

EZZA AGHA MALAK

**THE MAN
OF ALL SILENCES**

A Novel

Translated by Cynthia T. Hahn

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For Gilles,

*My most affectionate thanks
for the opportunity he gave me
to weave this novel in tandem.*

My words are my strength.

*Who will ever understand why two lovers who idolized each
other the day before,
for one badly interpreted remark,
separate from each other, one toward the East, the other
toward the West,
holding daggers of hatred, of vengeance,
of love and of remorse, and who no longer meet,
each draped in solitary pride?
It is a miracle renewed each day
and is no less miraculous for this.*

*The Songs of Maldoror
Le Comte de Lautréamont*

Prologue

*For those with any doubt, it is a love story.
But stifled by the silence and idiocy of men.
By the death and fragility of the person.
That of a soul, a homeland, an ego.
We are left only with finding a reason for being,
to tolerate the absurdity.*

Each time I get ready to write a love story about a couple who love one another and who tear each other apart, I find myself setting off in a contrary direction, almost parallel, telling a story of war and of the violence that runs through it.

This is very significant.

If my fingers, my keyboard, and my mind come together to take a detour, to clearly deviate from what I set out to do, this means that what is happening outside of me is much more compelling than what is happening inside.

What could emotional disappointment and a lover's deception represent, cruel though it may be, next to the sight of burned bodies and blood being shed to the rhythm of violence provoked by those closest to us?

And what is heartbreak and fragmentation of the self next to the explosive destruction of a country and homeland?

It has been this way in my writing for long decades now; as soon as I start a story of love and passion, of sentimental disillusionment and betrayal of trust, or even of cuckoldry and infidelity, something more urgent comes to the fore and emerges at the surface of my thoughts. Writing becomes ideology and the loving word a space that is as

geographical as it is geopolitical; it is where the collective conscience manifests and nourishes my fictional reflection, where young people die in any manner of ways. They are victims of iron fists and sadistic warmongering, regional or local, of extremists who profoundly exploit the religion of Allah in order to kill in his name. But the tale of extremism and confessionalism is only political. We are duped by the war over religion. It is only a lure.

A lure but a tragic reality.

In these times of sadistic and helter-skelter politics, Lebanon sees her children depart. We have been birthing children since the beginning of time for the most distant of places: Europe, Australia, the United States, the Northern countries, etc., etc., etc.... Today our country has become more than ever an exporter of youth. Even though the license to export is not as easy to obtain as one imagines!

Opposed to this national drama is optimism, Lebanese-style. We take refuge there by inventing every kind of ersatz.

Love, hope, writing and all these poles of existential reflection could also become stand-ins.

I have a strong appetite for what I conceive of in its most transcendental form—love. That which raises high, which transports into ethereal layers of consciousness and reflection, love destined to be lived and not to be made. What would the human being be without transcendence? Without the elevation of the senses? Without soaring beyond material reality, from the instinctive duality that traverses the self?

I could not say if this story will be read as a story of love or of war and hatred. It is enough to adhere to Apollinaire's idea found in a letter to his warring sponsor:

"One must not ask love for more than what it has to give, and those who are reasonable, that is, the poets, profit from their suffering in love by singing about it".

A reasoned view to take defines it as a story that interlocks love with war, and war with love. It is a truly paranoid scenario. And where is the importance in all that?

Writing. Therapy. To tell a couple's story.

What gives me peace in this stifling imbroglio is writing; it is my balsamic drug and my vitamin. In doing this, I discharge myself of a heavy weight. It is not easy to break with thirteen years of tenderness only to throw them away. That would be akin to sadism, or masochism, to which resilience is opposed, as it sits diametrically opposite from apathy, vulnerability and resignation. In search of balance. And it is always with despair that I discover the baseness of men.

One must be a bit shock resistant. To overcome one's present situation. Stand up. Put yourself to the test of time; it is what makes us strong. It is what makes us resilient.

Too much pride is sometimes chained to a death sentence.

Yet pride remains our only safeguard.

Part I

Marseille, France

The Slap

Happiness is continuing to desire what one already possesses.

The Confessions of Saint Augustine

Love is easier to make than to live.

Marguerite Duras

1.

I didn't see it coming, this bitter outburst, which he tried to take back afterwards. Even so, everything foretold it, said it: his gaze which eluded mine, his pink carnation become pale, then changing instantly to red showing the strong emotion coloring his nearly bald head, the exasperated tone of his voice denoting an uncontrollable upset, as when faced with great fear, and these few words thrown out for me but not to me, as he was not looking my way:

"We have to stop... We must stop... it can't go on like this.. We must stop..."

The words spilled out helter-skelter, without any reason (from my point of view), multiplying the verbs that remained incomplete utterances.

No, I hadn't guessed it, foreseen it or predicted it, his acidic words, surprising and displaced. Because I had been holding mine back for the past several days, since just before we took the train for Paris to reach the hotel where we were to spend two nights. For me as well, there were things to "stop", reproaches to be made, accusations to formulate as it happens between even the most harmonious of couples. And so it was with us. There were days where we quarreled over futile and insignificant things, but our discussions were without repercussion.

It was such that lately, bitter and quarrelsome, he often let forth a categorical "no" before he had even understood my suggestions. To our friends, he smiled and teased, saying that with me he had learned how to say *no* and that this word of protest and of refusal didn't exist within his vocabulary before meeting me.

I had given him a good amount of freedom of expression.

I knew that life as a couple had its ups and downs, that it contained conflicts of all kinds, that there were inevitable moments of crisis, of misunderstanding and incomprehension but that once controlled, once the dialogue had begun, speech started, everything would go back to the way it was before. All true happiness has its share of ecstasy, of beatitude, of sour grapes, and of pain. I had to say that within our relationship, the moments of happiness and peace far outnumbered the moments of squabbling and troubles. Our life was flowing like a long, *peaceful river*.

