Safae el Khannoussi

OROPPA

Translated by David Colmer

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Then one day they took me away from my mother and my life as a dog began. (I know people say “It’s a dog’s life” to mean a hard life, but I’m not complaining. All I mean is that my life began per se.)

– Danilo Kiš, *Early Sorrows: For Children and Sensitive Readers* (tr. Michael Henry Heim)

We were not taught to speak but to babble — and only by listening to the swelling noise of the age and bleached by the foam on the crest of its wave did we acquire a language.

– Osip Mandelstam (tr. Clarence Brown)

PROLOGUE

Yet another scream cut through the room. But this one was different. With her eyes and mouth wide open, the woman who had been written off for dead clawed the air above her. A death rattle rose up from her body, the sound of rolling debris. A voice on the street asked for a light and in her bed the dying woman began to shake as if laughing at a joke. Salomé Abergel, born Salma Abergel in a bygone world now given over to new faces, screeched herself back to life.

Pressed against the balcony doors but with her tiny head sticking through the curtains and her hands gripping the fabric, the astonished child watched with a seriousness beyond her years. Salomé Abergel's witness saw the resurrection take place and thought that it was not a pretty sight, no, returning is more terrifying than departing.

Dr Mehdi had recently come to check on her. They had made him vow not to say a word about the woman in their house and, although surprised, he had made an appropriately solemn declaration that he might dangle by his tongue over the fires of damnation if he so much as mentioned it to anyone else. Now let me see the patient, he added sternly – still labouring under the misapprehension that something could be done for her! After examining the woman, a deep frown formed over his round glasses, whose arms were not resting on his ears but pushed into his grey curls. While blowing his nose into a wad of tissue, he declared it a lost cause by shaking his head slowly but categorically, so that there could be no doubt and not the slightest hope, after which the others turned their gaze from the doctor to the patient and shook their heads too.

By this time the woman weighed less than six and a half stone. You didn't need scales to know that, you could see it. One lung, in which a mysterious bacterium had settled, hung in her chest like a shrivelled fruit. Now it was the turn of the second. And that too was actually lost.

But that wasn't why they had called a doctor. The cough, so violent you had to wonder why the remaining lung hadn't burst long ago, was something they understood, but why the screaming? Dr Mehdi remarked drily that he was

not a psychiatrist. But couldn't he think of any possible explanations? The doctor responded with a crass joke: "Like a donkey that brays when the devil walks past, this lady yells when death bends over her."

The child was stunned by Dr Mehdi's words.

Since then death had been sitting on the chair next to the bed, legs crossed, combing more and more loose strands out of her hair, scouring a little more colour out of her face, whispering terrifying nightmares into her ear and flashing his sad bony grin.

Dr Mehdi had also said that she needed rest, so she could pass in peace. But Meryem, who had been given the task of looking after the sick woman, remained convinced that it was better to lift her out of bed and bathe her, and in the mornings, after breakfast, she would put her on a chair on the balcony and sit next to her to smoke a cigarette. She even had the nerve to swear that when she lit up the woman's eyelids quivered and her mouth opened slightly.

Cautiously the child walked over to the bed. The woman's eyes, calm and gleaming, scanned the ceiling, drifted down to the balcony doors, looked up again, fixed on the doorway, returned and, after a few laboured breaths, settled on the top of the girl's head, before creeping down over her face to rest at the level of her chest.

"Oh, fucking hell," the woman said.

It sounded like a nest of baby crows being thrown into a shredder.

Salomé Abergel would have slipped into death without any objections, if death, after first chewing on her hesitantly, hadn't spat her out again – which is to say, back to life. A strange way to wake up, thought Salomé, even if there were even crazier ways, like the other day, when she came to in bright sunlight on the balcony, next to a woman who was smoking with her eyes closed. Salomé pretended she was still asleep, but after that, she was awake for quite a while, until the woman put her back into bed and she drifted off into murky waters once more. Now her gaze caught a small creature, trembling at the foot of the bed and studying her with big eyes.

It must look ridiculous too, with her arms up in the air like this. In that exact moment she let them drop, so abruptly the child screamed.

"Now, now," she said, and she wanted to add, it can't be that bad. But the child had already fled the room.

What a day to come back to life, thought Salomé Abergel. But what kind of day was it? She struggled up onto her feet, opened the curtains and balcony

doors and looked out. The view: roof terraces, balconies with rush-mat fences, washing hung out to dry on lines between the buildings. She wasn't in Amsterdam anymore, but where was she? What in the name of God was she doing here?

And where were her cigarettes? Where did she put the bloody things?

Voices sounded in the hall. She closed the balcony doors, ran back to bed, stretched out and pretended to sleep.

The child came back in with a woman. Salomé recognised the voice. It was Meryem. "Is this what you dragged me from my work for? Leave the poor woman in peace, she's sick. There's no life left in her."

But the child was stubborn. "She was awake, really. She had her arms up in the air to strangle death!"

What the heck. Strangle death? How had she come up with that?

"She was awake, I swear it, holding her arms out like this! Really! And screeching. And then she opened her eyes and wanted to say something."

"That's enough of that. You're coming back downstairs with me. It's not healthy how much time you spend here."

Poor child. It's a mean trick. But give me a little time, just a little. And now piss off, you two! Mother and child. Leave me be. And when you go don't forget to leave a pack of Marlboros on the bedside table.

Part 1

coming ready or not

1

ENTRANCES

On the day our story starts, an icy autumn day in October, an early twilight had descended on the sombre streets of Amsterdam's Rivierenbuurt – you could even say it had never lifted – and an unusually shabby figure was approaching 270 Churchill-laan, the address where a meeting should have taken place two hours earlier.

Over the background noise of car tyres on wet asphalt, streetlights swinging to and fro on cables and the unremitting shivering of the thinning lindens, a song was just audible:

How can I not cry, Mama?
Luck never took my side.
I smiled at life, Mama,
But it didn't smile back!

The figure stopped in front of the ground floor apartment. Hind el Arian, as high as a kite, squinted hard at the front door and observed without any surprise that the key was already in the lock.

"Okay," she said with a contented smile and reached out to turn it.

But the key wouldn't budge.

Like a sad, defeated phantom, she stood in front of the window for a while staring into the dark living room, then walked back to the closed door.

Years later, while scrubbing away tacky traces of late-night revellers in a Paris bar, Hind thinks back on the key that was present, but useless. The first time I went there, Hind would say, I had to wait hours for Hbib Lebyad to show up with the right key.

That's how fast people forget, because if the diaries spread out in front of me (I mean the Fear Notebooks) are to be believed, Hind's earlier version of the day's events was very different. Here Hbib Lebyad was already standing on the doorstep at five o'clock sharp with his hands behind his back and curses

clamped between his teeth and had long since left by the time Hind finally showed up. What's more: the key worked.

As if it were a kind of ordeal, the lock opened after a few more attempts and within seconds Hind el Arian was in the hall with her luggage. It was dark. She put the suitcase and the carrier bag down on the floor and felt her way forward. The reassuring smell of tobacco-smoke-impregnated wood reminded her of early mornings in the weed café Rainblow City, her sanctuary when she wasn't grilling burgers in the musty kitchen of Hbib's snack bar. Otherwise it was most like entering somebody's crypt.

A couple of days before, Hbib Lebyad had twisted his massive body around the stacked crates that blocked the narrow hall to come into the kitchen to talk to her. Hind had been staring unblinkingly at the clock above the door for quite a while, but at the sound of the unaccustomed thumping and banging she reached down at random to grab an onion out of a bag on the floor and started hacking it diligently. It had been so long since Hbib had been in the kitchen that he was visibly shocked by how cramped it was. He leaned awkwardly on the fridge in a pose of feigned nonchalance that was undoubtedly intended to put Hind at ease, but had the opposite effect. Without interrupting her practised onion cutting, she looked up in surprise – miraculously the knife kept hitting the board and not her fingers – and studied Hbib with appropriate mistrust. Hbib Lebyad was not the type to stick his nose into other people's business – only one thing existed for him and that was the snack bar, his restaurant, as he called it. Many times she had heard him say "the restaurant" on the telephone and if an employee happened to be passing with a tray, you saw them look down at the chips and falafel sandwiches with surprised compassion.

