

## One

## Maison Blanche

I was taking a pee in the bathroom when I caught sight of myself in the mirror. My face looked so beautiful that I turned to look more closely, spraying the tiles round the toilet in my hurry. I shook my *zib* and put it back inside my boxers so I could study my face. It was like someone had drawn a faint shadow beneath the cheekbones, then put a touch of mascara on my lashes. The eyes had a depth I'd never seen before. I put my head to one side and smiled, then furrowed my brow as though I was being serious, but the eyes stayed the same – twinkling with a kind of humour and experience. This was the face of someone old beyond my years.

How could it be I'd never noticed before just how beautiful I was? Not regular handsome maybe like an old-time film star and not indie blank like a modern one. More a mix of soul and sexiness. With noble bones.

I flipped the glass to magnifying and back to normal. I held a hand mirror up to turn the reflection on itself, so it sat right-way-on. I backed against the wall, then went fisheye close. It made no difference. True, I'd smoked a little *kif*, but only a little, which was all I liked, and I'd had a Coke to keep my sugar level up (a tip from a boy in my year). I felt happy to think this person was me. No harm could come to someone who looked like that. The ways of peace and righteousness were ours. Not to mention soft-skinned girls and travel to distant places.

We stared into one another's eyes for a few more minutes.

Then he spoke.

He said, 'You got to get out, man. You gotta get out.'

I felt myself nodding in agreement.

Because I'd known this anyway, for quite a while. There was nothing shocking in what he said, it was more of a relief.

'Go now.'

'I will. Any day now.'

We lived just outside the medina, the old town, in a whitewashed house. There was another family on the ground floor, but an outside staircase led to our front door. We had the top two floors and a roof terrace with a view towards the sea. My stepmother used to hang the washing up there, which pissed my father off. 'How can I bring people home when they have to sit next to a row of wet shirts?' I had nothing against my stepmother except that she was not my mother. That, and the fact that she always repeated herself. Once she'd locked on to a piece of news or a point of view, she couldn't let it go. 'All our problems are caused by the Arabs of the Gulf, especially the Saudis,' she told us one January. In September she was still saying this like something she'd just stumbled on.

In the middle of the terrace was a *taifor*, a kind of low table. It had a woven cloth, orange and red, and small shiny discs that reflected the sun. On it was a box of cigarettes and coloured glasses for tea. My father asked men he hoped would invest in his business to come up and admire the view while he unlocked his supply of whisky. He offered it round with a leer that made me feel sick. There were tons of places in town you could buy liquor. Some of them had only boxes of tissues or cat food in the window, but everyone knew you couldn't run a specialist tissue shop. You only had to go a few paces in, past the Kleenex, and there were rows of Johnnie Walker and Glenmorangie above the lager and Moroccan wine.

Then my father told me to go and do some studying. Down in my room at the back of the house, I opened my books. I was studying economics, though ‘studying’ may be too strong a word. True, I’d done well at school when I was young, but it was only because I was good at languages. I’d learned French from my mother, who was half French herself. Her father was from a French settler family in Algeria – one of those they called *pieds noirs*, or black feet, because the original ones (a hundred years before) had had shiny leather shoes. Normally the generations of settlers married others of their own, French people, but my grandfather took a liking to an Algerian woman in Oran (Algerian Granny) and they were married, though in what religion I don’t know. They moved to Morocco and then to Paris, where my mother, Hanan, was born one day in the early Fifties. I don’t know why they had such itchy feet. Maybe they saw trouble coming in Algeria. I guess the Arab name was a gesture from my French grandfather to his Algerian wife now they were stuck in Paris. *Hanan*, any dictionary will tell you, means ‘mercy’ or ‘clemency’, so maybe he was trying to be nice.

It was in Paris that Hanan, my mother, was brought up and where perhaps she should have stayed. But in her early thirties she went to Morocco on a visit to some cousins and it was there she had the misfortune to meet and marry Malik Zafar, a would-be businessman, who, in 1986, became my father.

My mother died when I was ten. Or maybe I was nine. I wasn’t aware at the time how ill she was and went off to school one day telling her I hoped her ‘cold’ would be better by the evening. She did look thin and had trouble speaking. I was later told she had had cancer of the oesophagus, though I hardly knew what either word meant. Her legacy was my ability to speak French.

