in Si Salah. The latter went to Sheikh Tahar, discussed altogether the terms and scheduled the date of the wedding.

And that happened as arranged. Your father, Ameer, married Fatima with the attendance of all the villagers... Ameer was querying Sheikh Tahar about the Angels. And his father-in-law just kept assuring him.

- They'll come back... They'll come back!

The destinies were not overlooking. Ameer's mother, Halima, died with her hands still stained with the henna of her son's marriage. Ameer was fraught with chagrin. He lost his most esteemed people in his comeliest days of life.

The bride consoled Ameer with extreme care. She did her best to peel the black veil off her husband's mournful visage.

- It's a black year, Fatima.

Fatima stared sadly at her groom.

- Didn't you tell me that she was the whiteness of years?

- Blackness and whiteness blended and the former defeated the latter. The raven won the tie of hues. The night laughed at the day.

- ...

- I lost my tender mother. When? During my honeymoon!

- You want to ruin yourself thinking likewise, Ameer?

- ...

- That's the divine wisdom, Ameer. It took your mother away after it has given you what you were hoping for... If the past is recent, yet the future is nearer. You should pull out of the past. God's Decree. You know well that death is an unavoidable fate, the bridge connecting the life and the afterlife.

Sheikh Tahar visited the newlyweds.

- 'The Angels' are asking after you, Ameer!

- 'The Angels'? What do they want from me? Ameer demanded, erect like a willow.

- Don't you care about the four Angels who've discovered both you in the cemetery of Sidi al-Mekhfi by night?

Ameer recalled them now.

- Oh... Yes I do.

- The 'Angels of Earth' want to know if you're fine. Come along with me, they're my guests tonight.

That night, Ameer comprehended the secrets of the 'Angels.' He remembered his old burned-out house, the agony of his cow under the burning olive tree. The call of duty wheedled his guts. He chose

the path of the ‘Angels’, and volunteered for the armed Revolution.

He confessed to Fatima and her father his bold decision to combat the French army. Sheikh Tahar blessed his son-in-law’s move, while Fatima accepted her husband’s choice, yet tears flowed down her kiss-depleted cheeks.

Then, Ameer followed the fire of war, and Fatima lived with her father, looking forward to the return of Ameer alive and well. After two months, Ameer popped in for some warm embrace. Fatima was craving for his maleness. He told her the life in the woods, the ambushes. She could no longer see him depart alone and urged him to let her accompany him to the mountains.

- ...

At the ankle of the mountains, Ameer spoke to Fatima.

- There atop the mountains, the “Angels of Earth’ date the ‘Angels of Heavens’ to chat about the matters of life.

- Do the ‘Angels’ accept to blend in with us? Fatima asked, merrily candid.

- The ‘Angels’ don’t care about the skins of humankind. All they’re interested in are only the deeds of men and women.

- What do the ‘Angels’ do? she interrogated him bluntly.

- The ‘Angels of Earth’ cross swords with the Devils, and the ‘Angels of Heavens’ award them the medals of martyrdom!

- What’s my mission, my darling husband?

- You’ll be the messenger between Earth and Heavens! You’ll nurse the wounded hearts and quench their thirst of faith!

- So, the ‘Angels of Earth’ are the mujahedin themselves?

- Yes! Ameer beamed at her smugly. You’re a brainy woman!”

Former mujahid Lakhdar paused, to put a cigarette aglow, stuck it between his fingers. Whorls of smoke soon clouded the room. And so did his roving eyes. The past towed his recollections painfully.

- Came that last night as we were altogether. We were in a cache setting up an attack against the enemy to liberate thirteen prisoners. We had just to define the exact timing. In the morning, we were awakened by the thunder of bullets and canons. The bombs fell down to kindle the foot of the mountains, staining in their wake the slopes with blood. We were just a few combatants as the French foes closed in on us. We holed up in our hideout, hoping they would draw back at any moment, but we realized that they were targeting us, and there was no way to survive. The more time passed by, the closer the enemy loomed over us. Our cache looked over the plains with only two exits: one exit cut through the woods wherein the enemy bivouacked, and the other one was an escarpment overlooking Wadi al-Akhira (Creek of the Last Judgment), leading to al-Maqtā Azrak and Hammam Melouane. Fighting off the enemy from the first exit was very perilous...

- How many of you were besieged there? Salem interrupted, impatient.

- Ten plus your dad and mom! Twelve, in total.

Salem's countenance crumpled and interrogated officer Lakhdar more.

- What did you do afterwards, sheikh Lakhdar?