Interminable seconds passed without either of them saying a word. Then he broke the silence. "So? How's it going? Are you still lodging with that old girl?"

The old girl was a Catholic landlady called Cor Mudden, who regularly invited Hind to drink a glass of Beerenburg with her so they could talk about God. At first she'd fooled Cor that she didn't have a god, but the old lady, who had shrunk over the years to well under five foot but still had the perseverance of a tireless zealot, was not that easily discouraged. "But child, I can see in your eyes that God lives in your heart." There would have been something beautiful and reassuring about that if Cor Mudden's god hadn't had such a loathing for North Africans.

She would have continued cutting the onion into ever smaller pieces if Hbib hadn't frowned at her while sucking hard on his cigarette. Now and then their eyes met and then Hbib twisted his wide face into a smile that sent a cold shiver down Hind's spine.

"I'm still living in the attic, yes," she mumbled. Hbib pulled a new crushed cigarette out of his back pocket and offered her a friend's apartment between inhalations. And not some sad attic room where the mice celebrated carnival on your sheets at night, he said, but a real house, his face still suspiciously friendly. Hind was so nervous she closed the door of the dishwasher with such a loud bang that even Hbib was startled, the shudder that passed through his body so intense that the cigarette fell out of his fingers to the floor. He made no move to pick it up, but simply lit another.

"Whose house, did you say?" she shouted over the racket of the dishwasher.

"A friend's," Hbib repeated. "Her name is Salomé Abergel. She was . . . is an artist. It's a fantastic house. And in the Rivierenbuurt. Isn't that where you grew up?"

She didn't answer but wanted to know how much rent she'd have to pay. Here Hbib committed a gross blunder, because without thinking he cheerfully said, "It won't cost you a thing!"

Now Hind really started to get suspicious. "What do you mean, not a thing? Have you buried her in the back yard or what?"

"Don't be a smartarse. Salomé is off travelling. Who knows when she'll be back, and if I'm judging the situation correctly, it won't be any time soon."

Annoyed, Hind cast a glance through the hatch at the empty tables before walking out the back door, with Hbib in her wake. The alley looked abandoned and depressing. Hind and Hbib watched a young couple pass by. The man, who had his arm around the slim, pale woman, whispered something in her ear, after which she, to their astonishment, put her hand on his crotch. Roaring with laughter they walked out of the alley.

"Dogs," Hbib mumbled.

But Hind – who was the kind of virgin who, wandering without a whip or a palfrey, lugged her virginity from mountain to mountain and valley to valley – looked back at the snack bar, then at her nervous boss, and thought of nothing so much as the unfairness of the world.

"Listen, you'll have a much better place to live and it won't cost you a penny. You don't have to worry about Salomé, she's not coming back. Not for

now, anyway. You take the keys. You say goodbye to the old girl and move in. Salomé is a good friend of mine. Her house is now yours. You clean, tidy up, water the plants. Otherwise you live however you like. But don't forget. It's the Ri-vie-ren-buurt. I don't want any trouble. And if anybody asks about Salomé Abergel, you tell them you're her cousin and she's on holiday."

Hind looked at the fat spatters on the wall above the grill, then at the photo of Muhammad Ali in Las Vegas, posing next to a younger, better-looking version of Hbib, now hidden somewhere in the colossus he had become.

"But where is she?" she'd asked with narrow eyes.

Hbib Lebyad didn't bother to answer. He flapped his hands as a sign the conversation was over. "This Wednesday, five o'clock, not a minute later!"

Hbib was right. It was a real house. From the street you could see all the way through to the garden, with a staircase and floors that weren't replicas of each other but had their own layout. It was just damn dark. And it was also baffling, as if there were rooms behind the walls where the things that really mattered happened, she thought, while carrying the suitcase upstairs. Still feeling her way, she made her way around the upper floor, checking out the bedrooms, a large one at the back and a small one at the front. The front one was empty except for a three-quarter bed and a desk, and seemed like it hadn't been used for years. The large bedroom, on the other hand, was a complete mess as if someone had left in a hurry. Either that or it was the den of an agitated lunatic. The floor was sown with messages, letters, old newspapers, magazines and books with yellowed covers that were full of handwritten notes.

The most logical choice was to move into the larger bedroom: there was a double bed and the room had a view of the garden. But something about it made Hind reluctant to stay there, she preferred the smaller one. There, at least, you could hear the muffled but reassuring street noise from Churchill-laan. After leaving the suitcase there, she went back downstairs. A rare, long-forgotten fear rose within her, the kind that only afflicts children, a fear that is capable of taking on a form. And, sure enough, as if on command, in the heart of the darkness, things began to groan, hiss and creak. Out of nowhere a gust of wind raced through the house, and somewhere in the depths of the apartment, an animated telephone conversation suddenly began.

God moves in mysterious ways. But after two joints on an empty stomach His signs light up and one of those signs was waiting for her in the living room. At first sight the room was as good as empty, an interior of soothing

minimalism: there was an enormous L-shaped sofa, an oval coffee table and, on the left by the open kitchen, a long wooden table with a sad withered bouquet on it as the only thing that betrayed that, not so very long ago, this place had been inhabited.

It was like she had stepped into a memory of a grim childhood, and to ward it off she resumed her singing:

How can I not cry, Mama?
Luck never took my side.
Life . . .

She pulled the last bit of bud, the papers and the roach out of her coat pocket and began the ritual she carried out six or seven times a day. While breaking open a cigarette to spread its dry contents out over the paper, she felt the peacefulness that had accompanied her on her way to the house returning, though it was a fragile consolation for what lay ahead: a night and a day and then a week and maybe months alone in this gigantic place, where the tick-tick-tick of the clock set off echoes of calamity in her misty brain.

Her gaze fell on a glass hand on the coffee table, open in a coercive gesture. Hind felt in her coat pocket, pulled out a five-cent coin and placed it on the palm of the hand. Although nothing happened, she knew with great certainty that the hand was insulted. After a couple of seconds, she took the coin back. Her thoughts drifted to Cor Mudden, who would be installing herself in front of the TV around this time, making sure to position herself like a tattered eagle with a good view of the hall just in case Hind came in. Goodbye, Corrie, she thought, and blew the old lady out of her thoughts without a trace of wistfulness.

Her phone rang. On the other end of the line, the heavy breathing of someone wearing an oxygen mask. Even before he'd said a word, you could tell from the panting that it was Hbib Lebyad. Now he roared in her ear before she'd had a chance to speak. "Where were you?!"

"On my way . . . " she said, which, from her perspective, was entirely true.

"I waited half an hour for you!"

She lit another cigarette. On the other end of the line it started to thunder.

"Time, Hind," Hbib said, "is not a relative concept! I stood there for a fucking hour waiting. I phoned and phoned and phoned. No answer, no . . . "

Here he put on a thin, high voice. “Hello, Hbib, I’ll be a little late!” And then his own voice again. “No, nothing. I’ve got better things to do. I’ve got a business to run.”

“Uh-huh . . . ”

“I should have waited with the keys until I was sure you were the right person. At your age I slept at a friend’s on the patio. In the morning his sister mopped me out onto the street with the dirty water. Do you realise how lucky you are? I’m letting you live there to look after the place. I’m just giving you that responsibility. There aren’t many employers like me. But if I’m standing at the fucking window wasting my time . . . Then I regret it, right? Then I think, have I made the right decision. Is she up to it?”

Hind, who had never before been taken for somebody with a sense of responsibility, had asked herself the same question. Her conclusion had been that her boss was not just entrusting her with a task, but that she was also doing him a favour.

