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All the Perfumes of Araby
1992

For nearly two years after my arrival in Egypt, I put off visiting the Pyramids. I had seen them once, briefly at sunset, while *en route* by car from Alexandria to Cairo. Looming up from the lion-coloured sands, their sunstruck sides ignited to a shimmering orange, as if the original limestone veneer had been magically restored, and the shadows in their lee showed a deep mysterious blue, almost purple, like the blood of Caesar's Rome. They diminished me, those ancient tombs. Too much beauty for my deracinated spirit, too much grandeur and immensity. They made me think of history, death, and folly. I had no wish to endure the bout of self-examination a longer visit might provoke. It would be best, I thought, to live a hard, modern life in that city of monuments, free of ponderous considerations and intellectual witness. But eventually curiosity got the best of me, and one afternoon I travelled out to Giza. This time, swarmed by tourists, displayed beneath an oppressive grey sky, it was the Pyramids that looked diminished: dull brown heaps like the spoor of a huge, strangely regular beast.

I wandered about for more than an hour. I regarded the faceless mystery of the Sphinx and managed to avoid having a video taken atop a camel by a ragged teenager with an old camcorder and the raw scar of an AIDS inoculation on his bicep. At length I leaned up against my Land Rover and smoked a hand-rolled cigarette salted with hashish and opium flakes. I thought in pictures, my eyes closed, imagining ibis gods and golden sun boats. When a woman's voice with more than a touch of Southern accent spoke from nearby, saying, 'You can smell that shit fifty feet away,' I was so distanced I felt only mild resentment for this interference in the plotlessness of my life, and said, because it required little energy, 'Thanks.'

She was tall and slender and brown, with a slightly horsey face and generous features and a pronounced overbite, the sort of tomboyish look I'd always found attractive, though overall she was a bit sinewy for my tastes. Late twenties, I'd say. About my age. Her skin, roughened by the sun, was just starting to crack into crow's-feet, her cheekbones were sharply whittled, and her honey-brown hair, tied back with a bandanna, was streaked blonde and brittle at the ends. She had on chino shorts and a white T-shirt and was carrying a net bag that held a canteen, a passport wallet, and some oranges.

'Aren't you goin' to put it out?' She gestured at my cigarette.

'Guess I better,' I said, and grinned at her as I ground out the butt, expecting her to leave now that her prim mission had been accomplished; but she remained standing there, squinting at me.

'You're that smuggler guy, right?' she said. 'Shears.'

'Shields. Danny Shields.' I was not alarmed that she knew my business—many did—but I was annoyed at not being able to recall her. She had nice eyes, dark brown, almost oriental-shaped. Her legs were long, lean and well defined, but very feminine. 'Sorry,' I said. 'I don't remember your name.'

'Kate Corsaro,' she said after a moment's hesitation. 'We've never met. Just somebody pointed you out to me in a night club. They told me you were a smuggler.' She left a pause. 'I thought you looked interestin'.'

'First impressions,' I said. 'You can never trust 'em.'

'Oh, I don't know 'bout that.' She gazed off toward the Great Pyramid; then, after a second or two: 'So what do you smuggle? Drugs?'

'Too dangerous. You run drugs, you're looking at the death penalty. I have something of a moral problem with it, too.'

'Is that right?' She glanced down at the remains of my cigarette.

'Just because I use doesn't mean I approve of the business.'

'Seems to me that's tacit approval.'

'Maybe so, but I see a distinction. Whatever else pays, I'll deal with it. Diamonds, exotic software, hacksaw blades... whatever. But no drugs.'

'Hacksaw blades?' She laughed. 'Can't be much profit in that.'

'You might be surprised.'

'Been a while since anything's surprised me,' she said.

A silence stretched between us, vibrant as a plucked wire. I wanted to touch the soft packs of muscle that bunched at the corners of her mouth. 'You've come to the right place,' I said. 'I'm surprised all the time here.'

'Is that so?'

'Like now,' I said. 'Like this very minute, I'm surprised.'

'This here?' she said. 'This is just doin' what comes naturally.'

Despite her flirtatious tone, I had an idea she was getting bored. To hold her interest I told stories about my Arab partner in the old bazaar, about moving robotic elements and tractor parts. It's odd, how when you come on to someone, even with the sort of half-assed move I was making, you invest the proceedings with unwarranted emotion, you imbue every action and thought with luminous possibility, until suddenly all the playful motives you had for making the move begin to grow legitimate and powerful. It is as if a little engine has been switched on in your heart due to some critical level of heat having been reached. It seems that random and impersonal, that careless. Not that I was falling in love with her. It was just that everything was becoming urgent, edgy. But soon I began to bore myself with my own glibness, and I asked Kate how she had ended up in Egypt.

'I was in the Middle East nine years ago. I had an itch to see it again.'

'In Egypt?'

'Naw, I was in Saudi. But I didn't want to go back. I couldn't walk around free like here.'

I was just putting those two facts together, 1990 and Saudi Arabia, when the sun came out full, and something glinted on the back of her right hand: three triangular diamond chips embedded in the flesh. I noticed a slight difference in colouration between the wrist and forearm, and realized it was a prosthesis. I had seen similar ones, the same pattern of diamond chips, all embedded in artificial limbs belonging to veterans of Desert Storm. Kate caught me staring at the hand, shifted it behind her hip; but a second later she moved it back into plain view.

'Somethin' botherin' you?' she asked flatly.

'Not at all,' I said.

She held my eyes for a few beats. The tension in her face dissolved. 'It bothers some,' she said, flexing the fingers of the hand, watching them work. She glanced up at me again. 'I flew a chopper, case you're wonderin'.'

I made a noncommittal noise. 'Must have been tough.'

'Yeah, maybe, I don't know. Basically what happened was just plain stupid.' She lapsed into another silence, and I grew concerned again that I might be losing her interest.

'Would you like to go somewhere?' I asked. 'Maybe have a drink?'