- Sheikh Lakhdar? What a beautiful sobriquet! Well, let me go back to the story of fire and iron. I put it this way: a man has a mind, while the lion has muscles. We chose the second exit, that is, we all leapt over the cliff down into the creek, save Ameer and Fatima. Tears filled the eyes of Salem again, chagrined.

- They remained alone?

- We looked up at their impending jump, but they didn't, alas. Actually, your mother hesitated because of you!

- Because of me?

- She was pregnant of you, Salem! That was what your father had told us from atop the cliff when we were in the creek.

Officer Lakhdar patted Salem on the back, and then went on the epic account.

- I had noticed that your mother didn't weep that day like you're doing now! Your parents were waving down at us. A farewell...

Officer Lakhdar halted during a few seconds, dismal, took out a handkerchief from his pocket, and dried the tears of past separation and then-homecoming.

- Listen, Salem, to the last words of your father: 'I face the enemy just to lessen his ammunition... That's useful for our Revolution.'

Salem raised his head, inspired by his father's prowess.

- Didn't you all say: 'You cross over the river in flood to the other side through a bridge of comrades' bodies.'

- That period wasn't rife for this kind of poetry, kiddo! The war airplane buzzed overhead, and we had to hop for camouflage. Your parents hid beneath a boulder near the cache. 'Even if you escape a lion unharmed, that doesn't mean you can chase it!' The enraged French soldiers reached the cache, scoured it thoroughly, and then blew it up...

- What else? Salem asked, apprehensive.

Officer Lakhdar heaved a sigh of regret.

- The separation seemed long... The news went that your father, Ameer, fell as martyr at the foot of the mountains, while your mother, Fatima, was captured by the enemy and jailed her in a military prison. She had been donned the blue outfit...

- The blue clothes! Salem interceded. The blue clothes are worn by prisoners.

- Yes.

Salem shook his head, vexed.

- That what Maamar had told me: 'Your mother showed up in the village blue-clad, with you as a toddler in her arms.'

The officer looked at Fatima who was smiling, though her eyes gleamed with tears.

- You were born inside a prison behind the bars, Salem!

Salem got agitated, came closer to Fatima.

- Mother! Mother!

She did not hear his calls, as she was deaf, too. Her mind was elsewhere. Her eyes were rapt with the photo of smiling Ameer in military uniform, leaning on a gun.

Souad could not choke back her tears at hearing the moving story. She dashed into her room with a pinch of shock.

- I'm convinced, now, that my mother had lost her hearing and speech in that military jail under torture. Any more news you could feed me with, Sheikh Lakhdar?

- I told you all what I know.

The two men fell mute, beheld Fatima who was sitting with the officer's wife. Minutes wore on, with only expressive eyes in the air.

Officer Lakhdar broke the quiescent mood.

- I forgot to tell you, that many months later we heard what had happened to the inhabitants of the village. The bombs destroyed their houses, killed scores of people and left many homeless, including your maternal grandfather, Sheikh Tahar... The first bomb pounded the mosque, killing Si Salah the imam, and most of the children while studying. Anyway, a war is always a calamity which often ends with victories.

Salem felt freed from his past ghosts.

- Thanks God, the truth is finally divulged to hush the foul mouths!

- I still wonder how you've grown up ignoring that you're a son of a martyr and a mujahida.

- The fate is so harsh, sir. I only knew I was a son of Bekkoucha, that is, the dumb-and-deaf woman...

- The names don't glorify the men. Only the men do get their reputation and stripes. As you've known the truth, what are you going to do, Salem?

- What's for? Salem said disturbingly. If I can, I don't know; and if I know, I can't. A dilemma, no?

Officer Lakhdar took off from his couch.

- Let's head back there, Salem, to revisit those legendary sites and the cache we hid in, to see the creek we jumped into. We'll evoke the bygone memories. Then, we'll see what to do.
- We also go back to the village? Salem asked, fascinated.
- The village of birth of your father is far away, in another area. First, we go to the village located near Wadi al-Akhira and the cache. I'm reasonably sure your mother, once freed from jail, had moved to that village. There, we'll ask people to show their hospitality, solidarity and faithfulness.

29

The celebration went on beyond the afternoon. The crowd awaited the appearance of Hadj Boualem and his guests to take part in the horse-racing. Shortly afterwards, people suddenly cried out for cover.

- To the hideout! To the hideout!

Every time a green-colored car of the gendarmes showed up, the villagers scampered off for shelter. They got accustomed to acting so since the French colonization era. The gendarmes had not set foot in the village for five months, since they had taken the dumb-and-deaf Fatima into custody. The sudden arrival of the gendarmes frightened them, as though wolves were falling upon the grazing sheep.

Once the peasants were out of sight, they began to chew the fat.

- Did you do something wrong?