The longer she listed to Hbib’s incoherent tirade, the more fixated she became on the open hand, which was still demanding a mysterious gift, and the more likely it seemed that she was getting herself mixed up in something that was much greater and more exciting than she could have imagined.

“Are you listening?”

“Yes! I am! I’m listening! I’m doing my best!”

“I’m not asking you to do your best. I want you to do what’s right. There’s a fortune’s worth of art in that house, a genius’s most valuable work! The most masterful masterpieces of a true master! The most brilliant mind in a whole generation of lousy scroungers.”

Hind kept nodding, realised that Hbib couldn’t see her, but didn’t stop.

“Hey, Hbib, there’s a hand here on the table. Have you ever noticed that?”

“A hand?” Hbib exclaimed in surprise. “What kind of hand?”

“There’s a glass hand on the coffee table. It’s like it wants something, but I don’t have any change.”

A silence fell. Hbib Lebyad growled something unintelligible. “Right, you’re inside at least. Make yourself a cup of tea, have a shower, look around and call me if you bump into anything.”

They hung up. A minute later she received the following text:

Hind, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but for God’s sake put that hand somewhere you can’t see it.

THE TWENTY-FIRST ARRONDISSEMENT

Hind's failure to turn up at the agreed time was related to the temptations of a mysterious world sometimes called "the twenty-first": a constantly rearranging system of vaults, parks, attics, tunnels, bridges, car parks, bars, street corners, basements and back alleys where the happy searcher escapes, if briefly, the predictably ill-fated course of normal life. Every day people who were seen in the ordinary world as wimps or monsters, servants or executioners, shoe-shiners or kamikazes launched a new search for this destination, scouring the world for any sign of an entrance. Some had seen the twenty-first with their own eyes, some lied about it. As a result it was impossible to work out which testimonies were true and which not.

Nowhere in the orderly, dust-free archives of European memory were there any references to this weird and wonderful place, the subject for years now of enigmatic insinuation and blood-curdling anecdote. Nowhere was there a map showing the territory where these fantastic tales took place. According to a group of intellectual castaways, the so-called magical Marxists, the twenty-first (not to be confused with Charles de Morny's bourgeois show town and Parisian resort) derived its name from the French capital's official count of twenty arrondissements. But that didn't clarify why it should be there and not somewhere like Liège or Marseilles or Genoa, where it could just as well be located. Another explanation could be found in the surviving speeches of a revolutionary Algerian exile (whose name has been lost in the maelstrom of time) who spent the nineties in Paris, where he fell under the spell of a group of writers from Martinique, among them Suzanne Césaire. The twenty-first referred to a future era under the sway of an imaginativeness that would be as bloody as it was healing – our century, dear people!

It was in a wintry Berlin that Hind learned of the existence of this mystic paradise. During one of the last U-Bahn rides, before you're irrevocably spat out into a Berlin night, a night you would be better off spending in the closest Späti or simply in bed, a man further along the carriage, whose face betrayed an ascetic exhaustion on the verge of saintliness, in ecstasy or half asleep, had

declared in a thick Arabic accent to no one in particular that there was a subterranean world where your misery had a name, where you encounter your own kind without the slightest sense of hatred or resentment, where you eat what's been nicked from above and where God lives among the people as an equal. Because up here, he concluded, up here it's purgatory. With that he walked over to Hind, knelt before her and asked if *die Jungfrau* knew what purgatory felt like. After she answered that she didn't, he said it felt like eternal homesickness.

Over the years Hind had collected an array of signs, insinuations, rumours and stories, all indicating the correctness of what the flip-flop-wearing orator had confided to her that night in Berlin: the underground is a sanctuary for all those people the world above can't bear, a place where they are embraced and celebrated. Rather than looking away, the people below appreciate their criminality. Up above you are pointed out with an accusing finger and called, "Outlaw! Brute! Beast!" But if you've tasted that delightful existence, which really is criminal and barbaric, you say, "Yeah, so?"

While Hbib Lebyad was grinding his teeth on the lookout at the door of Salomé's house, Hind was in Rainblow City searching for a sign or gateway: a new face, a casual glance, an open magazine, a name, a logo on a lighter, a lost message on a discarded receipt, the route to an unknown destination mapped out on a beer mat. They'd arranged the appointment on the fifteenth, her day off. Normally her days off were filled with hours in which cigarettes and booze compensated her for her work in the restaurant: the clink of plates, grease building up under her nails, Hbib's heavy tread, gaggles of slurring tourists coming in to scoff themselves silly in the middle of the night, your average wanderers in no-man's land. They also had to compensate her for *life beyond the restaurant*, the life that gave Hind palpitations in the morning when she tried to think of what to do on her day off and concluded there was nothing. Nothing at all. A whole world out there and nothing to do.

THE SOMNIFICENT SEVEN

Afternoons in particular were a melancholy trap that usually ended in Oud-West at Rainblow City, where laughter or conversation were absent most of the day, and people limited themselves to occasional muttered swearing. Rainblow City was located at street level in a dilapidated building on Jan van Galenstraat, whose upper floors were curtained with sheets or tarpaulins and inhabited by figures you never saw coming or going. It was a rectangular space divided in two by a glass wall with a door that squeaked so horribly on its hinges that a collective shudder passed through the whole place whenever it was used. The section immediately behind the entrance was the boutique, where a miserable and exhausted, underpaid student hid behind the CBD and HTC bottles and the marijuana-themed products – mugs, ashtrays, tiles, calendars and fluorescent dildos – constantly reading and rereading the same book by Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization.* The other section served as a bar, a not all too monstrous cross between an old-fashioned bordello and a seedy roadside boozer, with worn-out furniture that had been collected haphazardly over the years and photos of wild parties on the walls.

When evening surrounded the establishment, the student woke from his slumbers, reluctantly stood up and disappeared through a door next to the counter. A few seconds later the sad decor was lit by red and orange light from two enormous lava lamps and a smoke-ringed chandelier that trailed cobwebs over the patrons' well-cooked heads. There was a row of five pairs of facing, brown leather sofas with wooden tables decorated with arabesques between them. Besides the staked profusion of plastic ivy and the party photos, the walls were decorated with original newspaper clippings of great events in the modern history of North Africa, in particular the football match between a Maghrebi team and the French national football team (3-2), and several friendlies against the team of the Algerian National Liberation Front. There was also a message carved by a patron: "You're not lost yet."

(Once a Polish tourist had pointed at that sentence and babbled, just like our national anthem! Piercing the air with an index finger, his face given over to blissful oblivion, he had launched into the first line of the song: Poland is not yet lost . . . ! As could be expected, nobody joined in.)

In Rainblow City Hind had found a small company of what she called the golems in God's backroom, bored stowaways who were invariably teetering on the edge of consciousness. Two or three times a week the somnificent seven entered the café on Jan van Galenstraat one after the other, and sat down at the table closest to the window or, like a thrombosis, blocked the passage to the rest

of the room. One joint after the other was passed around and sometimes, when spirits were really high, they talked. One week led to another. Hours went up in smoke, conversations evaporated, leaving everyone dazed and downhearted. Sometimes the party went into extra time: the owner lowered the shutters and gave the somnificent seven a round of soft drink on the house. They sat in a row at the bar in the light of the orange lava lamp, resting their weary heads on their hands and sniggering softly at the owner's hysterical ranting.

There was Bo Fluyter – a community nurse. The only one who ever bought anyone else a drink, she was probably head over heels in love with Hind. Bo Fluyter took care of elderly people in Watergraafsmeer – hard, thankless work she put her whole heart into – and in the evening she took the melancholy and loneliness home with her to her flat, which was furnished as if it too was a nursing home. Everywhere you looked there were cushions in all possible shapes and colours, and a sickly smell of soap and decrepitude hung in the air – along with the smoke of the occasional joint.