She worried her lower lip. 'A drink's not all we're talkin' about here, is it?'

I was pleased by her frankness, her desire to move things along. Like her ungilded

exterior, I took this to indicate inner strength. 'I suppose not.'

She let out a breath slowly. 'Know why I came back to this part of the world? I want somethin' from this place. I don't even know what exactly. Sometimes I think it's just to feel somethin' strong again, 'cause I've been so insulated against feelin' the past nine years. But whatever, I don't wanna be hangin' around anybody who's goin' to hold me back.' Another sigh. 'It's probably weird, me sayin' all this, but I don't want any misunderstandin's.'

'No, it's not weird. I can relate.' Sad for her, I was careful not to let the words sound too facile, because though I *did* understand her, I no longer believed in what she thought was out there. I felt I should make a stab at honesty. 'Me, I'm not looking for anything,' I told her. 'I just try to accept what comes.'

'That's more than most,' she said glumly.

Overhead the contrail of a fighter became visible, arrowing east toward Syria and the latest headlines. Seeing it appeared to brighten Kate.

'Well,' she said, shouldering her bag. 'I reckon I'll take you up on that drink.'

Around midnight I got up from my bed and went into the living room, to a telephone table by French doors that stood open onto a balcony, where I dialled the Belgian girl whom I had been fucking for the past year. When she answered I said, 'Hey, Claire.'

'Danny? Where are you?'

'Out and about.' I tried to think of something else to say. She was helping to install an advanced computer in one of the mosques, one of those projects cloaked in secrecy. I found the whole thing immensely boring, but now I thought talking about it might be distracting. 'How's work?' I asked.

'The usual. The mullahs are upset, the technicians are incompetent.'

I imagined I could hear her displeasure in the bursts of static on the line. It was a cool night, and I shivered in the breeze. Sweat was drying on my chest, my thighs. Faint wailing music and a chaos of traffic noises from the street below. A slant of moonlight fell over the tile floor, a thin tide that sliced across my ankles and bleached my feet bone white. Beyond the light, two chairs and a sofa made shadowy puzzles in a blue darkness.

'You're with somebody, aren't you?' Claire said.

'You know me,' I said.

'Perhaps I should come over. Make it a threesome.'

'Not this time.' But I could not help picturing them together. Claire, soft and white, black hair and large, startling indigo eyes, the submissive voluptuary, the intellectual with a doctorate in artificial intelligence. Kate, all brown and lithe, passionate and violently alive.

'Who is she?'

'An American. She just got a divorce, she's doing some travelling.'

A prickly silence. 'Why did you call?'

'I wanted to hear your voice.'

'That's bullshit,' she said. 'You're worried about something. I always get these calls when something's not going the way you planned.'

I hung my head, listening to the little fizzing storms on the line.

'Is she getting to you, Danny? Is that it?'

Through the French doors I could see a corner of the building that housed police headquarters on Tewfik Square, and facing it, reddish-brown under the arc lights, the colossal statue of Rameses II, marooned on a traffic island, ruler now of a tiny country of parched grass and chipped cement, a steady stream of traffic coursing around it.

'That's why you called,' Claire said. 'Maybe you're falling in love a little bit, and you wanted... what do you say? A reality check. Well, don't worry, Danny. The world's still

just like it was this morning. The big ones still eat the little ones, and you and I, we have our arrangement. We still’—she let rancour creep into her voice—‘we still are there for each other.’

‘It must be the drugs that make you so wise,’ I said, both irritated and comforted that she knew me so well.

‘That’s it! That’s it, exactly. And you, lover. It’s been an education with you.’

I heard a noise behind me. Kate was standing in the bedroom door, a sheet wrapped around her body, her face in shadow.

‘I’ve got to go,’ I said to Claire.

‘Duty calls, eh? All right, Danny. I know you’ll be busy for a while, but give me a call when you get tired of it. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

‘Who was that?’ Kate asked as I hung up.

‘I was breaking a date,’ I said.

‘For tomorrow?’ She came toward me, holding the sheet closed at her breasts. The cloth was dazzlingly white in contrast to her tan. With her hair tumbled about her shoulders, she had acquired an animal energy that had not been noticeable earlier. There was a sullen wariness in her face.

‘For tonight,’ I said.

‘That wasn’t very thoughtful.’ She put her right hand on my chest; I could feel my heart beating against it.

‘I’m not a very nice guy,’ I said.

She frowned at that. ‘I’m s’posed to believe ’cause you say you’re not a nice guy, you really are? I’m s’posed to overlook the fact that after rollin’ around with me, you hop outta the sack and call another woman?’

‘I think,’ I said, ‘you should probably take it to heart.’

Saying this affected me like a confession, the blurting out of a truth that until then I had only dimly perceived, and I felt heavy with the baggage of my trivial past, my deceits and delusions, the confidence game I had made of ordinary days and nights.

Kate studied me for a second or two. Her eyes looked all dark. Then she moved her hand lower, her fingers trailing across my stomach. ‘Hell, I’m fed up with nice guys,’ she said, and curled her fingers around my cock.

This made me a little nervous. That right hand of hers was a marvel. Earlier that evening she had crushed an ice cube into powder between her forefinger and thumb to win a bet, and had flicked off the top of a beer bottle as easily as I would have flicked a piece of lint from my jacket. She might, I thought, want to punish me because of the phone call. But she only caressed me, bringing my erection to life. The sheet slid to the floor, and I touched her breasts. They were small, with puffy coral-coloured areolae. I let their soft weights cosy in my hands. ‘Ah, baby,’ she said, a catch in her voice. ‘Baby.’ I could feel her trembling. She drew me to the sofa, perched on the back of it, and hooked her legs about my waist. My cock scored the crease of her, nuzzled the seep of juices. She guided me inside, worked me partway in. Her head came forward to rest on my shoulder, and her mouth pressed against my throat, breathing a moist, warm circle on my skin. She held me motionless, hands clamped to my buttocks. I pushed against her, trying to seat myself more deeply.