- I did nothing! a voice would protest.

Then, Sheikh Hamza stood motioning with his hand, reassuring the fled mob.

- Why are you so scared, guys? I see you're shivering like geese in winter! Don't be terrified, you're under Hadj Boualem's wings. Don't you know he's the government himself? The gendarmes are like Solomon's Ring in his finger.

The tires skidded to a shrieking stop, hurting the rural earth as the brakes tamed them to become static. One of the gendarmes got out of the vehicle, scrutinizing the silent crowd, faces down, as if they concealed a crime in their thoughts.

Kouider single-footed to the tree-bordered house, bringing the news to his master.

Hadj Boualem soon stalked out in a bright wear. The crowd flooded him with hellos. He did not care about their bogus smiles.

He advanced towards the gendarmes, opening up his arms overemotionally, as he greeted them and shook their hands.

- Welcome, lions of the country! I was looking forward to your coming in this remarkable day. Come in, Si Zoubir and Toufik are expecting you two.

The villagers were amused by the boldness and high-esteem of Hadj Boualem in front of the men of the System.

A gendarme nodded to the other mate to go in with Hadj Boualem, who was overflowing with self-importance and delight. He showed them the doorstep.

Sheikh Hamza clubbed the soil with his bat, affirmative.

- You see, they're like rings in his fingers!

- Resume the tale, Sheikh Hamza! a guttural tone demanded in the open air.

Sheikh Hamza kept quiet for a while, calling back where he paused, then grinned as he knew it.

- When the meal was being served, the people asked the pious pilgrim to taste the slice of meat first, as a symbol of blessing. No sooner had he stashed the meat between his teeth than he threw it away, because he didn't appreciate its tang. The people urged him to tell them why he did so. He swept the clouds of their surprise and said: 'I'm used to hampering my lust of forbidden fruit. All I like is the allowed food. I know this meat is cut from an illicit ram. That's why I cast it aside.' The sheikh who held the feast had overheard the pilgrim's sharp words and then dashed immediately to the butcher's for an explanation of what had happened accurately. The butcher answered him rather shamefully: 'The pilgrim is right. I had found my ram stifled to death by a rope attached to the trunk of a tree. At once, I slaughtered the ram to sell it to you, because I needed money.'

- What has the master of the feast done when he knew about the asphyxiated ram? Slimane asked Sheikh Hamza.

- He did nothing, rather he...

Sheikh Hamza stopped talking, riveting his eyes to the lavish car which pulled out near the gendarmes' automobile.

Officer Lakhdar got down and then gestured at everybody with his right hand. Prior he heard the voices greeting him back, a frightening yell wafted out of the house. The peasants were awed when they saw Hadj Boualem stepping out, handcuffed altogether with his son, Bouzid, their mugs down, followed by Zoubir, the mayor, and Toufik, the forest keeper. The gendarmes shoved them all inside the vehicle like thieves.

The onlookers did not believe their protuberant eyes. They remained speechless. Officer Lakhdar accosted the two gendarmes who kicked their Ranger boots and brought themselves in military salute.

Sheikh Hamza coughed in his fist. 'God of Seven Heavens, the Switcher of circumstances! Hadj Boualem went in a hero, and went out a prisoner!'

The officer seemed lost. One gendarme approached him.

- Do you want to know the cause of the arrest, Commander?

- I wouldn't mind being briefed about it! Commander Lakhdar wished austerely.

The gendarme cleared his throat to fill him on the issue.

- Many cases. It's about an old homicide. And a rape of a young woman. And a cutting of trees without a permit. And usage of a state-owned farming machine for personal purposes.

Commander Lakhdar combed the two suspects with sharpened eyes. Then he said farewell to the two gendarmes, already gotten back in the vehicle which sped away in a hurry. Kouider ran after the vehicle like a batrachian, till he felt jaded, short of breath, and despaired.

The villagers squinted unbelievably at the horizon wolfing down the legend of father and son. Othmane walked to where the lush car was parked, greeted Salem and they talked of lots of things.

Commander Lakhdar stood in the middle of the villagers, poised to address them quite audibly.

- Oh, villagers, listen to me. Next Friday, I invite you to come back right here.

The crowd wondered what the drive of the appeal was.

- Within a couple of days, you'll receive official invitations from the wilaya, and you'll know the real motive.

Commander Lakhdar climbed back into his car and left the village behind.

Othmane was soon ringed by the curious peasants, overwhelming him with questions.

- What did Salem tell you? Why shall we convene here next Friday?

- Many things will be made public in the village this ongoing week, Othmane replied mysteriously, before he walked back home.

Kouider lied down on his back, weeping. The crowd towered over him, worried about his state.