There was Bogdan, who delivered neatly folded white bindles to respectable white-collar junkies in Zuidas and their nephews and nieces in De Pijp. Although nobody could confirm it, he claimed to have studied law at the University of Zagreb, before being turned out on the street by his father for dealing in marijuana and other gear. Bogdan had an immense loathing for his dad and if you so much as asked about him, he would turn red and erupt into a fit of swearing. This had to do with what happened after his father played the good parent by kicking him out to punish him for his criminal stupidity. When Bogdan went back later to pick up his stash, that same father, who had called him a dealer, said he was going to keep it. After all, unbeknownst to him, he had been accommodating a business enterprise all these years. Now he was going to keep the stuff himself. It was his house and the very least he deserved was a share of the proceeds. As he couldn't bring himself to give the old man a beating or beg him to return the confiscated product, Bogdan had found himself obliged to set a few friends on his father. In contrast to what is generally claimed, children are more faithful to their parents than the other way round. He didn't know how it had turned out for his father, having left the country before the news could reach him.

Then there was Abel, who was studying classics and often launched into discussions of things nobody really understood, although they'd learned to nod and quickly change the subject. He came from a family of what Rafael called municipal theatre progressivists, i.e. neoliberal do-gooders, i.e. hypocritical

arseholes. According to Rafael, Abel was suffering from an acute ethical vertigo that could only be the result of an education in which self-aggrandising liberal drivel had instigated intense confusion in the fragile, as-yet immature brain of a much younger Abel.

He sometimes got into an argument with Rafael, who came from a suspect communist background full of prominent politicians, artists and officials, and when that happened the others would act like they couldn't hear it or everyone would go home. Rafael was an Argentinian who refused to speak Dutch because "it sounded like a blocked drain" and life was too short to contribute to something so unaesthetic and degrading – although there had been occasions when someone had sat down at their table and addressed him in Dutch and then he'd replied with splendid phrases like "by your leave" that left the person in question, who didn't know him at all otherwise, thinking, what is this well-bred young man doing in such a shabby locale in the year of Our Lord 2010? His family seemed to be a kind of breeding ground for impeccable (professionally speaking) senior civil servants. And that future would have been his for the taking too, if he hadn't had an inexplicable lifelong aversion to this predestined vocation. Of course, *of course,* he fell in love with a barefoot German hippy doing a circuit of Latin America, but that was before he realised how sharp the contrast between her and the place she came from, Frankfurt am Main, where he stuck it out for less than two months before leaving again without her – scared off by the setting in which his love life would have to unfold, given her determination to add a touch of stability to her life. In Frankfurt, where contractors seemed to compete for the ugliest and least humane architectural design, he had wondered how such a cheerful charming girl could possibly opt for such a miserable shithole of a city. Rafael may not have realised that you have to be exposed to German conditions long enough to see their appeal. How he'd ended up in Amsterdam was something they all knew as it was a story he loved to tell: he'd grabbed his stuff, walked to the station and taken the first international train out of there. He was an art student, which the others interpreted as spending the whole day with his shoes off and smoking cigarettes while playing the silverback among all the other aficionados of hairy armpits. For the last nine years or so he'd been working in a Rotterdam bar that was frequented by a few pretentious characters he called salon anarchists to their faces. He'd plonk the tray with their beer on it down in front of them and say, "Three for the salon anarchists!" Every now and then his boss would get involved, thinking the staff should be more or less polite to the

customers. But in fact he, as his employer, couldn't do a thing about it, because then he would have got in trouble with the salon anarchists. They were at least good for that.

How Rafael ended up as one of the somnificent seven is a story worth telling. On the day they met he had won some kind of art prize from the Willem de Kooning Academy, and to celebrate he'd asked a Rietveld Academy student out to dinner (he got all his girlfriends there). They'd agreed to meet at a tapas bar on Marnixstraat and for the occasion he'd gone to the hairdresser's for the first time in years. The girl never showed and after a while he noticed that the jokes of the waitresses, who he'd informed about his date, were getting coarse and insulting. To make things worse, he kept ordering beers and acting boisterously, to the hilarity of the staff. After one and a half hours he left, but not without giving the waitress a tip, and one that was so large he might just as well have eaten. After that he walked aimlessly for a while and before he knew it he was strolling into Rainblow City, where a delegation of dazed ne'er-do-wells sitting at a round table looked up from their game of cards. The next day he had squandered more than half of the art prize on an – admittedly – unforgettable night.

To conclude there were the Stitou sisters – Zazie and Mina, inseparable, one hard and impatient, her short hair always brightly dyed, the other dreamy and unpredictable, but able to squash most male self-confidence with a few well-chosen words. From the moment Rafael joined their circle, it was clear that a special kind of love would blossom between him and Mina, one that needed at first to be combatted and denied, gradually developing into exasperating suffering. The secret hope that it would come to nothing. The certainty that their coming together was inevitable. But always the fear of what would follow. Rafael had the feeling it could be the death of him. Mina, on the other hand, confided in Hind that she avoided Rafael because she was afraid of something indeterminate, something beyond her, the dark certainty that for her there was absolutely nothing at stake. One night after extensive discussion the group decided to accompany the sisters Mina and Zazie to a house party on Oudezijds Achterburgwal. It turned out to be in a studio that also served as a bedroom and kitchen and the place was packed with students conversing at the top of their voices. Almost immediately, Mina and Rafael withdrew to the balcony where, protected by a force field, they talked to each other for hours without being disturbed by anyone else. There was only one moment, which later turned out to be crucial, in which Mina's gaze slid past Rafael and through the glass door into

the studio, where it rested for a second while a mysterious smile passed over her face. Rafael hadn't made too much of it. Convinced that this was finally the night he would go to bed with Mina and blinded by excitement, he abandoned all suspicion. But after the party she suddenly cycled off in front of his nose with somebody else, a guy with a nose ring and an ugly blue beanie, whereupon he shouted after her that he would stay there waiting in that very spot until she came back again and it better not take too long. And sure enough, not much later, Mina returned. Stuttering, Rafael asked if she'd slept with the other guy. Mina said if that made any difference he wouldn't be standing here now. He said he wanted to know anyway. "Yes," Mina said, "we had a quick fuck on the steps down to the canal in an alley that stank of cabbage and piss and after a while I realised that we were taking a long time, too long."

Reassured Rafael took Mina to his room on Zeedijk. That night he was scared of missing the smallest detail and then another hour had passed without his paying attention and, with his head spinning, he stepped over to the sink whose tap didn't work and, shivering from the cold or a premonition of inescapable danger, pissed into it. In those loneliest of moments, when no one existed in the whole world except him and Mina, and Mina seemed so far away, he did his best to pluck up his courage.

This was the beginning of his pursuit of and search for Mina, who kept disappearing and resurfacing again. Whenever they were apart, they wrote each other exhaustive letters packed with despair and short notes full of longing.

When Mina spent some time in France on a writer's residence, Rafael awaited her return like a ghost, regularly complaining about how little contact they had and smoking joint after joint. The others insisted that the absence wouldn't harm their love – but deep in their hearts they struggled with the same insecurity and anxiety on their friend's behalf. These well-intentioned interventions did nothing to ease Rafael's melancholy. It was impossible for the others to reassure or console him because there was a voice in his head that visited him in unguarded moments, the voice of a twisted gewgaw peddler installed in the corner of the room, who whispered like an icy wind that Rafael had lost Mina Stitou long ago because she wasn't seeking anything, not even in him, and desired nothing. But these days of chaos and insecurity too he survived. After Mina's return from France a dazzling symbiosis that gave off a permanently heady smell arose.

As to be expected, the relationship fizzled out. It briefly seemed that this would be the end of the somnificent seven too, but Rafael stubbornly insisted

that it was a misunderstanding. What misunderstanding? they asked. I don't know, he said, but it was only a matter of time before it was straightened out.