‘No!’ She pricked me with her nails. ‘Stay like this a minute.’

‘I want to be all the way in you,’ I said. She laughed happily, said, ‘Oh, I thought I had it all,’ and angled herself to accommodate me. I went in deeper with that silky glide that makes you think you are going to flow along with it forever, like the entry of a diver or the dismount of a gymnast, so perfect and gravityless, it should mark the first stage of a journey and not merely an abrupt transition into a clumsier state. I needed to feel it again, and I

fucked her heavily, supporting her with both hands. She quit trying to hold me and thrust with her hips, losing her balance and putting a strain on my arms. We wobbled, nearly tumbled off the sofa. It was clear we were not going to make a success of things in this position.

‘Let’s go back in the bedroom,’ I said.

‘Stay inside me,’ she said, and threw her arms around my neck. ‘I need you there. Carry me.’

I lifted her and went weaving toward the bedroom, into the thick darkness, lurching sideways but managing to keep the tip of my cock lodged inside her; then I lowered her carefully, awkwardly, onto the cool, rumpled sheet. We wriggled about until we were centred on the bed, and I sank into her again. She bridged up on her elbows. I thought she would kiss me, but she only put her lips to my ear and whispered, ‘Do everything to me.’

Those words seemed so innocent, as if she were new to all this sweet struggle, they made me feel splendid and blessed and full of love. But as I moved in her again, caution ruled me, and though I told her I loved her, I spoke in the softest of voices, a windy phrase almost indistinguishable from a sigh, and not so she could hear.

Two days later as we explored the old bazaar, the Khan al Khalili, idling along the packed, dusty streets among beggars, acrobats, men selling holograms of the Sphinx and plastic cartouches, ox-carts laden with bricks, hooting taxis, more beggars, travelling through zones of garbage stink, spicy cooking odours, perfumes, incense, hashish, walking through a thousand radio musics in the elaborate shade of mosques and roof warrens, past bamboo stalls and old slave markets with tawny arched façades and painted doors in whitewashed walls that might lead into a courtyard populated by doves and orange trees and houris or the virtual reality of a wealthy businessman with violet skies and flames bursting from black rock and djinns in iron armour, it occurred to me that while I had come to know a great deal about Kate during the past forty-eight hours, incidents from her armed service, sundry drab episodes from her marriage, her family in Virginia, she knew next to nothing about me. Having identified me as ‘that smuggler guy’ appeared to have satisfied her curiosity. Not that there was anything more salient to know—my life had gone unchanged for almost a decade, and the colours of my youth had no real bearing on the man I had become, aimless and pleasure-seeking and competent in unimportant ways. I recognized that Kate was hoping to recapture the intensity she had experienced during her war, the talent for intensity that had been shrouded by marriage, and I realized now it was my occupation, not my winning personality, that had attracted her. I was to be the centrepiece of her furious nostalgia, a sinister element of the design. This comprised an irony I did not believe she would appreciate, for I was far from the adventurous soul she assumed me to be. My success in business was due to an attention to detail and the exercise of caution. The urge to play Indiana Jones was not in my canon. On the other hand, a large portion of what had attracted me to her was more or less the same quality she thought to perceive in me: her drive toward the edge, her consuming desire to put herself in harm’s way on both emotional and physical levels. Because of the imbalance of our involvements, I knew that by allowing myself to become obsessed—and I had already developed a pounding fascination with her—I was opening myself up to a world of hurt; but that, too, the possibility of emotional risk, was part of her appeal. In ways I did not understand, I was committed to whatever course she cared to choose. It was as if when I first looked at her and saw the glitter of that impersonal desire in her eyes, that lust for whatever would excite her, I’d heard the future roaring in my ears and said to myself, Now, old son, now you can throw your life away for no reason at all.

The interior of the shop belonging to Abdel Affifi, my partner in crime, was a

nondescript clutter: glass display counters ranked with bottles of various essences, shelves laden with toy camels and cotton shirts, cheap luggage, gilt bathrobes, fly whisks, bearded plastic heads with tiny fiberoptic memories that recited verses from the Koran, trays heaped with fraudulent antiquities. A beggar peered in through the window, his wizened face visible between two camel saddles, an artefact of the culture more authentic than any the shop had for sale. Abdel himself was a hook-nosed old man clad in a fez and a shabby suit coat worn over a gallibeya. He made a fuss over Kate, who had on a summery print dress and looked very pretty; he served her mint tea and insisted she try his most expensive essence. He failed to notice her prosthesis and seized her right hand; before she could object, he applied a drop of the oily stuff to the inside of her wrist. The perfume, designed to react with the skin to form a unique fragrance, gave off scarcely any odour at all. She pretended to be delighted, but moments later I caught her staring grimly at the wrist, and when I tried to console her, she shook me off.

Not long afterward a plump, animated middle-aged Arab entered the shop, a man whom I knew as Rollo. Sleek black hair; flourishing moustache; western-style suit. He and Abdel struck up a conversation by the door. This did not please me. Rollo had been trying to involve us in drug-trafficking in the Sinai. I wanted nothing to do with him, but Abdel, who was under some heavy financial pressure, had showed signs of weakening. I must admit I was also tempted by the money, but I had refused to give in to temptation. My policy of not dealing drugs was one of the few fixed points remaining on my moral compass; I needed to maintain it, I thought, in order to maintain my separateness from the chaotic amorality of my environment... though it may be that a form of superstitious fear, perhaps an apprehension that I would expose myself to karmic peril if I breached the policy, had supplanted any true moral feeling.

‘Who’s that?’ Kate asked, and when I told her, she said, ‘Rollo? That’s hilarious!’

‘His father was a guide for the Brits in World War II. He taught Rollo the King’s English, or at least some fishwife’s version of it. The name’ll make sense when you hear him talk.’