- What happened to you, too, Kouider? Slimane demanded. Get up... Get up!

- The bad omen, Djilali remembered superstitiously, was that jackal we've seen this morning!

The rasping voice of Belkacem Bouakkaz thundered in the air, as he walked home shoulder to shoulder with Maamar.

- If the small jackal slipped out of the hands of shepherds, the great jackal got trapped today!

- The justice, Maamar admitted, is a lofty ceiling not liable to flooding or fire.

Sheikh Hamza recited a Koranic verse with a coughing trail

- 'God gives whom it pleases Him the kingdom, and He takes away the power from whosoever He wants.'

- 'God gives respite, but never neglects,' chin-haired Sheikh Bouakkaz recited more, unburdened. I swear by my beard, which has pushed up in the wake of the death of my sweet daughter Safia, that your Hadj Boualem is going to spend this night in jail. I hope it forever. I beg You this, Creator of The Seven Heavens.

Sheikh Yayha interceded to soften the steaming minds.

- Oh, my fellow peasants, 'fear God wherever you are.' The two men are in the custody of the government. Let's trust our knowledgeable government to do justice

Most of the peasants decamped, save a few men stayed beside Kouider, who began to come to.

30

Two days had flown by, and the village lived unacquainted moments. People would congregate here and there, some of them inquiring about the news and the others dived in interpreting the facts and the rebounds.

On the third morning, however, the long-speculating villagers were pulled out of their guesses, as some cars rolled closer, quite unexpectedly. One car stopped in front of the village's unique store and a middle-aged woman driver descended. She wore a dazzling white dress with black stripes. She explored the place with inquisitive eyes. She inched forward toward the men who were warming their buttocks on amorphous rocks set against the store. She was a bit anxious when she asked them.

- Who can show me the house of Bouzid? Is Hadj Boualem here?

They kept silent and diffident. Children soon approached her. She opened her handbag.

- Is Hadj Boualem here, kids?

They answered her simultaneously, eyeing the handbag content.

- Hadj is in jail! Hadj is in jail!

Her hand loosened over the handbag, and talked to them with contumely and in skepticism.

- What have you said? You're lying!

One boy swore by the Holy Koran.

- We're telling you the truth, madam. Children never tell lies. We saw Hadj Boualem and Bouzid seized by the gendarmes. In handcuffs, as well.

She turned upset, searching for the right words.

- Why? Did they find out the truth?

She paused. Then she addressed the sitting men with a sad tone.

- I forgot to introduce myself... My name's Jawhara, Boualem's wife... The Hadj, as you're used to calling him. The fake Hadj. I swear by my life, he has never set a foot in Mecca. During the hajj season, we would fly to France, and once seated in the airplane he was always joking: 'You've just to praise God and Mecca, to see the plebs misguided!'

She let out a lilting chuckle which soon ebbed away. She regretfully and gloomily confessed to the awed bystanders very dangerous revelations.

- Your Hadj had killed my poor husband to marry me, for he was crazy about my curves. After all these years, he walked out on me for a younger woman. Without a minute scruple, he has sued for divorce while I was abroad!

She halted and produced from her handbag a blue sheet of paper, then restarted with pint of irony.

- That's the so-called summons. He asks for a divorce ... He forgot who I am ... My gosh! I'm sure you're still tending his livestock, aren't you? The very habit of your ancestors, as a matter of fact. That was what he used to tell me...

- We...

But Maamar was interrupted by liverish Jawhara

- You worth nothing! Nothing! As Hadj has once depicted you: 'A drum brings you together, and a stick sends you for cover!' The bread binds you together under his shoes, and, therefore, your dignity is crushed under his feet.

- Far be it from that humiliation, Maamar retorted. The meadow isn't all grass.

- Poor wretch! My husband, Mouhouche's father, would think likewise! God, forgive me... Go forgive me... God...

Jawhara burst into tears and returned to her car, leaving the village. The men stood lost and disbelieving. They were astounded to hear from her mouth the accusations against the closest man to her heart.

- That's life, Djilali commented. 'Fatten up your dog, and it'll devour you at last!'

- The mask has slipped! Amrane quipped. They're uncovered now. Do you know that the tractor Bouzid was plowing with the day of Bekkoucha incident, is the owned by the state? Instead of farming our village, he kept it for himself.

- If this is the reason of the arrest of the mayor, Hadj Boualem and Bouzid, Slimane wondered, what crime did Toufik commit?

Sheikh Yahya held half of the truth.

- That's a punishment for his killing the foodstuff-laden donkey of Maamar!

Maamar rejoiced, having the other half of the truth.