In the permanent gloom of the weed café, the other customers observed the somnificent seven from various angles with disdainful inquisitiveness. It sometimes happened that an eccentric figure with a helpless grin on their face would step out of the shadows to join the group only to be ignored, much to their sorrow. People whispered that the seven moved in criminal circles. They also whispered that they were members of a circus troupe. They even whispered that, with the exception of Bo Fluyter and Abel, none of them were legal and they spent their days lying low in a squat where the women prostituted themselves while the men smoked joints in adjacent rooms and listened silently to their groaning. The secret bond that united the somnificent seven was a mystery to all. They only knew that they had managed to find each other in a clouded world.

But that too was a vague suspicion.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE PAINTINGS

Hind was now lying stretched out on the sofa and staring up at the ceiling. Every time she blew out some more smoke the house seemed to expand: the dining table, which was just a step or two away from the sofa, was slowly sliding further away and the shed in the garden now looked like a woodcutter's cottage in a dark, fairy-tale forest. If you looked carefully, you could see the dangling silhouettes of severed limbs. Yes, she had to get away from here and the sooner the better. The cloudy living room now smelled so strongly of skunk it made her feel sick. She picked up the bags and, with her heart pounding, walked to the front door. In that moment her gaze fell on the door next to the coffee table, on which a sign saying ENTER AT OWN RISK was hung. She went over to the door, which was less than five foot high, and tried the handle. It swung open immediately to reveal a wooden staircase down to the cellar. She was about to take a first step when she reconsidered and put the carrier bag

down to block the door. A string was hanging next to the door frame. When Hind pulled it, a light bulb downstairs flicked on.

The cellar was a large windowless room with a low ceiling with sad abandoned cobwebs hanging from it. There was a rack with rolled canvases and a long table against the wall. On the table were three identical lamps. Part of the room was hidden behind a thick dark curtain. She picked one of the canvases out of the rack and unrolled it on the table. The painting showed a serene winter afternoon. A snowy landscape. Small globular figures with their upper bodies in thick woollen clothes skating on black ice. On both sides, the snowfields gave way to pine forest. Two figures, a woman and a child, were the only ones to have traversed the vegetated section and were about to leave the canvas. On the left-hand shore several men in dark-blue overalls were carrying a coffin onto the ice. Sitting upright in the coffin was a man who was grinning and waving to the bystanders.

Hind rolled the painting back up and returned it to the rack. She went over to the curtain. Behind it were two more paintings that reached up to the ceiling. Hind could only see one of them. It was a large circle divided into smaller spaces that were connected to each other by copper tubes. Mutated humanoid figures were crawling in and out of the rooms: a laboratory in which elderly people were rotating, linked to an umbilical cord that resembled a bicycle chain; a clothesline on which flapping geese hung from their feet with their beaks wide open; a garden with a pond with waterlilies with headstones on them. In the middle of this hell was a square with rounded corners where a crowd made up of what looked like a single cloned woman was thronging around a gigantic horn that rose from the ground. In a tangle of limbs, the clones tried to seize hold of the trumpet, falling and clambering over each other. The tubes formed a labyrinth around this open place. Gradually it became clear to her that the further you got from the square, the more grotesque the scenes: catlike creatures fishing ears out of aquariums; limbs growing from tree trunks; body parts being dragged along as appendages by small insects. The edges of the painting were given over to complete darkness, as if the density of the tubes there was so high that you could no longer make out anything. But if you looked closely, and Hind wasn't sure she wasn't mistaken, figures stepped out of the darkness, squid-like creatures in the uniforms of soldiers or prison wardens. And where the faces should have been there was only a more intense black.

Suddenly gripped by a fear of being locked in the cellar, Hind shot up the stairs, sweat gushing down her temples. She didn't know if it was because she

had encountered something totally demented or because, while looking at the paintings, she had started to feel like someone on the other side of the wall was watching her every move.

Or maybe, she thought, they're sheltering. But sheltering from what?

Sheltering from the storm.

But it's not stormy inside.

Well, maybe they stand for something else. After all, you turned on the light. They don't like that. Turn it off, quick.

A TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

The next morning Hind woke to a shrill clamour. "Hannah Melger," said the screen. Hind waited for the phone to stop ringing, then called the restaurant. Hbib answered immediately. At this hour his voice wasn't much more than gurgling syllables against the background of clinking glass and the constant drone of the coffee machine. He clearly recognised Salomé Abergel's number because he answered with, "Yeah, what?"

Hind said that a Hannah Melger had just called. Hbib snarled something unintelligible. Through the telephone she heard him walking to the storeroom. She closed her eyes and sucked on her cigarette. After spending three years in a minuscule room with someone four or five times her size, she could picture his movements in her sleep. He was probably twisting an arm out through the small window and lighting a cigarette, ten feet from the owner of the Vietnamese restaurant across the way, who would greet him with a wave of his hand or ignore him, depending on whether they'd caught each other's eye, something the men preferred to avoid – with between them the small chasm through which a stream of tourists flowed in search of the red-light district. Hbib asked her to repeat what she'd just said. Hannah Melger, Hind said, looking out at the passing trench coats, the droopy well-packaged children bouncing around in cargo bikes, the gleaming cars. More muttered cursing on the other end of the line. Then a long sigh or drag. She asked if she should answer the phone. Hbib drily replied, of course, otherwise Hannah would soon be at the door. Then he

succumbed to a coughing fit. Hind put down the receiver and picked at her nails. When the coughing came to an end, she picked up again.

Hbib gave instructions: if Hannah asked who she was, she had to say "Salomé's cousin." If she asked about the paintings, she had to tell her that she didn't know anything about any paintings.

They hung up. Then Hind went into the kitchen, put on some coffee, rolled a joint and sat down next to the phone to wait. Half an hour later it rang again. She picked it up, said her name and added, after hesitating, Salomé's. Silence. Salomé, said the voice, Salomé? Almost pleading. Hind: This is Hind speaking, ma'am, her cousin. Hind smirked at the windows, as if Hbib was standing there listening. The woman's voice said, I thought for a moment you were Salomé. Listen, Hindi, Hinna, do you know where Salomé is?

Throat clearing at both ends of the line.

There was nothing else for it. Listen, lady, she said, I don't want to give the impression of being annoying and ill-mannered, but you have to realise, it's half nine and I was working all night (that was a lie). What's more, it's my day off and that gives me the right to sleep in for a couple of hours, wouldn't you say?

But Hannah was stubborn. She said she wasn't asking her to come over for coffee, she just wanted to know where Salomé was.

Hind sighed and said she didn't know either. She said Salomé often went away on trips. Is that so? the voice struck back. You're her cousin, you say? Yes, kind of . . . The woman laughed. Kind of? Hind felt like hanging up but heard herself saying that tribal family bonds are complex, but you could indeed say that she was Salomé Abergel's cousin, or in any case that there was a good chance of that being the case. The woman on the other end of the line repeated Hind's last words, as if it were a theory she vaguely remembered. She asked, more cautiously now, why Salomé hadn't informed anyone of her plans. Confused, Hind didn't answer. She was trying to stay grounded in reality but felt herself being drawn further into the mystery. Finally, she replied honestly that she didn't know. At this, Hannah Melger gave her her telephone number and made her promise to keep her up to date with any news. They hung up simultaneously without saying goodbye.

Hind immediately called Hbib. After she'd told him the story, Hbib sighed and asked if she'd sounded like this on the phone too. She said she didn't understand what he meant. Hbib said that of course he didn't want to stick his nose into her business, but it sounded like she'd had a stroke. Oh, she said. Yes,

oh. Oh! Oh, oh, oh, said Hbib. It took her a while to figure out that he was mimicking her. Look, what you get up to in your free time – and at work too by the way because I'm not blind – is up to you. But listen good, whatever you learn about Salomé in that house, no matter what you find, not a word to Melger. Not a syllable. Now go and have a cold shower.