After a minute or so Rollo came toward us, beaming like an uncle who had just spied his favourite nephew—this despite the fact he knew I detested him. ‘Danny!’ he said joyfully, giving me a hug, enveloping me in an aura of flowery cologne. Then, turning his white smile on Kate, he said in the ripest of Cockney accent, ‘‘Oo’s the bird?’

Kate managed to keep a straight face during the introductions and the exchange of pleasantries that followed, but after Rollo had drawn me aside I saw her over his shoulder, laughing silently.

‘Look ’ere, mate,’ Rollo was saying. ‘My friend Abdel and Oi ’ave made us an agreement, but we can’t do nuffin’ ’less you’re part of it. Oi need you to settle things with the Israelis. They’ve ’eard of you, and they’ll be ’appier finkin’ a Yank’s in charge.’

‘Fuck off,’ I said.

‘Listen to this offer, my friend,’ Abdel said, making a plaintive face.

With an air of vast self-importance, Rollo took a notepad from the pocket of his suit coat, scribbled on it and then showed me the percentages he had written. I tried to look blasé and told him I wasn’t interested.

‘Nao, you’re not interested!’ said Rollo. ‘Your eyes ’alf bugged out, they did!’

‘He’s only asking for you to make some arrangements,’ said Abdel in a wheedling tone. ‘You won’t be carrying drugs.’

‘Damn right I won’t.’ Abdel started to say something more, but I cut him off. ‘There’s worse than Israeli troops out in the Sinai. With or without drugs, what he’s asking is risky as hell. I don’t know shit about these people. They might take a dislike to me and blow my fucking head off.’

Abdel continued trying to persuade me, and this put me in a thorny position. I could

have made my own way in Cairo without much difficulty, but Abdel had taken me under his wing, treated me more like a son than a partner, and as a result I was doing very well indeed. He was no saint, God knows; but compared to Rollo he was an innocent. I did not want him to get in over his head. Yet it was hard to deny him, knowing he was in trouble. I'd had dealings in the Sinai before, and I believed I could deal with Rollo's people. Crossing the border was no problem—though detection systems should have made such crossing impossible, there were many Israelis these days willing to look the other way for a price. It was the Palestinians who concerned me. Since the Intifada had failed, all manner of eccentric fundamentalism, some of it arcane in nature, had come to flourish in the camps and villages of the Sinai, and I had heard stories that gave me pause.

'I'll think it over,' I said at last, figuring that if I could put him off, some wiser business opportunity might arise.

He spread his hands in a gesture of acquiescence, but Rollo, tactful as ever, brayed at me, saying, 'Yeah, g'wan, fink it over! We'll just await your pleasure, shall we?'

After we had left Abdel's I explained to Kate what had happened. We were walking along a narrow street of open-front shops, ignoring the pleas of the beggars. The sun had lowered behind a mosque on our left, and the golden light had the mineral richness of the light you often get in the tropics when the sun is shining through rain clouds. As we neared the edge of the bazaar Kate leaned into me, pressed her breasts against my arm, and said coyly, 'Can't we go? I'd like to watch you in action!'

'You want to go with me?' I chuckled. 'Not a chance!'

She pulled back from me, angry. 'What's so funny? I've been in the desert before. And I know how to handle myself. Maybe better than you!'

'Maybe,' I said, trying to mollify her. 'But you've never dealt with people like this. I wouldn't want to be responsible for what could happen.'

That stirred her up even more. 'Let's get this straight,' she said. 'I'm nobody's responsibility but my own, okay? Just 'cause we're screwin', that doesn't mean...'

'Kate,' I said, uncomfortable with the crowd that was gathering, the taxi honking at us to clear the way. We were standing beside a store that sold baskets, and the owner and customers had come out to watch. A trolley so clotted with humanity, people stuffed inside, hanging all over the outside, that you could scarcely see the green enamel finish of the car, passed on the street adjoining the entrance to the bazaar, and it seemed all those brown arms were waving at me.

'That doesn't mean,' she went on, 'you got any papers on me. Do you understand? I don't want you to be confused!'

I was startled by the intensity of her anger. She was enraged, her face flushed, standing with hands on hips, continuing her harangue. Some of the onlookers had begun to make jokes about me; the taxi driver was leaning out his window and laughing. Even the beggars were grinning.

I caught her by the arm. She tried to wrench away, but I hauled her along, pushed her into an alley, pinned her against the wall. 'You can get all over me back at my place if you want,' I said. 'But not here. I work down here. People see me humiliated in public by a woman, word gets around, and I lose respect. That may sound sexist, but that's how it is in this culture. Respect's the main currency in my business. I can't afford to lose it.'

She grew instantly contrite, telling me she understood, apologizing, not backing away from her statement of independence, but saying that she should have known better than to cause a scene, she was just a real bitch on that particular subject.

I had expected her anger to abate, yet not so quickly, and it was not until later I realized that her sudden shift in mood was due less to my logic than to the fact that I had acted like the character she fancied me instead of like the man I was. And perhaps I *had* been putting on an act. If Claire had done to me what Kate had, I would have simply

walked away from her. But of course Claire would never have acted that way.

At the time I understood little of this. I believe now that I did not want to understand, that I knew I would have to play a role in order to keep the affair on course, to satisfy Kate's demands, and I am certain that this talent for self-deception was partly responsible for all that came to happen.

All that next week I tried to distract Kate from what had become a preoccupation with illegal adventure by showing her Cairo, a city that, with its minarets and roof warrens, its modern bridges and timeless river, ubiquitous flies, computerized calls to prayer, crushing poverty and secret pleasures, seemed to embody all the toxins and exaltations of life. But Kate, though exhilarated, was not distracted. One evening as we sat surrounded by old men smoking waterpipes in a back-alley club—Claire's favourite, as it happened—a place constructed of ornate carpets draped over a bamboo frame, with folding chairs and little metal tables, all centred about a makeshift stage upon which a drugged young girl wearing street clothes, her cheeks pierced by silver needles, sang a song that prophesied glory for Islam, Kate grew surly and silent, and as she often did when depressed, bent coins between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. There was a great deal I loved about her, but this fixation on her prosthesis disturbed me no end. Once she had slit open a seam that ran across the palm, peeled back folds of plastic skin, laying bare a packed complexity of microcircuits, and demonstrated how, by stripping a wire that ran to the power pack, she could short out an electrical system. I was not happy to think that the woman with whom I was sleeping could electrocute me on a whim.