- Thanks God, my poor donkey is avenged! Don't forget that Toufik, as being the forest warden, has allowed to Hadj Boualem to topple all the young trees!

Sheikh Dahmane, the village's imam, motioned to the rear of the store and whispered to his fellow men.

- Bouakkaz is coming up to us... Shift the subjects... 'Silence brings you the love of others!' When will we begin the operation?

31

Sunshine always follows rain. This Friday holds my future in a howdah of past which had burdened me with a laborious life. On this very Friday, I get back the aura of my birth. My mother will regain her golden crown, that is, her beautiful name of birth, lost for twenty years. Today, the unknown martyr will win back his prejudiced title.

Salem, seated comfortably in the Hunda, was musing so in high spirits, as the car drove up the steep mountainous road toward the village of his grandmother, Halima.

The officer stretched his arm out of the window.

- Look, Salem...

- Sorry, sir. What are you telling me?

- Look down the valley. It's Wadi al-Akhira.

Salem tilted his head to take hold of the long flowing river, winding through the mountains, then turned back to his mother who was smilingly swinging her head back and forth, as reminiscences cascaded over her mind.

- You know, Salem, the names of all these jet-black chasms and soaring peaks are inscribed in our memories with words of fire

- How do you see them now, sheikh Lakhdar?

- If there was no separation, there would be no reunion. Look at that gray rock atop the hill. God knows how many times I would share meals there with your father. I call back now, that was in the Mawlid's Eve, when we ran out of food. We slithered down into the stream's bank and we ate the roots of the doum palm. That lofty mountain bent down the day we welcomed your newly recruited father. We dubbed the mountain, 'The Flutter of Flag.'

- We used to call it, Mount Beni Mesra, Salem pointed out. Why have you named it, 'The Flutter of Flag'?

- Its secret name during the Revolution. Every Thursday evening, your father would share out ammunitions on the battalions.

- I do understand now. This revolutionary nom de guerre reminds me of another one.

- Which one? Commander Lakhdar asked, as he focused on the road ahead.

- 'Sesame'. It's the name of a Palestinian beach taken by the guerillas as a place to stockpile ammunitions at Abu Hatem al-Nejar. The secret password was: 'Open, Sesame.' Yes, we reached our village!

The two men tied up their tongues, while dumbfounded Fatima was staring at the spot of her former hut, which had turned into burnt wrecks.

Commander Lakhdar halved the silence.

- I do remember... I do remember...

His daughter, Souad, had taken seat beside Fatima.

- What is it, dad?

- Since we'd come to the village last week, and I've been trying to figure out what is lacking in the landscape of the village... It lost something we got used to seeing in Revolution days.

- I'm eager to know it, sheikh Lakhdar? Salem demanded, passionate.

- The tree... The willow tree which was overlooking the fountain! Where is it gone?

Salem let out a deep breath and replied tersely.

- It reminds me a forgotten stab...

- Why are you so sad and hesitating, Salem? Souad asked, bothered.

- Tell her, Salem, what happened to the willow tree. It's relevant now. Didn't you see that in its trunk was engraved a big heart bearing the words 'LONG LIVE ALGERIA'? Your father, Ameur, etched it.

- You, too, did it, dad? Salem sighed. Hadj Boualem sawed it down. Did you forget what happened to him?

- Oh, yes, I do remember... No tyrant escapes the deserved chastisement, sooner or later.

Before noon, the villagers had practically finished assembling the bones of martyrs in the village square. They showed extreme ardor in the operation. The words of the zealous imam, Sheikh Dahmane, were still ringing in their ears.

- The dead must be honored by the living... The fragrant bone fragments... The keepers of our religion... The official authorities sponsor this process... Proceed carefully... God is the Greatest.

Commander Lakhdar pulled his car to a stop a few yards from the village's square. Coffins were being aligned and emblazoned with national flags.

Slimane, staggered, whispered into the ear of Sheikh Yahya.

- Look, there... Unbelievable! Bekkoucha and her son got out of the officer's car. And a beautiful young woman, too!

Sheikh Yahya frowned, yet his reverence was not rippled.

- Show mercy to the martyrs, Slimane. Don't listen to the gossip of people.

Salem came up to them, visibly touched. They hugged each other with sympathy.

- Sheikh Yahya!

- How are you two doing?

- Fine. How's Mahmoud?

- All right. He's over there.

Salem scoured the throng to spot Mahmoud. The latter was busy writing on a big banner. Salem paced toward him. They shared a cordial embrace, welling over with joy of seeing each other after a long absence. He read the banner with great emotion:

GLORY AND ETERNITY FOR OUR RIGHTEOUS MARTYRS

Commander Lakhdar greeted the villagers present there and drew near the imam, while Souad stood beside the car beholding the dug ditches, lined up at the other side of the square.