2

THE MUSINGS OF AN ELDERLY RESTAURANT OWNER

Hbib Lebyad rolled the office chair closer to the tiny window and lit a cigarette. Typical Salma, he sighed. First the Biblical schizo stuff – premonitions and visions and revelations set off by her own paintings, cryptic messages whispered into his telephone in the middle of the night. Then disappearing from one day to the next. House empty, an overstrung curator, the auction coming up and the horrible will she'd saddled him with. And now he was stuck with a confused employee who'd been coming to work stoned for weeks and leaving even more stoned.

In spare moments he withdrew into his study to read and reread the will Salma had left behind, squinting hard and sucking on a cigarette as if on a respirator.

So you don't want the auction to go ahead? Fffffffffff.

So I have to take charge of it all? Fffffffffff.

And what do I do with Melger, huh? How do I resolve that? Fffffff.

Hbib's anger was a very thin layer of varnish over dark, sweltering fear. You could accuse Salma of a lot of things, but running away wasn't one of them. There had even been moments when he'd hoped she would. A healthy person distances themselves from disaster, leeches, scandal. Not Salma. She was one of those peculiar people who demand that others like them because they are so incredibly insufferable. The result was that everyone was scared of her. With a big smile on her face, she regularly told him so. Everyone is scared of me, you know. Except you, you're my man. And then he kept quiet, because he was scared of her too.

Recently his ex-wife Isabelle Lamer has appeared in one of his dreams. Bobbing in a swimming pool filled with little plastic balls in every colour of the

rainbow, she had yelled at him, If she'd been really crazy she wouldn't have thought about a will! Even in dreams she couldn't give up her French cynicism.

It was just like that story of Dris's, about when he was working as a cleaner for Shell in North Amsterdam in the eighties and tried to get a pension by pretending to be mad. They admitted him to hospital and locked him in a room where he was observed twenty-four hours a day. The examining psychiatrist had the room flooded and after Dris, thinking he was clever, didn't react but stayed lying on his bed drooling and jabbering, she walked in and said, "Mr Hasnaoui, it's not your mind but your morals that are flawed. Someone with a real paranoid obsession would have screamed the whole building down. The porter will process you further."

They all thought it hilarious until Dris Hasnaoui really did go mad. That was all in the old days. Anecdotes, booze, now and then a girlfriend who never stuck it out for longer than a couple of months. In the meantime most of them had "disappeared", as they say. They lived, spread over various European cities, in terrace houses and suburban tower blocks and had regular jobs and bills and children who couldn't pronounce their own surname. Others wasted away in tiny rooms, living off dole payments they partly used to maintain a dilapidated construction in some god-forsaken backwater.

He didn't have any children himself. And he didn't have any projects beyond the radius of a hundred yards in which his apartment and restaurant were located. Children. Heaven forbid he ever get mixed up in all that hassle. A creature that feeds on your youth, your money, even your peace of mind? Hbib Lebyad sat on his squeaking chair like a depressed bear. He used his foot to swing open the door of the mini-refrigerator and pulled out a beer, then closed the harmless thing with an undeserved kick and drained the bottle in three gulps.

He had to admit to missing Salma. His little loon. Yes, there had been a period when he had occasionally fantasised about a child with her, the result of a drunken blunder that would tie him to her forever, but that was only because he was incapable of imagining a relationship. Trying to picture opening his front door to be greeted by Salma, who flickered her thickly made-up lashes at him and planted a smacker on his cheek, he burst into such uncontrollable laughter that everything in his little office started to shake. But if he fantasised long enough, the image of Salma in their local on Zeedijk came of its own accord: her shouting unsolicited advice in her ridiculous accent to Marieke the barmaid, pinching the fabric of her blouse just above her heart, pulling it away from her and saying, "You know what you should do, Kiki-Marieki? You

shouldn’t keep whinging about all those men, but get yourself a hobby instead. You wear a man here, like a brooch. They don’t belong inside.”

SCENES FROM A TRANS-ATLANTIC MARRIAGE

Hbib had been an artist once too, even if he’d never called it that. Artists were spongers who never accomplished anything, and if they did, they were bastards who ruined things or gambled everything away or ended it all. In the late eighties he quit the circus and decided, together with his then wife, the French-American Isabelle (official name of birth, Isabelle Lamer, married name Isabelle Lamer-Lebyad and, as far as he was concerned, now single again as Isabelle Lamerde), to return to the other side of the ocean and settle temporarily in Amsterdam. Isabelle had a friend there who made theatre costumes, and she knew someone else, a certain Gabriel Vez, who was big in European showbiz. It was Isabelle’s idea to swap the grotesque flashing lights of Las Vegas for Gabriel Vez’s troupe, whose fame had even reached the dressing rooms of Nevada’s completely over-the-top casinos.

Less hysteria, more professionalism, Isabelle repeated over and over. It was fine by Hbib. Having left Tunisia, he was, unlike his wife, completely indifferent to the distinction between a West European country and a U.S. state. Of course, he could point out the obvious differences: Americans were friendlier and only said nasty things behind your back. Europeans were full of the innate disdain of people who delude themselves that they are the centre of the universe, even if he didn’t know why that was. But a foreign country remained a foreign country and everywhere he went, he felt, ironically enough, like a bystander in a play in which his role had been written in an incomprehensible language. A few days after their arrival in Amsterdam his urine suddenly took on a dark colour and his body was burning up so much he could hardly get out of bed. He was admitted to hospital for acute kidney failure and when he was discharged a couple of weeks later he was overcome by a strange sensation, namely that he was at home here, in this city.

After he told Isabelle that he could no longer be bothered literally tying himself in knots during a twice-yearly trek around the continent, they didn’t

speak for more than ten days. Maybe she suddenly realised that the stubborn silence wasn't making much of an impression on him, maybe she'd read an article in one of her magazines – held demonstratively in front of her face – that destroyed her last shred of patience, but an evening came when they had an argument that would repeat itself in exactly the same way over the coming months. The average argument with Isabelle proceeded as follows:

Her: You're a good-for-nothing. You lured me into your trap.

Him: Take it easy, Isabelle.

Her: I raise you up out of the mud of that underdeveloped country, make an artiste of you, show you the whole world, and this is the thanks I get.

Him: Maybe so, but I owe it mostly to my flexible joints, I'd say, so watch your words, Isabelle.

Her: A-ha! So you're saying I didn't do anything for you? You were living on the street! You were dirty and that miserable group of acrobats of yours didn't amount to anything! Riffraff! You were like monkeys in costumes. I fished you out of the filth with my bare hands!

Him: Maybe. But without my role in the circus they would have kicked you out long ago, Isabelle.

Her: How dare you?

Him: Me? I don't dare anything at all. From now on I'm going to sit on my arse and not be daring at all. I'm going to act normal.

Her (raising her voice): What do you mean "act normal"?!

Him: That's what I mean. You don't even know what that is!

Her: I hope they drag you down to hell by those simian limbs of yours. How can I be with a man who doesn't take his art as seriously as I take mine? (Here her eyes filled with tears but these had long stopped affecting him.) Aren't you going to miss it? she asked, imploringly. This is self-sabotage.

Him, sneering: I don't need to miss the circus, madame, and neither do you, because this marriage is one.

After a couple of none-too-successful months with the gitano's troupe, Isabelle went back to the United States. Hbib stayed in Amsterdam. He invested his savings and the money he earned as a cook and cleaner in a mental home in a small run-down shop in the red-light district that he bought for a hundred and fifty thousand guilders. In his free time he sold second-hand cars and scooters at the bazaar in Beverwijk and took on occasional painting-and-decorating jobs. Years of disinfectant and insomnia. And Salomé, of course, who was still called

Salma and sold still lifes, portraits, records and old posters next to him at the bazaar on Saturdays.