I understood her fixation—at least I sympathized with it—but there was much I did not understand about her reaction to war. I had known men of my father's generation, veterans of Vietnam, who had exhibited a similar yearning for the terrible pleasures of the battlefield; yet they had been brutally used and discarded by their country, whereas the veterans of Kate's war had been celebrated as American saints. Even if I accepted the idea that all combat veterans longed for such intensity, that did not explain the feverish quality of Kate's longing, and I thought my inability to understand her might stem from my failure to understand Desert Storm, a fabulous victory that had achieved next to nothing in terms of *realpolitik*, unless you considered the deaths of a hundred thousand Iraqis, the restoration of a cruel oligarchy in Kuwait, and the drastic upgrading of Syria's missile capacity to be achievements. Could the inconclusiveness of the action be responsible for the sickness that preyed upon Kate? Or could it be in that delirious sky over Baghdad, with white streaks and flares whirling in the electric blue of the nightscope like a kind of strange cellular activity, the darting of sperm in an inky womb, the mysterious associations of organelles, that some magic had been at work, infecting those who fought beneath it with unending dissatisfaction? I had asked Kate questions that addressed these and other notions, but she would only talk about the war in terms of anecdote, mostly humorous, mostly undermining the popular conception that Desert Storm had been an exercise of phenomenal precision, telling of crates of missiles left untended in the middle of nowhere, tank commands roaming aimlessly, misdirected platoons. Watching her that night, unable to comprehend her motives—or my own, for that matter—I acknowledged that my relationship with her was intrinsically concerned with the exploration of those motives, and so I told her that I was going into the Sinai, that she could go with me.

She glanced up from her pile of bent piastres; for an instant something glowed and shifted in her face, as if she were in the grip of an emotion that had the fierce mutability of a fire burning out of control.

'All right!' she said, and took my hand.

I had expected more of a reaction, but perhaps she too had known it was inevitable.

The young girl's song was ending. She swayed under the necklace of light bulbs that illuminated the stage, her hands describing delicate passages in the air, not a drop of blood spilling from her pierced cheeks, singing of how Muhammed returned to reign in Mecca and the blessing of Islam spread throughout the infidel world and flowers bloomed in the desert. All around me, wreathed in hashish smoke, old men were nodding, weeping, speaking the name of God. That was what I most loved about the Arabs of the bazaar, their capacity to cast aside the duplicitous context of their lives and find within themselves some holy fibre that allowed them to reduce the pain of the world to an article of faith. I shed no tears, yet I felt as one of them, wholly embracing a glorious futility, given over to the thunderous joy of belief, though I realized that the truth to which I had surrendered myself was meagre and blighted and could not long sustain me.

Two nights later as we approached our rendezvous point, which lay less than a kilometre from the abandoned Palestinian village of El Malik, I began to smell perfume. I pulled Abdel's jeep onto the shoulder, in among some thorn bushes. Kate asked what was wrong, and I told her, Nothing. But perfume was often used by smugglers to disguise the scent of opium, and I was afraid that we had been set up. The cushion of the back seat was drenched with attar of roses. I sliced the upholstery with my pocket knife, groped inside the cushion, and along with wet stuffing and perfume vials and broken glass—apparently the last pothole had done the damage—I felt thin, hard cakes wrapped in paper. Opium. And not a little of it.

Somewhere out in the darkness, among the barren hills that bulked up against the stars, an engine kicked over; I had to assume that the Israelis had spotted us, were puzzled by our having stopped, and were coming for their goods. A chill bloomed between my shoulder blades, and my legs grew feeble. I could feel the great emptiness of the Sinai solidifying around us, as malefic as a black tower in whose keep we stood. That no one had told me about the drugs made it clear that my survival was not a *fait accompli*. Rollo had viewed me as an impediment to his association with Abdel; alone, he would be able to manipulate Abdel, and he might have arranged to have me eliminated by the Israelis. An overly imaginative scenario, perhaps. But I had no desire to test its inaccuracy.

I listened to the approaching engine. Judging by its sound, the Israelis were driving something far more powerful than the jeep. We would not be able to outrun them.

'Get the guns,' I said to Kate; I dug out some of the opium and stashed it in my pack, along with several dozen of the vials, thinking I could use them for currency. Once again she asked me what was wrong. I shoved her aside and fished the guns—Belgian SMGs—out from beneath the front seat. I tossed one to her, said, 'Let's go,' and set off at a jog into the hills.

She caught up to me, grabbed my arm. 'You goin' to tell me what the hell's goin' on?'

Until that moment I had controlled my fear, but her touch broke my control, and I was galvanized with terror, furious at her for having led me into this mess, at myself for having followed, for letting her so distract me that I had neglected to take basic precautions. 'You stupid fucking bitch!' I shouted. 'You're so hot to die, stay here. Otherwise get your ass moving.' Her face was pale and stunned in the starlight. I felt a flicker of remorse, but only a flicker. 'You wanted this,' I said. 'Now deal with it.'

We had climbed about a third of a mile, I'd guess, when small-arms fire sounded from the road. But no bullets struck close to us. After a few more bursts, there was a loud explosion and a fireball at the base of the hill. The jeep. Shortly thereafter I heard the Israelis' engine roar away. As I had hoped, they were satisfied with the opium and not sufficiently zealous to fulfil their part of what I assumed to have been a contract.

Nevertheless I continued climbing toward El Malik, which offered decent cover and where I planned to spend the night. The next morning I intended to hook up with my own Israeli contacts and negotiate our passage back to Cairo.