Fatima, Salem's mother, approached the coffins, her attention drawn at the accumulated bones over a mat woven from leaves of doum palms. She stared left and right, and then joined her son, who was alongside Mahmoud and the officer listening to Sheikh Dahmane.

- I've never seen in my life people pouring in to work hard for the honor our martyrs...

The imam halted, as Kouider got closer to them, gripped by the military stripes on the shoulders of the officer, shining like a star-lit night. The imam resumed discourse.

- We've left no stone unturned, and we came up of thirty-three martyrs' remains as a first batch of bones. Most of them have been identified by their relatives and brothers in arms.

- Did you find my father? Salem interrupted him.

The imam resorted to silence.

- Did you find my father? Salem reiterated.

No response came up. Kouider barged in, reckless.

- Did your mother marry a man so that you can expect a father?

Salem felt armless, bare-chested in the face of this umpteenth cold stab. Yet, he cloaked his anger, grinned, and then aimed a blow at Kouider.

- You, dirty asshole, shut up! You're the most insignificant...

Fatima did not let her son end his sentence. She tugged at his arm with all her energy, trying to spell his name: 'S... S...' The two strode away in the direction of the west, down onto the foot of the mountains. Salem attempted to flag down his mother.

- Mom... Mom! Where to? Let's come back to identify my father before the burial.

Salem talked to himself: 'It would be the last day in my life, shouldn't the truth come into sight to gainsay the villagers'

allegations.’ He then rushed alone to the coffins, opening each one with trembling hands. It was like he was probing everything in nothingness.

Commander Lakhdar blocked him at the third coffin.

- What are you doing, Salem?

Salem gazed at him expectantly.

- Let me alone, please!

- What are you looking for? Stop fumbling with the martyrs! Enough!

- I’m looking for my dignity... Remains of my father, the martyr.

Peasants crowded round, as Commander Lakhdar talked on.

- Your dignity went to the foot of the mountains! To the woods! Look at your mother who bears your dignity. Don’t you fear that beasts devour her down there?

Salem heaved his head as if he saw the officer for the first time. He sensed that the officer’s words bore secrets the mountains could no longer conceal. He sped to catch up with his gone mother.

Adamant Commander Lakhdar ordered some villagers to accompany him up the hills with their shovels.

- We’ve combed all the places, low and high, sir, Sheikh Dahmane tried to stop him.

- Maybe you’re right. Yet, I must go up there to relive at least the memories. Move on, guys!

Commander Lakhdar spearheaded ten men, following the path taken by Fatima and Salem. Mid-way, he started to entertain the shovel-wielding men.

- There is a fig tree in the vicinity of the stream whose fruit are salty in winter!

They marveled at his knowing this secret, only familiar to the established inhabitants of the village.

- How come you know it? one of them ventured to ask.

- Where do you live? Who are you? a second peasant enquired.

- It doesn't matter too much who I am and where I do live. It's just important to know yourselves more, and your lives. Life is a tedious journey which starts from a small jail (womb) to winds up, at oldness, in another small jail (tomb), and between the two there exists a bigger jail: the world.

- Did Salem tell you how to pinpoint the fig tree? a third villager demanded.

- I also know Wadi al-Akhira, S'baghnia, Ain Beni Ali, Beni Salah, Takitount, and many other localities.

32

Fatima and her son, Salem, had already attained the mound of stones, wherein she had pit her wits against Bouzid and his two cronies. She rolled up her sleeves and began to displace the stones, one by one. Salem stood unvoiced and baffled. She was collecting the remnants of the wax and put them in a handkerchief. She was actively engaged in her work, as words were brewing in her mind. Today, you'll see light or you'll be looked at. Deserts and mountains will recognize that your blood hadn't been spilled for nothing... My silent darling... You, the stranger amongst his people... Don't lose hope, as your bones will soon rest with your fallen mates in one trench... They're waiting for you in one united front... They're expecting you up there... Your dream came true and the country is free now. You've given birth to a son, yearning for your seeing honored... Today, my dear husband, we meet altogether in the presence our son. In the presence of all the community, and the 'Angels of Earth' and the 'Angels of Heavens' see each other again...

Salem made out why his mother was dislodging the stones. He knelt down, beholding the earth that had buried his unheard-of past; the past that hid the symbol of his honor. He cupped his hands and filled them with earth, looked at it, shed tears. He kissed the earth with his tremulous lips, and then daubed it on his face to mop the tears. With a medley of affection and blame, he gazed at his mother, who was almost finished with throwing the stones away. He wished she could hear his words. 'Why, mother? Why did you conceal this truth to me? You've been hiding the weapon when I was armless against my enemies?'