On quiet days they sought out each other's company. Hbib found Salma's hot-tempered character a welcome distraction from his daily worries. Her desire to spend time with him, on the other hand, remained a mystery to him for years. Salma's friends were self-conscious sophisticated types who never deigned to look at him. Most were poets, writers and artists, and almost all of them were political exiles (even if he eventually discovered that wasn't universally the case, as a number of them had caught on that if another state wants to make your life a misery and you have to leave because you are a seen as a danger, it immediately makes you a hero, even if you never did anything more than stand at an outdoor cafe handing out pamphlets nobody but secret informers and plain-clothes policemen ever looked at). After a day at the bazaar he accompanied her to a reading or a performance or a bar where they discussed works by Ghada al-Samman, Mahmoud Darwish or Abdelkebir Khatibi. Then he drove her in his rattletrap Peugeot to the Bijlmer, where she lived in a small flat with her five-year-old son and a Dutch friend called Eva Beet. While the money in his newly acquired circle of friends mostly went on booze, cigarettes and circulating manifestos, he spent as much time as possible with Salma and her child and gradually renovated his shop, turning it into a restaurant – which he opened in 1994.

THE STORY OF THE DOG IN THE CELL

And even now he was still paying the price for that modest success. Every month somebody turned up: asking for a small loan, hoping he will lend a petit-bourgeois air to a matrimonial request, seeking accommodation for a niece who can't live from just her student grant and is looking for a well-paid part-time job as well. What could he say? He was the loser with a thriving business, the capitalist leper; they were the ones who made an art of scraping by and thanked him with a big fat middle finger by not answering his letters or phone calls afterwards.

In the old days, when calling abroad was more expensive, he recorded voice cassettes and sent them by post. He wouldn't get a reaction until a few months later, a lot of chatter and not a word about the money, and if it did come, he had to hand over a percentage to the person who brought it to him, and in the worst cases supporting the courier cost more than the original loan. Still, he continued to do people favours, though not without lamenting his fate in endless monologues, after all, he may have had no right to refuse, but it was only human to pour out his heart about treasonous friends, who disappeared out of his life forever, taking his hard-earned pennies with them. He wasn't going to demand repayment, but at the same time it wasn't as if he spent his days kneading falafel for his enjoyment.

Recently for example: Levi Shotz, standing in front of the window dripping with rain, a squashed homemade fruit-cake in his hands.

"Hbib Lebyad," he cried.

Hbib replied, "Shotz, old buddy!" to the clear embarrassment of the other. They embraced, patted each other on the back, kissed each other twice, shook hands, cuddled again, more kisses on forehead and cheeks, finally sitting down to make small talk while Hbib, unusually for him, left the staff in peace.

Hbib knew perfectly well that Levi didn't just happen to be visiting Amsterdam. Levi Shotz never just visited anywhere. He could only have come to Amsterdam with a definite purpose in mind. But for two men who hadn't seen each other for twenty years, this was a subject that could only be discussed after some serious drinking. That night Hbib closed the restaurant two hours early, went into the storeroom and pulled a bottle of raki off the shelf. As he was walking back, a woman with a leather jacket slung over one shoulder tried to open the front door. It wouldn't give and her gaze fell on the flabby man with a bottle of booze who was staring at her apathetically and the other man in an old-fashioned dark-brown trench coat who was watching her gesticulations from the bar with a comparable indifference. Without moving, Levi and Hbib exchanged a look of understanding. Then Hbib pressed the button to lower the shutters, cutting off her muffled protest while Levi, already fairly tipsy, waved and gestured nighty-night with his head on his hands.

It was three thirty in the morning when Levi Shotz finally confessed the reason for his visit. In 1999 he had moved to Madrid, at the insistence of his then boyfriend. They broke up again in a few months, but he decided to stay and became a translator from Hebrew into Dutch and French, and vice versa. There were some periods when he didn't have any jobs at all and then he would work

as a waiter in the restaurant of a mutual friend of his and his former partner's, which actually generated as much as his sporadic translations. It went on like this for twelve years until one day when he was contacted by a publisher who wanted a book called *We Were Friends* translated into Dutch.

Levi poured them both some more raki. "So they send me that book and I start to read. The story goes like this: during the regime of an imaginary dictator of a country called Macabia, a man is thrown into an isolation cell for reasons that remain unexplained and left to his fate. One day a dog is locked up in the same cell, and it soon turns out that this dog is not only extremely intelligent, but also has the gift of speech. The only thing the dog lacks is what's called a historical memory. For example, he doesn't know how the regime arose and he doesn't know where he was born either or how he ended up in this particular country. What he does know is that he can tell his friends from his enemies by smell, and it is precisely this convergence of an animal's banal skill and being intelligent enough to speak that intrigues the prisoner. For instance, the dog *says*, "I want to be *your* dog and nobody else's," and that, admittedly, is something fabulous if you stop to think about it. Anyway, the regime falls – the suggestion is that the head of state is dead – and the man is released together with his dog. But as soon as they're outside, the animal takes on a demonic quality and starts urging the man to commit murder and carry out acts of vandalism, which the man initially refuses, before finally submitting, partly because the dog is his only friend, and partly because he wants to take vengeance on the world. It's not a great book. Here and there the story is flawed and there's no explanation why the man, who murders one person after the other, is never pursued by the police. The series of bloody and violent and sometimes thoroughly unbearable incidents ends with the dog telling the man to kill himself by locking himself up in his own house so that he, the dog that is, cannot possibly escape. The man has to throw out everything edible in the house and then take an overdose so that, after a few days, the dog will be so hungry he will eat him, and then the dog dies too, with the man in the dog, in the dog's stomach that is, and so he dies twice, once as a slave and once as a master, once as a human and once as an animal. Well, you get it."

Levi Shotz gasped for breath and before Hbib could ask him what on Earth that terrible story had to do with Levi's return, he continued, "And here it comes, right . . . Somewhere halfway through *We Were Friends*, when the two of them are released, they get their identification papers back. And guess what? That satanic dog is called Levi fucking Shotz."

Hbib, whose drunken thoughts had started to wander, nodded compassionately, whereupon Levi pounded the bar with his fist and screamed, “Goddammit, arsehole, I’m telling you something. The dog in the book is called Levi Shotz!”

Hbib rubbed his eyes, which were starting to sting, and shrugged. “Yeah, so?”

Levi hit his chest with both fists and screamed in Hbib’s face, “I’m Levi Shotz!”

It was not so much the cry as the mad desperation in his eyes that brought Hbib back to his senses. While his panting boyhood friend searched for a lighter, he cleared his throat and lit a cigarette. “Friend, I’m Hbib Lebyad. There are hundreds of us in this world. Sooner or later some poor drip will decide to write a book and call his hero Hbib Lebyad. Levi Shotz is a fantastic name.”

Disheartened, Levi shook his head and stared at the floor with bulging eyes. “This is different. That dog was deliberately named after me.” He fell silent.

A human being could set their mind to defying madness a whole life long, Hbib thought, doing their utmost until their very last moment on this mortal coil so they could cark it with dignity, but sooner or later insanity would cunningly slip into your head. He had to admit: a talking dog being named after his friend was a peculiar coincidence. If he were in Levi Shotz’s shoes, he . . .

But he realised that he couldn’t imagine what it was to be Levi Shotz. Misunderstanding was rife between them. What they had together could still be called friendship because their ridiculous extremes made that incomprehension crystallise as shameless fascination. Just as Hbib Lebyad’s ironic admiration motivated him to stay abreast of the comings and goings of the brilliant poet and translator (whose sanity but never his genius was questioned by all), he received occasional greetings from Shotz, who had bumped into an acquaintance somewhere on the edge of the world and insisted that if they happened to cross paths with Hbib from Tunis, they had to give him his fond regards and tell him that he, Levi, had never forgotten that Hbib was the only person who knew how to bend and twist the human body beyond recognition.