On his upset, surly face, with his gaze far from mine, I assumed that all dialogue at that moment would be of little use, unproductive. He was clearly sulking. In the train that let us off at Marseille, he avoided all contact, any brush against me, refusing his usual grasp of my hand. There was a disconnect between us, hard to identify, a kind of unspoken tension that was building (I surmised) up to the eve of our Paris trip, and to that moment when, in the evening he wanted to "do a load of laundry."

I therefore attributed his bad mood to this *activity*. Banal drudgery, but that was how I understood it; his bad humor could well be linked to the washing of his laundry (could there be anything more silly?), and to my refusal to give him a hand, as I had always done. And for good reason.

On that evening, the eve of our departure, the wash basket was full to the brim with clothing Shirts, underwear, socks (only his) were spilling over the top in the bathroom. Every other day, he washed his dirty laundry. It's necessary when one rarely takes a shower during the week or only when one has to see the doctor.

On that evening therefore, he took his basket, spilling its fat load of laundry, and stuffed it into the washing machine. I didn't run over as I usually did. He should have done it well before that evening and it wasn't up to me to remind him.

Negligence really gets to me, as does uncleanliness. For me, there were elements of hygiene that must be respected and which Guy couldn't care less about. He had an instinctive revulsion of the bath and the shower. Some kind of water issue.

"You're doing it now?" I said lightly, indicating the washing machine.

"I'm out of shirts," he retorted in a cranky tone, starting the machine.

"And the fifty brand new shirts in the closet?"

He remained silent and sat down in front of the TV, on the white leather couch whose left armrest that he used nightly had turned a dirty white.

"But your wash won't be dry for tomorrow."

He turned his gaze on me, a sarcastic look that I have never seen before. Why this hostility and what did he expect from me? That I wash his laundry dutifully and without a second thought, though I was angry about the power the Oriental man had over his wife, his inconsiderate manner, making of her his possession, but also angry with the woman who resigned herself to this? The Arab mentality based on women's submission, on her silence and consent had always revolted me.

And should I incarnate this image for him while I was living on French soil with a French man? Reputed to be evolved and courteous? Was he seeking the pleasure of subjecting me as an Arab man would? Why did he want to play the macho?

All these questions momentarily surfaced in my mind. But I didn't hesitate to sweep them away, presuming them to be ridiculous and totally unsuited to a situation perhaps entirely invented by my imagination.

He sat down in front of the TV, after starting the washing machine, without customary comment, without

noting my presence. I sat next to him, asking him in a serious tone:

"Why are you acting this way?"

He frowned, but said nothing.

I wanted to spill it, to make him understand that he couldn't count on me for household tasks he could do himself and that he should take care of his own things or else hire a maid; that he was making out as if he were a spoiled Lebanese man, as these men had maids in Lebanon to serve them. I would not be this maid. Especially not there, in France, and in our home in Marseille.

I had hardly begun, saying, "Listen, you have to understand something; I'm not your servant. I take care of our house well enough, cleaning it and making it pleasant, you don't do anything, you don't cooperate; your stuff is tossed everywhere as if you lived in a hotel. I work just as you do... if not more; life as a couple demands sharing and cooperation..." but I heard him cut me off, grumbling: "It has to stop...".

So the problem was worse than I had imagined.

I took his chin in the palm of my hand and turned his head toward me. I asked him with a smile:

"But you didn't finish your sentence; *stop* what? What's the rest?"

He didn't respond. I asked again:

"Stop what, tell me... You began your sentence. So what's the end?"

"You know it!"

"Not at all..."

"Yes, you do!"

He said it with a solid, firm tone, accompanied by a vexed nod of his head. This surly attitude was something I considered to be a temporary sulk which would end with an amiable reconciliation on his part after a short period. As always.

But I was wrong. At first I thought he wasn't serious. But in thinking back to our trip to Paris, I understood that it was no joke or prank. Guy the tender, sweet one, was serious, and he didn't want to understand or hear about anything, as if he were trying out a new form of communication.

I couldn't understand anything either.

Where were the gestures of tenderness to which he was so attached and which had become a need and a part of his daily life? Such as the *hand in hand*, that revealing gesture which had become automatic, a ritual. Hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder and arm in arm, anywhere we were, in a restaurant or in the street, in front of the TV or at a friend's house, in the car or yet in bed. It was an affable and romantic attitude that suggested sublime feelings; I felt this warmth.

So much so that somewhere inside I was bothered by it. In the street, pulled by his hand strongly grasping mine, walking almost behind him as my steps could not equal his strides, I resembled a child, or even, a poodle. But I didn't complain because the affection that stemmed from this gesture was stronger than the feeling of domination that I felt when as we walked; he *pulled* me by the hand.

In bed, our two hands pressed together without the possibility of detachment, we munched our apples and drank our juice with the free hand while watching TV.

Saturday nights were dedicated to watching our two favorite shows, that of Patrick Sébastien that we watched while eating in the dining room, and then in our bedroom afterwards, *On n'est pas couché* ("We're not asleep") led by Laurent Ruquier. During the entire show, his hand grasped mine, for hours, his arm and shoulder against mine. As if he were afraid that I would evaporate or escape.

This ritual maintained during our thirteen years of living together was an obsessive imposition. It carried with it sensations, but also feelings. I found in this the expression of a great serenity and shared love, a gesture of self-giving and

belonging (of possession? It's possible). I always found in this reciprocal, epidermic touching, this alchemy of skin, an extraordinarily ethereal meaning, translated as, "I am with you, I belong to you", without saying it, especially stemming from such an introvert as Guy who hid his emotions. Sometimes skin is more telling than a look.

2.