The moon was rising as we came into the village, descending a slope strewn with boulders, and in that milky light, the whitewashed houses with their vacant black windows and walls gapped by Israeli artillery looked like the shards of enormous skulls. From the eastern edge of the place we gazed out across a valley figured by the lights of Israeli settlements, the formless constellations of a lesser sky. There was a heady air of desolation, a sense of lives violently interrupted yet still, in some frail, exhausted way, trying to complete their ordinary tasks, souls perceptible as a faint disturbance that underscored the silence, a vibration unaffected by the gusting of a cold wind.

We sheltered in a house with a packed dirt floor that offered a view of a public square and a ruined fountain. Kate, who had spoken little during the climb, sat against a wall and stared at me despondently.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said after a while. ‘This is all my fault.’

‘Not all of it,’ I said, dropping beside her. ‘Anyway, the worst is over. Tomorrow, if we’re careful, we should be able to get in touch with friends of mine. They’ll help us.’

She said nothing for almost a minute, then: ‘I’ve got to be crazy. To want this, I mean.’

I chose not to absolve her of insanity, but I put an arm about her. I believe I felt then what she wanted to feel. To be in that gutted doom of a place, lent a memorial beauty by the moonlight, all its ruin seeming to turn white and bulge with living shadow; to have survived folly and betrayal—and I was not concerned that what had happened would hurt my business, I was simply interested in paying the betrayers back in kind; to be in the company of a woman who, though I did not love her, had put a lover’s charge in me, a woman with whom I could practise a perfect counterfeit of passion; it was as if the events of that night had exposed a romantic core in me, and I was now entirely in the world, alive as I had not been for years.

She glanced up at me and said, ‘You look happy.’

I laughed and kissed her. The kiss deepened. I touched her breasts, startled to find that anything could feel so soft and luxurious in this harsh, empty place.

Kate pulled back and gave me a searching stare. The vitality had returned to her face. After a second she jumped to her feet, backed away until she was standing in the chute of light spilling through the door.

I came to one knee, intending to go after her, but she held up a hand to ward me off and began unbuttoning her shirt. She smiled as she shrugged out of the shirt, and watching her work her jeans down past her hips, eyes focused on the dark tangle between her thighs, visible through the opaque material of her panties, I felt heavy in my head, thick and slow, full of a red urge, like a dog restrained from feeding by its mistress’s command.

I saw the man behind her a moment before he reached the doorway, but I was so stupefied, I was unable to react, only registering him as a slight figure holding an automatic rifle, wearing jeans and a windbreaker. And a mask. He shoved Kate toward me, sending her toppling, and we fell together onto the floor. By the time I managed to disengage from her, he had been joined by four others, all masked. They were evil-looking things, the masks: curved sheets of white plastic with mouth slits and eyeholes, adorned with painted symbols and religious slogans.

‘Tell the whore to clothe herself,’ one said in Arabic.

They watched without comment as Kate dressed; she stared back at them, not defiant, but cold, measuring. An admirable pose, but I had no urge to hand her a medal. We had, I believed, come to the end of it. The men who held us captive had lost everything, and their sole remaining ambition was to go down in flames while exacting a terrible vengeance.

Oddly enough, at that moment I thought of Claire.

They collected our packs and guns and escorted us to the ruin of a small mosque, where another seven or eight masked men were assembled. Moonlight streamed through rents in the domed roof, applying a design of sharp shadows and blazing light to the floor tiles; the same fierce slogans decorating the masks had here been painted on the walls. A cooking fire burned in a shell crater. The men stationed themselves along the wall; then another man, unmasked, a sharply featured individual dressed in a striped robe, stepped out from a door at the rear of the building. He had a bronzed complexion and a neat beard salted with grey and one blind eye, white as marble. He was carrying a long, gracefully curved sword. He took a position at the centre of the room, directly beneath a gap in the roof, so that a beam of moonlight, separate and distinct, shone like a benediction upon him, and stared at us with disdain. I could feel the fanatical weight of his judgement as surely as if it were a form of radiation.

One of the others handed him my pack, whispered in his ear. He inspected the contents, removed a vial of perfume. He moved close to me, smiling, his blind eye glowing like a tiny moon. 'Thief,' he said in a voice like iron, 'my name is Mahmoud Ibrahim, and I am he who prepares the way. Thou hast stolen from me and given nothing in return. Yet because thou hast been touched by the city of Saladin, I will spare thee everything but pain.' He opened the vial and poured the contents over my head. He took out a second vial, a third, and repeated the process. I shut my eyes. The oily stuff ran into my mouth, thick and bitter, trickling cold down my cheeks, drowning the stink of my fear in a reek of flowers and humiliation.

Mahmoud took one of the cakes of opium, pinched off a substantial fragment. 'Eat,' he said, holding it out. I let him place it on my tongue like a communion wafer.

When he was satisfied that I had swallowed, he smiled, nodded. Then he gestured at Kate and handed his sword to the man who had brought him my pack. 'The woman first,' he said.

Kate shrieked as three men threw her onto the floor and positioned her right wrist atop a block. Another stood by with a torch, while the man wielding the sword laid the edge of it on her wrist, then lifted it high. The traditional Arab punishment for stealing, the lopping off of the right hand—I imagined it sheared away, blood spurting, and perhaps in her fright, Kate had also forgotten the prosthesis, for she twisted her head about, trying to find me, screaming, 'Danny! Help me!' But I was targeted by seven rifles, and I could only stand and watch, the scene burning into my brain—the stark shadows of the ruin, the men in their strange white masks, the calm prophet with his glowing eye, and Kate writhing, her face distorted by panic.

Then, with a windy noise, the sword flashed down.