Levi Shotz smiled as if he’d already forgotten his tirade and stared into his glass. The clock showed ten past four. Hbib was suddenly cold. Unsure how exactly he felt, he looked at the tiles, then at the flickering fluorescent light and finally at the hatch behind which the world no longer seemed to exist. It was Levi who broke the silence by sighing and sliding off his stool. “I know what

you're thinking. What's brought me here?" Levi grinned and Hbib noticed for the first time that he was missing most of his back teeth. "Do you remember Eva Beet?"

Hbib frowned. "Salma's pretty flatmate?"

"The one with the strange walk."

"Of course I remember her. I heard she emigrated to Israel. Levi, you've lost me. What's all this got to do with Eva Beet?"

"She wrote the book."

"Which book?"

"*We Were Friends*."

It was finally starting to dawn on Lebyad what the poor sod's problem was. Yes, he suddenly remembered how Eva Beet had avoided Shotz as much as possible. He had called her a simple-minded upstart without any reflective or critical capacity.

This revelation was followed by a rather inappropriate reaction – as drunk as he was, even Hbib realised that – but he burst out laughing all the same. When he had his breath back, he wiped the sweat from his forehead with a serviette and laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. Levi gave him a confused look.

"And now? No, wait! Let me guess. You want to borrow money to go to Israel to tell Eva Beet that she has to change the name in her published novel to Joe Bloggs. Or were you thinking of something much worse?"

"I have to do something."

"Write her an e-mail."

"What do you take me for? I've already sent her about sixteen of them."

"Contact the publisher."

"They said I don't have an exclusive right to my name, and the bastard added that any similarity between me and the dog was purely coincidental. But if you listen carefully, you can hear my voice when the bloody animal is talking. I swear it. I talk like that too!"

Hbib had to suppress a new fit of laughter. It really would be something if the work was translated by someone with the same name as the character of the dog. "Call the dog Eva Beet in the translation."

"I can't just do that."

"Then forget it."

But it took Hbib at least one and a half weeks to convince Levi Shotz to reconsider and in those one and a half weeks he accompanied him to

restaurants, bars, museums, book clubs – and because he, as host, insisted, he paid for everything. A stubborn habit that continued to surprise him, because as soon as the bill came his hand shot out of his pocket, which happened to be completely unnecessary, because Levi Shotz had other things on his mind. Hbib talked Levi into returning to Madrid and offered to buy him a plane ticket and, if necessary, advance him the first month's rent. "And stay away from the north," he had advised him. "This weather and these people aren't good for you." Eventually Levi relaxed and gratefully accepted his friend's offer. Hbib bought a very pricey ticket to Madrid and altogether this brief disillusionment cost him well over two thousand euros.

HALLUCINATIONS

The only time Levi Shotz and Hbib Lebyad shared a thought was when they were tripping on mushrooms in 1985. It was a beautiful summer evening and they'd been invited over by Hugo Machajewski, a Pole in his twenties who devoured detective novels at night and delivered freight to the large supermarket chains in the daytime. The heavy lifting showed because, big and brawny, when he was bending over someone at a party, he looked like a parenthesis looking for his other half. Around five in the morning, he would leave the party at his own house, get his scooter out of the shed and, without disturbing his guests, head off for work. It usually took hours before anybody discovered that Hugo was missing, whereupon some guests would slink off and others stay, but Hugo never minded because he'd come back in the afternoon to a cosy house where a warm meal and semi-stoned company were awaiting his return. On the summer afternoon in question, Hbib picked Levi and Salma up at Amstel Station and drove them to Hugo's house in Aalsmeer. They talked a lot on the way, especially Levi and Salma. She said that in Afghanistan the Soviets called the mujahideen "the dushman", which Levi, for some reason or other, found hilarious, despite its simply meaning "the enemy". When he asked Salma how she knew, she said she'd heard it from little Irad, who had picked it up somewhere, God knows where, and then Levi had to laugh even louder, so loud and shrill it hurt Hbib's ears. Then they talked about Irad, who demanded every

bit of strength Salma had in her when she had to drag him to school every morning. At school he refused to speak a word of Dutch. Every time the teacher asked him something, he answered tenaciously in French. Sometimes she lost her patience and, clearly frustrated, hissed at him that it had been more than a year, why was he being so stubborn? Hbib – who associated childish disobedience with incipient delinquency and had never been capable of feeling any affection for Salma's son but had a secret admiration for the child all the same – asked what Irad had answered. It was his first contribution to the conversation. Salma looked at him in the rear-view mirror and said, "He said it balances things out. That way, it's as unpleasant for the teacher as it is for him." There was a long silence, interrupted now and then by Hbib, who sighed or mumbled something like "hm". "But maybe it's just too much for him," Levi objected. "It's not easy for a child to just be plonked down somewhere." Annoyed, Salma glared out of the side window and snarled, "It's not as if I did it of my own free will. I was harassed out of Morocco and France spat me out and now I'm here, and who knows how far north I'll have to go before I finally get a little peace."

"Even if you go to the North Pole, you'll only find peace here," Levi said, tapping his temple. Salma rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to say something which, judging by the expression on her face, could only be an insult. But Hbib was already pulling up at the house, where a smiling Hugo was smoking on the doorstep and waved at them.

Salma joined a conversation between two undergraduates and a Slavic language Ph.D. student, who had a lot of interesting things to say, but had a strange tic of jerking her head to the right, which sometimes made her difficult to follow. The women were sitting in a corner talking about Marina Tsvetaeva's tragic end, while Levi Shotz and Hbib Lebyad introduced themselves with visible aversion to a small man called Frederik Bot, who worked at the boatyard and told them a horribly dull story about the different kinds of salon boats that were restored under his supervision, but suddenly suggested taking magic mushrooms, which explained why he had demanded Hbib and Levi's attention all this time, because they, just like him, were clearly out of place and bored stiff to boot. At Levi's insistence, Hbib consented and the three men withdrew to the sun room. While Hbib tried to ignore the gnomic grin on Frederik Bot's face, he reluctantly swallowed the bitter substance and passed the tin to Levi, who accepted it with a giggle. After half an hour, Hbib saw Levi's tousled hair slowly turn darker and start to billow as if they were under water. And Levi saw

the same thing, but with Hbib. As coincidence would have it, the consciousness of both men stretched so far that they suddenly, amid all the liveliness, simultaneously imagined themselves in the same universe, in which everything was stretched out to infinity by an incomprehensible constellation of reflections.

With a grin on his face, Hbib looked from the billowing Levi reflected in the glass to the physical Levi, whose hair now resembled a wig. The glass had taken on a cellophane-like quality, so that the figure behind it could suddenly push his hand into it, so far until it seemed about to tear. Overcome with admiration, Hbib couldn't take his eyes off his friend's transfiguration, while Levi observed the same miracle, his fingers sliding down his body as if it were falling apart, starting with little hairs and flakes of skin drifting down, followed by muscle fibres and so on. They were sitting together like that in silence when the setting sun suddenly broke through the cloud cover and rained gold down over them. And over Frederik Bot, who still hadn't felt a thing.

And so, what did it mean now to be normal? That was the question Hbib often asked himself when listening to the stories of his friends and friends of friends, fascinated and mistrustful at once, scared that incompetence and self-destruction might enter his life too. Had quitting the frivolous acrobat's circus turned him into a fat conceited coward? Had he hushed his joie de vivre into a permanent slumber by committing himself to a norm he secretly despised as much as his remaining friends did? Had he travelled to Israel with Levi Shotz in the parallel universe of what might have been to interrogate Eva Beet or amend the next edition of her novel?

Had he, as Salma Abergel had demanded in her will, personally burnt her remaining paintings instead of putting a scatter-brained child in the house to guard them? Torn between guilt feelings and an irrepressible urge to distance himself from everything that might get him into trouble in this country, Hbib stared at Salomé Abergel's posthumous demands. Then he folded the will, hid it away in a drawer of the storage cupboard and walked downstairs swearing.