The sublime feeling of touch! Sublime because it says so much while remaining silent, because of its great sensual power that can replace the absence of words. It has its own language, is moving and discreet. It contains an element of essence and skin with pores. There are tiny orifices that open to the world and give off the nature of one's being. We transmit as much via touch as we do through words, through tactile contact that is sometimes shown to be more eloquent than speech. It is in this way that Guy and I prolonged this unique experience.

There is the skin that envelops the body, protects it and receives its caresses. Surface of exchanges and contact, it has its carnal and corporal dimension. It also has its own language when it unites with another skin in which it finds harmony and understanding.

It was the case that Guy's skin got along marvelously with mine, and my skin was perfectly compatible with his. An erotic compatibility upheld for many years, but which this evening, had to stop, suspend itself. As a kind of punishment.

This compatibility applied equally between our bodies and minds, harmonious and in agreement. Often, in the midst of expressing one idea occupying my mind, I was surprised to hear him in the process of formulating it, as a diviner or magician. As if he were able to read my thoughts. A kind of mysterious alchemy comprised of complicity, tolerance and confidence supported our relationship. This is probably what comprised our understanding, our unity and stability: compatibility between a dreamy, idealistic Aquarius and a tender, maternal and emotional Cancer.

When I met him, I discovered in him strong qualities of mind and heart. And to get an idea of what the temperament of an Aquarius might be, I consulted, for fun, the site of a relational horoscope that was preceded by a psychological analysis of one's astrological sign. I read this:

"You are both so different that you will be certainly fascinated by one another. Cancer, water sign, needs proximity and the feeling of being needed. Aquarius, air sign, needs space and the feeling of independence in the relationship. Cancer can offer Aquarius warmth and affection without explanation. Aquarius can offer Cancer new ideas and the awareness of a larger world to explore."

And so it is difference sometimes that creates harmony, that ends up fostering resemblance in the act of melding with the other. As in osmosis, interpenetration where influence appears reciprocal and sensitive.

Diane and I met often to discuss this question of skin compatibility. Diane is a Lebanese friend living in Marseille. She would not accept certain interpretations. She had lost tactile contact and all other contact with her man who no longer touched her. She agreed however that Aquarius, air sign, needed space and a feeling of independence in the relationship. On this point, I justified Guy's behavior by imagining that he needed this, today. Although I didn't feel possessive. That was more like him.

His skin was really what monopolized me.

When Guy touched me for the first time, a tactile dimension composed of sensuality and protection inhabited me. His pale, sensual skin, even though a bit rough, put me in direct and intimate contact with him. I immediately realized that it is through skin that one can enter into contact with the other. "I've got you under my skin", he told me that day. His expression filled me with an intense pleasure because I also had him "under my epidermis".

A strangely tactile force brought our skin together. It was probably from this that the need to be always hand in hand came, and this "pleasure of the touch" as Voltaire called it.

Guy was tactile. So was I.

I never thought that our constancy and all this tactile compatibility could one day shift, invaded by an unknown uneasiness, nor that our complicity could turn to rupture and misunderstanding. We were evolving with age, to a point where no misconduct or blunder was allowed. When one is retired as I am, or when one is approaching retirement, as he was, the child in us has already grown up, transforming itself with good sense and discernment.

We were no longer Minervas but our life as a couple was developing in a healthy way. However, during the trip to Paris we had taken two days ago, something began to be missing from our emotional entente and our tactile dimension.

During our roundtrip, Paris-Marseille, everything was normal between us aside from one new, disconcerting thing: he avoided all physical contact with me. Contrary to his compulsions, he didn't take me by the hand, didn't pull me along like a poodle, didn't touch me at all. In the hotel, in the street, in the train. Upon our return, arriving at the train station Saint Charles de Marseille, we walked side by side but in parallel, as two acquaintances who had just met, each of us pulling a suitcase on wheels, chatting.

Even so, in Paris, during the conference we had just attended, he behaved amiably with me as with one of my Lebanese friends, who had become his friends—smiling, cooperating, exchanging with them small talk and affectionate words. Charismatic, he enjoyed expressing his graceful manner that they were happy to return in kind. And with our Parisian friends, he behaved like a perfect knight and gentleman, holding back no gesture of tenderness and goodwill.

What had happened then for him to avoid all contact with me, and for him, the one who was overly tactile, overly sensitive, overly attached to his habits, to throw out this, "We have to stop", upon our return home? For how long had this idea been simmering within him?

3.

I tried to concentrate on the words he had just spoken, where the verb "to stop", essentially transitive, was evoked without being completed. *We must stop...* but stop what? It was perplexing. My questions multiplied. I still didn't understand what he specifically wanted to stop.

With an unshakable calm, I looked him in the eye:

"But stop what? Why are you holding back? Explain yourself!"

After a long moment, he began, saying in an almost childish, innocent tone:

"We haven't made love for two years; we have no more physical contact...We have to stop..."

"I don't understand... Once more: *stop what?* Answer me!"

"You should know... You've had your own room for two years now..."

"I did that for you. For your comfort... For your sick little heart... as a favor to you!"

"And for myself," I also thought. If in the beginning of our coexistence, I could only fall asleep to the sound of his snoring (even when he became noisier and stop-start on certain nights). I had changed during these last two years. I found it more comfortable to have my own bed that no one else shared, to have the most pleasant sleep. And then there is the other side stemming from my prim and proper childhood. In physical relations, there were things that disgusted me, things I couldn't *offer him*. There was also this *thing about water* that he hated and that I needed. In the beginning, he accommodated me; he took his shower before bed. But some time afterwards, he began not to comply. I was not

demanding. Nor obsessive. But a minimum of hygiene was a priority.

He turned his head to avoid my gaze when I reiterated, "it's for your little sick heart". I drew closer.

"And you want us to stop? To stop living together, you mean?"