He heard footsteps crushing the ground closer behind him. He returned and saw Commander Lakhadar accompanied by other men.

- What are Salem and his mother doing here? Djilali asked, completely boggled.

- They're looking for what you and fellow villagers have been ignoring! They're digging up a treasure more costly than Hadj Boualem's money or Khosrow's wealth.

- That's the truth Hadj Boualem was misguiding you for years? Salem defended himself.

- Bekkoucha hit Bouzid with stones right here! Djilali added.

- Her name is Fatima Bent Tahar, Commander Lakhadar admonished Djilali. She went out to defend her country along with her husband, Ameur, whose bones rest here now in front of you all. In another words, this is an immaculate place of a glorious martyr. The men present winced at the news, which sent them whispering in utter incomprehension:

- A martyr? Salem's father was a martyr?

Slimane did not believe in what he saw and heard. He thought it was just a well-staged game to pull Salem and his mother out their doubts. He stuttered as he talked.

- Is it true that he's lying here? How can you identify him?

Mahmoud interposed, relieved yet dazed, too.

- He will recognize us! 'Aren't the martyrs alive whom the God endows with provisions?'

Commander Lakhdar asked Salem and Fatima to move aside, to let the men dig out. At first, Fatima did want to quit her place, but the officer convinced her to push a few meters backwards. He then shouted at the diggers.

- Don't draw the shovels close to the middle of the tomb!

No sooner had Commander Lakhdar warned them accordingly than they roared their incredible enjoyment.

- God is the Greatest... God is the Greatest... A martyr... A martyr!

- God is the Greatest... There is no power nor might save in God... Wait...

A tattered cloth appeared under the dust. Slimane parted with his shovel and went on digging with his fingers. Gingerly. Others

helped him, as well, till they distinguished the outlining of the buried martyr. They removed the broken skeleton with trembling hands and thudding hearts.

Commander Lakhder could not stand to witness the exhumed brother-in-arms. Tears flowed down his cheeks, recited a Koranic sura, The Opener. Fatima stepped closer, beheld the skeleton of her husband. She smiled down at him, before she passed out.

- Mom... Mom... Look, this is my dad... My dad... Dad, this is mom... I am your son... Dad... Mom... D...

The sobs choked Salem, felt dizzy, lost his balance, slumped over the soil and twitched between his quivering mother and static bones of his father...

Calls filled in the woods.

- Water... Coffin... Water... Hurry up!

Two men went like the wind to village to fetch water and a coffin.

Sweat soaked the forehead of Commander Lakhdar, merged with his own tears. Sometimes he talked to the remains of the martyr, and sometimes addressed the villagers still present around the skeleton.

- God bless you, my companion of arms. You were my noblest friend. You've earned the Delights of Perpetuity... We had parted in a gunpowder-laden morning in order to meet again under the sunshine of freedom... We'll see each again, my brother... The most blissful meet of all. The everlasting encounter...

Commander Lakhdar paused, wept without restraint, and forgot the men beside him. The streaming tears mashed the toughness of his military discipline, and made the gravediggers feel sorrow and repentance for having spoken ill of Salem's anonymous fatherhood...

Several minutes glided by in sheer quietness.

The villagers let drops of water flow down on the faces of Bekkoucha and Salem. The two opened their eyes, as though reborn. The villagers read through the features of the awakening mother and son. They apologized then-Fatima for the moniker

‘Bekkoucha’ of old days. They asked God’s Forgiveness for their ‘slander of a chaste women.’ They looked back to the day Bekkoucha, the ‘dumb-and-deaf-woman’, showed up in the village wearing a blue robe and holding a toddler in arms, Salem. They evoked the hut, the awkward walking, Bouzid, and so on.

Djilali cut their thoughts short as he extirpated under the earth a dusty pocket watch, a few rusty bullets and coins.

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In the afternoon, the inhabitants of the village convened in great numbers, raising eyebrows of awe. They reinterred the remains of the martyrs in the village's square; took part in the emotional event Salem and his mother, Fatima, Commander Lakhdar and his daughter, Souad, and folks from the town. Subsequently, they all flocked to the foot of the mountains to erect a stony memorial in the honor of Ameer, the father of Salem. They unfurled the national flag atop, and then recited Koranic verses collectively. The national anthem was intoned, too. Smiles and tears melded, setting up a makeshift rainbow over the countenances.

The villagers embraced each other, and reminisced about joys of religious feasts of old. Regretting having defiled a martyr's name, they even begged pardon to loyal and chaste Fatima, and her son, Salem. At last, they knew the secret behind her refusal to quit the village, despite the intimidation they whipped her with along the years.