As the blade bit into Kate's prosthesis, slicing through plastic and microcircuitry, there was a sizzling noise, and a rippling blue-white charge flowed up the steel, outlining blade and hilt in miniature lightnings. Sparks showered around the man holding it, and there was so much confusion and shouting I am not sure whether or not he screamed. He stood for a second or two, shivering with the voltage passing through him; smoke trickled between his fingers. Then he fell. The sword flew from his grasp and went spinning across the floor to my feet.

It was reflex that moved me to pick up the sword, and it was dumb luck that Mahmoud had recoiled from the electrocution and wound up beside me. But I did not waste the opportunity. I slid the blade under his neck, making a yoke of it, and dragged him toward the rear door. Kate was sitting up, dazed, her prosthesis dangling horribly from a spaghetti of charred wires; but when I called to her, she got to her feet and came weaving toward me. More than half the men had fled, terrified by the witchery of her hand, but the remainder were closing on me. I pulled the blade tight against Mahmoud's Adam's apple,

making him stiffen and gasp.

'*Emshi!*' I shouted, and his men backed away.

With Kate at my side, I guided Mahmoud through the rear door into a small room whose back wall had been obliterated. Three cars were parked outside. Kate leaned against the wall beside me; her face was empty, slack.

'Keys,' I said to Mahmoud.

He groped in the pocket of his robe, fingered them out. 'The Peugeot,' he said, gritting out the words.

'Can you drive?' I asked Kate.

She did not answer.

I kicked her hard in the calf. She blinked; her head wobbled.

'Drive!' I told her. 'Take the keys and drive.'

Though the men harassed us, aiming their rifles, threatening us, we made it to the car, Mahmoud and I taking the back seat. I sat turned toward him, barring his throat with the blade. Then we were bumping along the cratered streets, jouncing over potholes, past the last houses and out onto a rocky, precipitous road that wound down into the moonstruck valley. No headlights showed behind us. Once the land began to flatten out, I removed the blade from Mahmoud's throat. His men would not risk confronting the Israeli patrols. I was shaking, rattled with adrenaline, yet at the same time I felt woozy, drifty, as if a cloud were building in the centre of my brain. I remembered the opium.

'Shit!' I said.

Mahmoud seemed as calm and content as a hawk with a dead mouse. Kate was staring straight ahead, her good hand clenching the wheel; her skin was pasty, and when she glanced back I had the impression that she looked like she might be going into shock.

'You okay?' I asked.

She muttered something; the car swerved wildly onto the shoulder.

It was definitely the opium coming on. I was having trouble feeling the tips of my fingers, and my head was turning into a balloon. Everything I thought left a vague colour in the air. Smoking opium was a fairly smooth sail, albeit a long ocean voyage; eating it, however, was a rocket to the moon. I was still lifting slowly from the launch pad, but in a minute or two I was going to have all the physical capacity of a cantaloupe. Or maybe a honeydew. I couldn't decide. Something round and gleaming and very, very still. I had intended to turn Mahmoud over to the Israelis; I was sure they wanted him, and I hoped that his capture would help them overlook our illegal entry. But now, with the opium taking control and Kate on the wobbly side, I could not chance having him along.

'Stop the car,' I said.

I had to repeat myself twice before she complied, and by the time she did, I had almost forgotten why I wanted her to stop.

'Get out,' I said to Mahmoud. That blind eye of his had acquired the nacreous depth of pearl, and I was beginning to see things in it. Beautiful things, amazing things. I told him again to get out. Or maybe I didn't. It was difficult to distinguish between speech and thought. Everything was so absorbing. The dark, the distant lights of a kibbutz. The attar of roses smell that clung to me. I could lose myself in any of it. Then something touched me on the brow, leaving a cool spot that went deep inside my head.

'From thy poison I have made thee a vision of the time to come,' Mahmoud said. 'What thou will have of it, I know not. But it is a gift of the Prophet, may His name be praised, and he planteth no seed that doth not bear fruit.'

In the interval between these words and when next he spoke, I heard a symphony compounded of breath and night sounds and metallic creaks that implied an entire secret history hitherto unknown to man. Then there was a whisper, as sinister as a violin tremolo in a minor key: 'Thou will not evade my punishment this night.'

I thought I heard the car door slam shut.

'Kate,' I said. 'Can you get us somewhere? A town. Some place...'

I never heard her reply, for I was walking along the crest of a green hill shaped like a dune. A verdant plain spread in every direction, picked out here and there by white stone houses formed into elaborate shapes, and by deep blue lakes along whose edges flamingos stalked and lions with men's voices took their ease, and by white cities where no one cried for meat and in whose highest tower lofty questions were put to a wonderful machine that had summoned and now embodied the soul of the Prophet. White clouds the size of small kingdoms floated overhead, and flying among them were golden shining things that whirled and darted like swallows, yet were made of metal not flesh. At long last I came to a pool shaped like a deep blue eye, almost purple, that lay in the midst of a bamboo thicket, with the ancient statue of an enthroned pharaoh at one end, worn faceless by the wind and the sand. I made to drink from the pool, but when I dipped my hand into the water, it began to stir and to ripple, and strange lights glowed beneath the surface illuminating an intricate thing of silver fibres and rods and other structures whose natures were not clearly revealed, and I heard a voice in the air, the voice of this silver thing, saying, 'I am the Oracle of the Past. Ask and I will tell thee where thou hast been.'

And I said to her, for it was the voice of a woman, 'Of what use is this? I wish to know the Future.'

'Truly,' she said, 'the Future is already known. This is the time of Paradise long prophesied, the time without end when all men live as brothers. Only the Past remains a mystery, and indeed, it has always been thus, for no man can know himself by knowing his future. It is from the Past that the greatest wisdom derives.'

'Then tell me who I am,' I said.

There was a silence, and finally the voice said, 'Thou art Daniel, the infidel who is known as The Arm of Ibrahim, and thou hast struck down many enemies of Allah and also many enemies of the sons of Abraham. Thou hast faced peril and known terrible strife, yet thou hast survived to wield great power in the service of peace and righteousness, though thy life is as secret to the world as a stone at the bottom of the Nile.' The voice paused, then said, 'I do not understand thee, for it seems thy past and thy future are the same.'