He grew quiet, as if in agreement. I followed:

"...And for us to separate?"

"Yes!"

Ouch! I shouldn't have asked the question in this way.

His yes came across as the cry of relief of a sulking child. He said it firmly, without hesitation. In response to my question in real time. As if I were the one who had suggested, had pulled it from him. This question (probably related to my proud roots) imposed its own response. It hurt me because I had in no way expected such a reply.

A small, almost ironic smile crossed my face while his remained sullen, head lowered as if sorry for a mistake.

"No! You are joking! You really want us to separate?"

"..."

"And because we no longer make love?"

"..."

"And because it's my fault?"

"..."

My rage exploded:

"But it's you, your medication, your extra weight... your moods... your worries over work... your stress... You didn't realize this?"

He remained silent to my reproaches. I strongly added:

"Listen... If you think that I'm going to play the prostitute to awaken your sleeping desire, you're wrong!"

"Prostitute": I dared say the word to him. This word that represents a male fantasy. I knew it from stories of my acquaintances, both Arab and French; the well-educated, perfect woman doesn't please a man for long in the life of a

couple. Even if enterprising and liberated, he is quickly bored afterwards, and the perverse side of the male emerges. In intimacy, what he desires is the prostitute and her symbolism capable of awakening in him the sexual instinct and satisfying his libido, this libido that seems to guide him. A girlfriend told me that her husband could achieve an erection only by using dirty expressions and repeating to her, "You are my little bitch" and he asked her to use the same tone with him. That shocked her at first but in the end she adapted to it to please him. She explained it to me as an invitation on the part of her husband to be all women to him: the lover, the girlfriend, the confidante and ...the bitch. In short, *everything*, she told me one day.

In our shared life, there was no question of it (that I act as this friend of mine had done), at least not for me who believed in transcendence and the sublimation of instincts. These two values are not always "the negation of desire" and elevate one above sensual and material realities.

Far from being cynical, a thinker and dreamer, Guy had a confiding, natural timidity that had reassured me since the first day of our relationship. When I met him at age 48, he was a respectful and respectable man. Loyal and honest, a nobility of spirit distinguished him. In Lebanon, he had made a lot of friends because of this visible, noble side.

Our life evolved in respect and mutual understanding. In intimate moments, there was a tender and quiet love. And over time, I understand that he had not had a lot of sexual experience. He was neither inventive nor dynamic, and not wild. Rather classic. He had spent 20 or so years with the same woman, and it was but three years before their divorce that they had gotten married. "To protect her," he had affirmed to me. True or not, I loved this protective and affectionate, even shy side of him. Not very outgoing, he knew well how to appear affable by controlling his emotions.

But now he spoke out without being able to master his anger or his thoughts. Impulsively, he spat out his exasperation by pronouncing the *sentence* of separation and the assent I had supplied: yes.

I added further, playfully, in order to hide my emotions:

"And if you think that I'm going to cry and beg, that I'm going to get down on my knees, you are wrong there too. You know me... 'Please stay' is not my thing..."

My warning, my threat rather had no effect.

He returned again to his silent state. I had to say something:

"Are you saying that *I have to leave*?" I articulated, separating each word carefully.

"Yes!"

Another clear *yes*, precise and sadistic. I was red with rage.

There too, I had not expected such a raw response, such a desire to hurt by affirmation. My self-confidence and my pride were at stake. I continued with a little mocking smile:

"Let it be so then. I will leave. Amen!"

Once again the silence, one of these silences that only lethargy could bring:

"Do you have someone else?"

"You know how I am..."

A concise question-response and that didn't explain much, except that he was painting his own portrait of an honest man.

Should I believe him?

I still don't understand why it was impossible to discuss seriously with him. I contented myself with guessing his thoughts. Interpreting them in my own way. As I did now. But that put me in such an irritated state that it rendered the ideas darker still by fabricating a reality.

He gambled on silence, this redeeming power, resistant as a shield and behind which he protected himself, closing himself down like an oyster.

Silence is sometimes a strength. In the case where one could say: the dogs are barking but they will calm down as long as one doesn't react. Lao Tse said: "Silence is the source of great strength."

But at the same time, it is a cowardly act, disrespectful and dishonest with regard to the other when speech is retained.

"Only silence is great, the rest is weakness?"

No, Mr. Vigny.

On the contrary. Silence is impotence, a weakness, an impasse that only language may liberate.

It was Guy's cowardice, his lack of confidence that was revealed through his hurtful silence. He dared not respond nor finish his sentence. He enclosed himself behind the walls of his silence.

Was he afraid of saying nasty things?

Instead of calming myself, diminishing my anger, his silence made me tense. Guy knew well how to be quiet when he lacked expressions or speech. The force of silence was something he possessed. To my great exasperation.

When pride is wounded, it is inconsolable.

That was my case.

I don't really know why initially, I had taken his words lightly, his desire for us to separate, his wish for me to leave home. Because I knew that this was not what he wanted to express? Because he was incapable of it? Incapable of separating from me, incapable of abandoning *my hand*? Because I imagined that he was inventing a scenario that would bring us back together in a better way? Or some story for a novel?

And no, there was no question of a joke because he had just signed off on my offense in the clearest way, without hesitation, with this hideous adverb of aggressive agreement,

YES. "The more the offender is dear, the greater the offense."
Why had this verse from Corneille come to mind? My offense,
I had simply swallowed it whole. I took a more serious tone:

"I am asking you if you have someone else, I want a
response. And 'You know how I am' is not one," I retorted
with a stare.

But he kept silent.

4.

So it was not for *some other woman* that he wanted me to leave. I would have preferred this; to leave me for someone else would have at least been justifiable. But "I have no one and I'm leaving you anyway" is more insulting, more hurtful.