Let bygones be bygones...

Salem looked blithe as he was deluged with the sympathy of the peasants. He gasped for breath when they approached him for kisses and squeezes. Some talked with him covered with shame. Dusky-faced, head down, and the lips pursed, Belkacem Bouakkaz stepped closer to shake the hand of Salem, before he withdrew.

The town clerk took a close step as he spoke aloud.

- Oh, you, peasants who live in the village of martyrs... The government decided to grant you land and necessary means. Those interested in this process can register themselves at the town hall freely and democratically...

- What democracy are you talking about? Othmane snapped on tenterhooks. All what we've seen mushroomed in the town hall are forgery and nepotism!

The official clerk kept a cool head.

- Democracy is consultative, guarded by the awareness of the citizens. Our Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, had said: 'Whoever sees an evil, he must change it by his hand...'

- What does it mean you grant land, freedom and democracy? Sheikh Yahya wondered, a bit mordant.

- Do you want us go back to the era of Agrarian Revolution?

Commander Lakhdar clarified more the words of the official representative.

- Look, dear peasants. The land will be yours, you plow it freely, and all what you sow, you'll reap it for yourselves. You've the choice to do so, individually or collectively, as it pleases you.

The peasants stared at each other, for clues of sincerity and reassurance. They gave each other sustained hug, and then trooped back to the village, chanting.

- 'We're holding the weapons... We're holding the weapons...'

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- How my revamped honor is now flying high. It's the first time I enter the village with my parents, in full. I can now stare out over each face, and all the eyes. I can defy the prickly glances with my head held high. I can even brave the estrangement which ruined my existence for years. Everybody ought to know that I do exist and my legitimate father did, too. I am not a bastard! How sweet the honor is! How bitter the dishonor is! My dignity was buried in the foot of the mountains. Everyone tried to clothe it the dress of mucky disgrace. Oh, what an enchanting meeting with the honeys and the sweethearts...

Then, Salem pushed a deep sigh, out of regret, with his eyes welling with tears.

Mahmoud felt for his friend.

- Why all these tears now, Salem?

- Those of fates, Mahmoud.

- Life taught us that there are tears of joy. Am I right?

- If only Safia were alive, I would be the happiest human being in the world.

Salem nodded in nostalgia of the last date with her under the willow tree...

'You know, I'm afraid, Salem.'

'What are you afraid of, Safia?'

'I'm afraid of fates. What if the fire of separation turns the good memories into ashes and the wind sweeps them away?'

- It's the Wisdom of God, Salem. You've to fold the page on the past. It's the twentieth of August, and we're just a few days away

from the new school year. Let's hold on to life with newer perspectives.

Salem looked at Mahmoud in a blurred silence.

- Listen to me, Salem. You've to resume studies, at least through correspondence courses.

Commander Lakhdar came up to them. He smiled and placed a hand on the shoulder of Salem.

- And did you forget the military service?

Salem seemed strong-minded.

- As the truth is at last revealed to me, I'm going to enlist in the military service willingly.

Mahmoud sang a carol.

- 'The youths plant the trees and protect the homeland... The youths at the door of Africa cut through the Hoggar Mountains!'

- Despite everything, I'll do my duty, Salem interrupted his comrade. I shall carry on the track of my dead father for the sake of my country.

- You've the right to be exempt from military service, Mahmoud remarked. Your father paid a high price before you were born. Am I right, honorable officer?

- Indeed, kid. All the sons of martyrs are exempt from the draft. This privilege is in the honor of the souls of our martyrs. This will help them further their studies at the university without hitches.

Salem felt he was over the moon as he embraced Commander Lakhdar. He turned back to see his mother drawing closer along with Souad.

- Which field will you study at the university?

- Surgery of throat!

Souad was now with them, smiling. Fatima kept mute.

- And me, Salem, I'll opt for ear surgery!

Commander Lakhdar laughed as he turned to Mahmoud.

- And you'll become a great Historian in the offing. The History of nations is the attire it displays when strutting around. I fear to see it one day muddied. What do you think about it, Mah...

Mahmoud winked at Salem and smiled, astute.

- Yes, you're right, officer. Yet, I think I'll don the imam's priestly garb to make the impending marriage of your daughter sacred!

Everyone smiled in consent at the marital hint. Salem and Souad lowered their heads in silence, suddenly made heavy by shyness.

Commander Lakhdar motioned towards the villagers to behold the monument, which was fading out as the sun hurtled down beyond the hills. The only visible thing atop the monument was the flag, watching over the peasants with honesty and fulfillment.

THE END