(At this point I heard a scream, a tremendous noise, and felt a tearing pain in my right arm; but I was overwhelmed by the opium and it was as if these things had happened to someone else to whom I was somehow remotely physically connected.)

I, of course, understood the Oracle's confusion. Was not her past my future, and vice versa? 'What must I now do?' I asked.

'Thou must return to the city of Saladin, and there thou will build a city within the city, and all I have told you will come to pass.'

'And who will sustain me against the peril and strife that you have prophesied?'

'I will,' said the voice. 'I will sustain thee.'

'Tell me who you are,' I said.

'I am the Oracle, the soul of the machine,' the voice said. 'Yet I am also, and this I do not understand, the love of thy life come across the centuries to find thee.'

And from the pool there emerged a woman all of white metal save only her right hand which was bone and blood and milky flesh, and her eyes had the shape of the pond and were of a like colour, indigo, and it seemed I had known her for many years, though I could not call her to mind. I took her hand, and as I did, the flesh of her hand began to spread, devouring the metal, until she stood before me, a woman in all ways, complete and mortal.

(I heard anxious voices, 'Where's the driver?' 'She was thrown out.' 'Have you got him?' 'Oh, God! I can't stop the bleeding!' and felt even more intense pain. The vision had begun to fade, and I saw flashes of red light, of concerned faces, the interior of a van.)

And I lay down with the woman among the bamboo stalks, and we touched and whispered, and when I entered her she gave a soft cry that went out and out into the world, winding over the green plain and into the dark valley like the wail of a siren or a call to prayer, and in our lovemaking it seemed we were moving at great speed past strange bodies of light and towers, heading for a destination beyond that of pleasure and release, a place where all my wounds would be healed and all my deepest questions answered.

The doctors in Haifa tried to save my right arm, but in the end they were forced to amputate. It took me six months to adapt to a prosthesis, six months in which I considered what had happened and what I should do next. Kate had also been in the hospital, but she had returned to America by the time I was well enough to ask for her. She left a note in which she apologized for the accident and for involving me in her ‘misguided attempt to recapture what I never really lost’. I felt no bitterness toward her. She had failed herself far more than she had failed me. My fascination with her, the psychological structure that supported strong emotion, had died that night in the ruined mosque, its charge expended.

Neither did I feel bitter toward Mahmoud Ibrahim. In retrospect, it seemed he had been no ordinary fanatic, that his poise had been the emblem of a profound internal gravity, of peacefulness and wisdom. Perhaps I manufactured this characterization in order to justify my folly in terms of predestination or some other quasi-religious precept. Yet I could not wholly disbelieve that something of the sort may have been involved. How else could Mahmoud have known that I came from Cairo, the city of Saladin? Then there was his prophecy of my ‘punishment’, the vision with its curiously formal frame and futuristic detail, so distinct from the random lucidity of the usual opium dream.

A gift from the Prophet?

I wondered. I doubted, yet still I wondered.

Claire came to Haifa, distraught, horrified at my injuries. She slept in the hospital room with me, she washed me, she tended me in every human way. The similarity between her and the woman of my vision was not lost upon me, nor was the fact that her studies in artificial intelligence and her secret project with the mosque gave rise to some interesting possibilities and paradoxes concerning the Oracle; yet I was reluctant to buy into something so preposterous. As the months passed, however, I could not ignore the way that things were changing between us, the tendrils of feeling that we had tried to kill with drugs and cynicism now beginning to creep forth and bud. If this much of the vision had a correspondence with reality, how then could I ignore the rest of it? The life of power and strife, the building of a city within a city: my business? It occurred to me that I had only played at business all these years, that now I was being tempted to get serious. There was much one could effect on an international level through the agency of the black market. But if I were to get serious, it would call for an increased ruthlessness on my part, a ruthlessness informed by a sense of morality and history, something I was not sure I had in me.

I did not know what I would do on my return to Cairo, but on my second night back I went for a walk alone through a secluded quarter of the Khan al Khalili, heading—I thought—in no particular direction, idling along; yet I was not altogether surprised when I came to a certain door in a certain whitewashed wall, the retreat of a wealthy businessman. I hesitated. All the particulars of Mahmoud’s vision came before my eyes, and I began to understand that, true or not, it offered me a design for life far superior to any I had contrived. At length I opened the door, which was locked, with no great difficulty, and stepped into a courtyard with a tiled fountain and lemon trees. I moved quietly into the house beyond, into a long study lined with books, furnished with a mahogany desk and leather chairs. I waited in the shadows for the man, idly playing with the coins in my pocket, a habit I had picked up during my rehabilitation. I left one of the coins on the desk for him

to find. I knew he was a poor sleeper, that soon he would wake and come into the study. When at last he did appear, yawning and stretching, a plump fellow with a furious moustache and sleek black hair, I did not hate him as much as I had presumed; I saw him mainly as an impediment to my new goals.

He sat at the desk, switched on a lamp that cast a pool of light onto the writing surface, shuffled some papers, then spotted the ten-piastre coin that I had left for him. He picked it up and held it to the light. The coin was bent double, the image on its face erased by the pressure of my right thumb and forefinger. It seemed an article of wonder to him, and I felt a little sad for what I must do. He was, after all, much the same as I, a ruthless man with goals, except my ruthlessness was a matter of future record and my goals the stuff of prophecy.

There was no point, I realized, in delaying things. I moved forward, and he peered into the darkness, trying to make me out, his face beginning to register the first of his final misgivings. I felt ordered and serene, not in the least anxious, and I understood that this must be the feeling one attains when one takes a difficult step one has balked at for years and finds that it is not so difficult at all, but a sweet inevitability, a confident emergence rather than an escalation of fear.

‘Hello, Rollo,’ I said. ‘I just need a few seconds of your time.’