In any case, during our long years as a couple, Guy had not been too interested in women. On TV, he couldn't stand certain presenters, actresses, film or theater performers, even though they were very beautiful. He found them revolting and ugly. As for the men, he made no such remark about them.

"You know how I am...": no, I didn't know, at least not right then. I thought I knew him. I knew the Guy who was honest and loyal, the Guy who cared about me and didn't know how to lie. To lie *correctly*, I should say. In the rare moments when he tried to pull off a little white lie, he was easily discovered, and I bent over backwards so as not to offend him. What was obvious to me was that we had just spent our twelfth year together without a bump, in tenderness and love. That was my way.

For a quick moment, I suspected the Dutch woman, his former assistant, retired for several years now, and who I thought impressed him. She was an enormous woman with yellow teeth and salt and pepper hair she never colored.

He liked to evoke her (and provoke me) while talking about her, about her desire to hold down a job, even an unpaid one, during retirement and her strong character: she had driven trucks, semi-trailers for long hauls. Then he added that she was a woman who was *unbearable*, very difficult. Was he saying this to disguise his feelings, as he had an ex who was *odious* and *hysterical* as he had described her to me? And what attraction could she hold for him? Her masculine side? Her *animus*, as one says in psychology and which spoke to his

feminine side, Guy's *anima*? I questioned myself about it sometimes.

In our short conversations on the topic of the Dutch woman (I always suspected a kind of malice on Guy's part), I presumed that he wanted to create a rival for me. But I think that in principal, a rival presupposes equality, a resemblance perhaps with the other in the situation of rivalry. This was not the case between the Dutch woman and me. Everything about us was different: what she wore and how she wore it, her physical traits and her intellect. I was her superior, physically, culturally and morally. At least that's what I imagined. And Guy was certainly aware of it. But when one day, I had described her as an ugly woman who unfortunately neglected her appearance, he railed against me as if I had insulted him.

In fact, at the very moment when his insistent *Yes*, then his cruel second affirmative *Yes* regarding our separation and my departure was uttered, the Dutch woman sprang to mind. Was it because of her that he was doing all this posturing? He always defended her and exaggerated her merits. He even wanted to find a paid job for her within his department, even to the point of paying her salary. He told me this as we were dining *intimately* in one of those chic restaurants in Quebec, where I was speaking at a national conference. We took advantage of this to take a nice trip, which he had just spoiled to a certain extent.

I have to note that Guy accompanied me on all my trips and travels, cultural or otherwise. I also accompanied him during his. We were always together. And the word *together* had its own symbolism for him and represented something emblematic that signified union, sharing and harmony. He often told me this. It was the same for me. In his company, I found calm because there was tenderness and love. Because there was also that sublime gesture, *holding hands*, that he could not do without.

Once I no longer suspected the Dutch woman, another (rival?) came out of Ali Baba's cave. Recently, Guy recounted to my friends (in my presence) that he had found an old female classmate on Facebook with whom he had fallen in love when he was nine years old.

It was the first and last time that he related that episode and I wondered what reason he might have for recounting these stories with or without a basis for discussion. Was he doing this out of jealousy or to make me jealous? But the admiration, the respect, the appreciation and the affection he showed towards me, broke down my suppositions.

Maybe I was wrong to tell him one day about my lover from Quebec. I thought that our maturity of mind and our intellectual development would allow for such subjects. Sometimes his jealousy exploded. And he told me that he was even jealous of the characters in my novels.

That is why his defensive position with regard to "the way he was", a bit strange, astounded me. He denied any extramarital relationship but nonetheless demanded my departure. And my quip, "Let it be done," thrown out like a ping-pong ball smacking a smooth surface, would have no doubt satisfied him. I had too much pride not to respond positively to his request.

To leave each other well, without doing any harm: Guy said this to me one day during an ordinary discussion.

When I pressed him for a clearer response (stop what?), he remained stiff as a statue. So I took his resolute silence for determination and conclusion: *we had to break up.*

In the midst of a great relationship? Why?

What should I do?

Accept the break up and turn the page? Just forget it and leave? Depart from the *nest* and take off?

The nest: Guy had replaced the word *house* or *our home* with these two words full of sweetness: *our nest*.

In his messages, he specifically said to me that he was *in the nest* or that he had *just left the nest*, or that at such and such a time, he would return *to the nest*.

That is why the very idea of departure threw me into a state of exasperating disorientation. Should I give in to his desire that may be only a passing fancy?

My questions progressed in a negative direction. And why would I be afraid of separation? We will separate and it won't be the end of the world, I concluded.

We would separate, but with dignity. "To leave each other well" as Proust had rightly predicted regarding his "lost Albertine".

Focusing my mind on this *prediction*, I ran to my little library and grabbed from a shelf, *In Search of Lost Time*, which had once held a place on my bedside table. I turned the pages from volume IV, to the place where Proust's *Marcel* was analyzing this situation of disappearance and departure by giving a beautiful lesson on attachment, disinterest and habit. But which he immediately contradicted by rectifying it.

"We had said that we would leave each other well. But it is infinitely rare that one leaves another well, for if we were doing well, we wouldn't leave each other." And Guy and I, we were doing "well" even "very well", but paradoxically, we had to leave each other.

This was what my mysterious Guy had raised.

5.

There was a time when I was enamored with Proust and his *In Search of...* I had devoured it, as one says, to the point of writing my thesis on it to defend. And with each reading, something new emerged through his psychological analyses (that went no further than psychology). Guy never read Proust or very little. He didn't like him or found him boring.

Still, Guy's attitude strongly resembled Marcel's with regard to his Albertine.

Just a coincidence or common male behavior?

Proust had thought that separation was just what he wanted, comparing the mediocrity of pleasures that Albertine provided with the richness of the desires that she prevented him from achieving. The great novelist's conclusion was not too pessimistic:

"I had thought that I didn't want to see her, that I didn't love her any more. But these words, *Mademoiselle Albertine has left*, had just produced in my heart, a suffering so great that I could no longer resist it. And so what I had thought was nothing for me, was simply my entire life."

With me gone, would Guy feel the same suffering, the same "open wounds" as Marcel had? I was dying to know. But it was still too soon to have a clear idea about it.

The page that followed this quote included something revolting. It even struck my own self-esteem. The use of the future tense in particular. Just who did he think he was, Mr. Proust with his fatuous remarks? I read:

"All that (suffering) is without importance because *I will get her to return immediately... She will be here this evening*. So there is no need to worry about it."

At the time, in my thesis, this future tense that expressed too much certainty and assurance in the text didn't

bother me. Today it did. And skimming the narrator's words, I found them to be so vain and humiliating that I opted for an immediate separation from Guy. And I wondered if it hadn't been inspired by Proust from this particular scene. Not a passionate reader of Proust or his analyses, he would have perhaps come across it, but not to the point of identifying with his narrator and reacting in a similar way. Besides, who did he think he was, Guy, to order my departure?

The very idea made me indignant.

The little grown up Marcel wanted his Albertine to disappear, but once she was gone, he felt the suffering, first of a misogynist, then of a vain, presumptuous sadist. "She will be here this evening": what male confidence. What self-conceit!

I thought at the same time that Guy believed he could silently and without too much discussion get me to leave (and perhaps get me to return). But I was no Albertine.

In his silence, his unspoken but assumed allusions, a hole was made in my heart when he confirmed, through the negative question (yes) and through the positive (yes) that he sought my departure.

How does one act when one's pride is wounded, and one's dignity and self-esteem? How could I swallow the fact that this good companion who was an essential part of my life, had dropped me and wanted my departure, for no apparent reason? As ambiguous as it was absurd, this situation seemed grotesque and depressing to me all at the same time.

In my prior relationships, it was I who had broken off, and for good reason. Today, it was he, my clumsy actor, who wanted to break up, wanted us to "stop" without justification. The fact that I had my "own room" could have been a mistake, but not an irreparable one. Everything could return to how it was before if we wished. Beyond 60 years of age, one doesn't have one's whole life ahead. And the game wasn't worth it, I explained to him.

Our relational balance had never been fragile. It progressed with a shared tenderness. Guy had just broken this. Without warning.

My pride was deeply wounded and kept me stuck in a feeling of sorrowful rejection. Years of love, serenity and reciprocal esteem had just been discounted into a stinging failure. And my pride refused to accept it. When pride is hurt and self-esteem hit, one's entire being is affected. I became incapable of letting it go, of forgiveness. One has to admit that tolerance and pride don't go together well faced with a humiliating situation. One wonders if love and pride can live together. And so my pride railed against it and dwelled on it. Not without pain. Sometimes one hides behind pride to protect the self from the feeling of being diminished.

"As you wish. Such a shame. I will go. But... when the time is right!" I noted that evening, head held high, my challenging gaze upon him. He gave me a distrustful look. My comment, "when the time is right" didn't seem to meet his expectations.

The desire to demoralize me, worse still, to bring me down and blot me out, appeared through his actions and words.

No, I would not allow him to do this. I would not destabilize myself. I have always been a woman who transmitted the freshness of eternal youth, who insisted on keeping that freshness and radiating it. I was always told this.

And what would I do with the pride stirring in me? That set itself above all else?

I instantly regretted my *magnanimously chivalrous* declarations: "I will set aside my pride and vanity. I don't wish to leave you, no.... leave you with your triple bypassed heart. No, I don't want to leave!" Why did I use these gentle words? To give him the advantage of wounding me further in different ways with different cruel remarks?

It seemed that my strongly altruistic declarations had rendered him all the more stubborn. But more talkative, smiling and engaging. As if nothing were wrong. Or as if he had attained his objective. We discussed everything during our shared meals except to touch upon our primary topic: our separation. I took advantage of every opportunity to remind him of it. As for him, he had said it once and for all, but that didn't stop me:

"You were lamenting about our two years of physical separation... Without asking for anything.... without demanding anything. You never protested. Your silence was your agreement! Too bad for you then!"

This short conversation took place in the supermarket while we shopped. The oyster, as usual, was fully closed upon himself. Guy said not a word.

6.

So what! Such a pity, it's not serious, it doesn't matter... these are my standard words when I find myself confronted with any problem no matter how complex. For me, there is no unsolvable problem. But for making a decision, there are no favorite expressions.

Making a decision is one of the most difficult tasks to accomplish. At the same time, it is the most liberating thing. It means the end of uncertainty and hesitation but also the start of reflection and meditation. It means weighing the 'for and against' and gauging them. Is there a good vs. a bad decision? How to know? One needs time and discernment.

Good or bad, regardless; the important thing is to save one's pride and self-esteem.

Our physical reconciliation seemed unachievable, as did our upcoming separation. I told him the following day:

"I am near you but as if I did not exist. And you place the responsibility upon me. Who is at fault? The one who does not take care of the other?"

After dwelling on the idea, separation was no longer scary. A strange thing: I was no longer afflicted by it. For there was another side to the page! The other side of the coin! Liberty regained and limits lifted.

"Don't disdain any of the problems you confront. They may bring well-being and good solutions." I repeated this Lebanese saying for us.

To be free again. It is not a bad idea.

I was alone in the house and I looked around me.

Suddenly, I felt relieved, my recent indignation appeased. I had had enough of accommodating his timetable, his wishes, his caprices. Enough of picking up his hair, his stubble, his chewed fingernails, his socks, his underwear,

under the bed and alongside, of picking up his bits of grated cheese (that he liked to munch straight from the bag), fallen to the floor between the refrigerator and the sink, of daily wiping the two drops of pee left on the toilet seat and on the floor, the greasy, sugary fingerprints stuck to the light switches and door knobs... And I had had enough of smelling cheese on his mustache and on the sheets...

There were a thousand and one reasons to justify making a decision and taking leave. And there is a time when the mind appears free to choose wisely. My mind seemed to have done what was necessary while I was distressed.

With Guy out of the house, I was free to make my new plan: leaving him as soon as possible.

Some people are more capable, more courageous than others in resolving a problem. I am one of them. I don't like half-measures. Black or white, no gray for me.

To think positively above all.

I weighed the advantages and the inconveniences that would result. It wasn't easy but the advantages were worth it. To leave him was to be free, and to be free was to move forward, as I had always done before him. I would leave then. Why remain here when a new flight was possible? Why be afraid of change?

That was how I was thinking. And that's how I thought to announce my decision that evening, to look for an apartment in Marseille, across from the sea, like ours.

A few minutes were enough for Google to parade dozens of apartments before me, of which two faced the Old Port. Ideal. What could be better?

I imagined myself alone in an apartment not far from his that he would also choose facing the sea and not far from the train station. Due to our many yearly trips, the train station was a necessity for transportation to the airport or toward French cities.

To be alone in the same city? The idea seemed scary in the beginning. Easy later on.

That's when another perspective grabbed me. Paris. The city of artists and intellectuals that I had lived in for a bit more than ten years, that I had loved, idolized, admired. I would return there. I would meet up with my friends who had stayed there, replacing their Lebanon with this space of light and culture.

An apartment in the 13th district as before. Why not? When I had left Paris to return to Lebanon at the end of the war, I felt ripped from a land in which I had dug solid roots that could not be upturned. And that had hurt.

I had left my Lebanese diaspora in the City of Light and memories. I would return to it.

On this point, I began to work two telephones, the landline and the cell phone, calling close friends residing in the French capital. The slap he had just given me had gotten me out of my dark torpor, inciting me to strategize. In less than one hour, I had before me a dozen addresses and apartments, to rent, sublet or buy. Tony, Laure, Nada, Muriel, Amine, Ghada, Fatma, etc. Everyone had mobilized, or consciously tried to find me an apartment near their own or in the same neighborhood.

Praise the Internet!

Now there's a subject that could take up all my time and prevent me from writing. But what did it matter? To accomplish a project is like being reborn. As if one gave birth after a period of time. It took the time required.

And I was not depressed. Depression is foreign to the Lebanese. With the optimism they are continually working with, the *joie de vivre* they manifest even in times of war, they have constantly pushed back the sense of doom that their cruel situation might engender. And because as children, they receive enough love and affection, drink enough of their

mother's milk, doldrums and depression pass them by and leave them alone.

Guy would probably be satisfied with my decision. There too, *what did it matter!* His satisfaction was no longer my concern. I had to think of my own. Just thinking of the separation, I felt free as a bird, my head full of projects and ideas. Wings began to sprout from my shoulders.

I would then rejoin my diaspora, this group that would receive me with love. That's a good resolution. I love the Lebanese mentality. It is a curious people, rather unique. Hospitable, charitable, welcoming; in short, charming.

The regular Lebanese, not an alien (today one really has to distinguish between alien and non-alien), and not corrupt (such as today they are made to be to serve big governments that exploit common people and who invent wars on their own terms by profiting from the bloodshed), that Lebanese who has remained far from dirty manipulations that exploit religious confessions and ideologies for their own sordid ends, is full of love and charity.

Should you fall and hurt yourself, it is your siblings who surround you to care for you. *Homeless?* That doesn't happen. It doesn't exist in Lebanon. For the friend, the neighbor, the classmate, the pal, the aunt, the great-aunt, the grandmother, uncle and others are there, all open to giving you a warm place under their roof for nothing.

Are you hungry? *Aib*, it's shameful and immoral to abandon you, to not give you the best of what they have. We share: bread, roof, clothing, ideas and cigarettes. Sharing is a gift among Lebanese. They are extroverts who comfort you with both words and actions.

Happiness is doubled when shared. Such is their conviction.

7.

A memory has resurfaced. Actually, two of them. Not long ago.

On that day, at the request of my brother, my mother and I were to visit the family of a young woman in Tripoli with whom he had become enamored that month. A meeting was arranged between them for him to "officially ask for her hand". We were in the 21st century, but these traditions and conventions still existed. While he had become German, residing for the last 25 years in Stuttgart, recently divorced from his German wife, Karine, my brother had not been able to completely shed his Oriental origins. His daughter Yasmine accompanied us. Eight years old, she had come with him to spend Easter vacation in Lebanon.

We were at the foot of the apartment building where the young woman lived when I saw a man in clean jeans, washing a steaming, grey Mercedes in front of a shop just behind the building. On the store's sign, there was a hastily painted word, *Garage*. I was happy to have the opportunity to wash my Citroën coupe, of which I was proud, without having to waste time, as I always did, making a stop at the carwash to drop it off, then returning to pick up my car. I asked the man in jeans (who I took for a worker) to wash my car during my visit. A large almost teasing smile lit up his face as he agreed. It was the end of the afternoon, shortly before dusk.

And so I gave him the keys to my car. But my brother violently reacted: "How can you give your car keys to a stranger? How can you have confidence in someone about whom you know nothing? He could be a thief, a gangster... How... How?"

I understood my brother's reaction well. If the 25 years he had spent in Germany had not taken his Oriental side from him, it was also true that this same timeframe had instilled in

him some Western ideas. His obvious distrust stemmed from this.

"Really! You are nothing but a suspicious German and a fearful Westerner," I said.

"But you don't know that man! Aren't you afraid of a bad surprise?"

"Go on... go up," I urged him, pushing him into the elevator.

Surprise? There was one, at the end of our two-hour visit. Not a bad one as he had thought, but unexpected, moving. For him especially, this brother who had forgotten, while in his host country, the meaning of conviviality, fraternity and humanity.

The nicely dressed man rushed towards me, giving me the key. Without saying a word. I looked at my brother victoriously, all the while asking the man how much I owed him. A smile, the same teasing one that at the outset had relaxed his features:

"Nothing," he said laconically.

"How is that, *nothing*? I owe you for the carwash..."

"I don't do that for a living; I was just washing my car. I had a bit of time left to wash yours..."

I warmly thanked him, shaking his hand and then started the motor.

I was not incredulous as my brother had been. My mother wasn't either. Little Yasmine pulled at her father's arm and begged him in German, to tell her what had happened.

A little farther, I stopped in front of a bakery and asked for "a cookie for the little girl and one for my mother." When I tried to give the baker some money from the window of my car, he refused to take it: "for the little one and the older one" and because "it was nothing", he said affably. It was worth at least 4 euros!

We talked for a long time afterwards about this little, marvelous country where the big States invented wars and

violence to wipe it out. "And possibly, for the spiritual and material qualities it enjoyed," my mother added.

Guy himself was an eyewitness to so many gestures of generosity, altruism and kindness in Lebanon. He often tried in vain to find a reason for these gestures, this truly Arab way of being. For him, the chivalrous periods that France had known, were in the process of disappearing. "For 5 centimes, they will give you the change from 20 euros without flinching," he affirmed. He was always admiring those "resourceful and intelligent" Lebanese.

Even when sulking, he attentively followed Lebanon's situation that had become complicated due to the war in Syria. If there was a broadcast about Lebanon, it was he who told me about it and we watched it together.

I took a lot of pleasure from that, feeling close to him and focusing on the same issues. But the fact that he neglected me by avoiding my skin unsettled me. I was forced to do the same. To avoid contact. I couldn't put my head on his shoulder without feeling it move away from me. How could I abandon my habits? And the conditioned reflex that has a resistant memory? And the involuntary reaction of our memory under sustained learning? We are not made of stone, after all.

It was therefore in this *time of idiotic separation*, that we performed a ridiculous ritual: an exchange of gentle, but most ordinary words, the same position in front of the TV after dinner, that is after midnight, the same nibbling in bed and the same haggard looks. Stretched out next to one another in the big bed stupidly watching a movie or show, we didn't touch each other, as if by some law that implicitly forbade it. Then once he had fallen asleep, I went to *my* bed in the *room next door*.

The first day after our altercation (that wasn't really one, as there were no unkind words or violent replies) was a normal one. In the morning, we found ourselves at the table, facing each other, sipping our *café au lait* that he had prepared,

talking about nothing much. In the evening, he was the *nice guy* and prepared the meal: ham and melon, cheese and wine that he had bought "at Monoprix, for me...", he declared.

We ate everything while watching TV. With a few comments from time to time, political or even ideological. But as soon as it became question of the problem of departure (my departure in principle), or of his revelations of the day before, silence became his weapon or he changed the subject.

This ritual seemed comfortable and useful to us. While we cared for each other, each one respected the freedom of the other. And their indifference.

Or that's at least what I thought.

At noon, he came home to eat. I didn't think he would return for lunch. We exchanged familiar smiles, as if it were a shared secret or even better a forbidden game which we were both playing.

"*Why, Guy, why?* I want you to explain it to me."

I couldn't help but ask my burning question.

The response was an oppressive silence, accompanied by a very soft look. What did all that mean?

I had always thought that silence, like indifference, "killed by degrees." The two are a fatal weapon when used maliciously. Guy seemed to know how to concoct silence with a cool indifference.

It was oppressive!

"Tell me Guy, *why?* Why don't you want...?"

I didn't dare add a complement to my sentence, just as he had done.

Out of pride?

He looked in front of him at the blue sea of the Old Port and the sailboats with their white masts that were crossing it. He came out of his silence:

"Look, look! I think I see some albatross. It's such a beautiful day to go sailing... the wind..."

"Yes, it's true, a beautiful day," I said, to express something, noting the uselessness of asking my imperative question.

Then his voice grew a bit stronger:

"Look, another plane... There, there!"

Anything but to talk about us, our problem that was eating me up inside. It was his problem in fact, his sexual problem that I didn't dare bring up except by joking about it, avoiding taking it seriously.

We had always argued about sexuality and its duration, figuring that passion and sexual interest for one's partner lasted only three years. Afterwards, one had to be creative and find something else. But what, if everything had already been tried, or almost all?

We also said that the adventure of the couple led to lassitude and ennui, then dissatisfaction.

But I couldn't say if it was really our problem, since we had just gone through our twelfth tender year as a couple. Guy didn't seem to really change during this time. He remained faithful, loyal, sincere. "You know how I am...".

The following evening, he was home before me. I was at Diane's house, my Lebanese friend married to a Frenchman. He called me on my cell, wondering (on purpose) about my lateness. His voice was full of affection.

Worried or impatient to resume his ritual, his routine?

"I'm coming, I'm downstairs," I reassured him. And when the elevator arrived at the eighth floor, he opened the door for me (although I could have used my keys), and he firmly placed a kiss on my forehead. He was waiting for me to have dinner and for us to watch Patrick Sébastien's show, as we did every Saturday. As usual, he had set the table and we ate in front of *Le plus Grand Cabaret du monde* with invited guest, Jeane Manson.

After dinner, we sat on the large white leather sofa, closer to the TV. For so long, we had been following these

rituals, sitting next to one another, hand in hand, my head against his chest, watching the same film, eating the same apple, sipping the same juice.

Sharing and exchange were our strong point. We had the same beliefs, the same care for each other and were convinced that we were made for each other.

Was all this going to crumble due to a "separate room"?