For a time, I went to the American School of Tangier, where the lessons were all in English and the girls wore Western clothes. There were daily doses of classical Arabic, as well, but it got too

expensive for the son of a flaky businessman. I was sent instead to a school in the Ville Nouvelle, where I got distracted, stopped reading and only just scraped into college at the end of it.

And at college there were more girls. There was also a woman who taught politics, Miss Aziz. She had hair so black it had a purple glow in the light that came through the lecture-room windows. It was thick, with a slight wave, chopped off just above the shoulder. Like other women, she wore trousers most of the time, but once she wore a black skirt to the knee with a white shirt and three rows of big red beads. Towards the end of class, I noticed that a thin strip of white lace had slipped below the hem of the skirt and settled on the black nylon that covered her legs.

We were all majoring in economics. It was a dull subject, but my father made me do it. Miss Aziz's politics class was a compulsory module in the course and it had a bit of history in it too. One day she told us about the wars of the last century and how the Europeans came to North Africa. She talked about the colonisers as though she wasn't sure they were quite human. They were cultured all right, the way she told it, but they were addicted to killing in a way that no number of symphonies could make up for.

All this was new to me. I didn't know exactly when the Europeans had first come to my country or what they wanted from us. But they'd left a lot behind in the names of boulevards, squares and churches. Listening to Miss Aziz describe the Spanish and the French as creatures of a slightly different species, I wondered if this was how they'd seen us, too, when they first arrived in North Africa – primitive bandits on a coastal strip above an endless desert. Bandits with religion.

Miss Aziz, at first glance, seemed to do the right things. She was patient with the questions of the class, and when Dr Ahmed, the head of department, put his head round the door and asked her for a word she placed her book face down on the desk and hurried after him. But what was different about her

was that she seemed to carry a world in her head that was not the world we knew. She never returned an essay late and she was polite to Hamid, the toothless janitor who swept the courtyard while the rest of us just laughed at his fat ass when he wasn't sitting on it. And I can't imagine Miss A ever raised her voice in the staffroom. So why did she give off this sense of rebellion?

Laila, my girlfriend, noticed the same thing. She used to call Miss Aziz 'the Messenger'. It was the name of an American television show in which an average family had adopted a boy who turned out to be an alien. It was a comedy aimed at children, but it was a cult at our college. The kids in the family were always begging to be taken away to his home planet, but the Messenger, who was like an ordinary boy except for two extra fingers (and some telekinetic powers), was too grateful to the mom and dad for rescuing him to take the children away, even on a day trip. For all I know, it was a hidden message, sponsored by some religious group – however shit your life is, you've got to keep believing, don't run away.

While my father poured his whisky down the throats of his guests (they never invested, they just drank), I sat on my bed and opened a course book. I was bored. Who cares about history, even if Miss Aziz is teaching it? What's the point of remembering stuff that happened before you were born? We weren't 'remembering' it anyway. We hadn't been there – neither had our teachers, nor anyone else in the world – so we couldn't *remember* it. What we were doing was *imagining* it . . . And what was the point of that?

If I wasn't distracted by thoughts of escape, it was by thoughts of Laila. In my room, pretending to study income distribution, I used to send her text messages on the fancy phone she'd given me when her father bought her a new one. Sometimes she sent me back a picture of herself, playing with her dog or drinking Fanta on the veranda of her house.

I hadn't slept with Laila. I was nineteen, and I hadn't slept with anyone. When she first arrived at college, I'm not sure the other guys noticed how pretty she was. At that time, she had very short dark hair, almost like a boy's, and they all drooled over pictures of blonde girls with hair to the shoulders. But I spotted the weight under her white shirt when she leaned across a table, even though everything was properly buttoned up. Girl students were allowed to wear pretty much what they wanted. Laila's clothes were modest, but somehow you could tell they were good quality. Maybe she got them sent from abroad or bought them online. After a week or so settling in, she became more confident. She was always laughing. For a while I was afraid she was laughing at me, but then I decided she was just carefree. She didn't like computer games as much as I did, but she was crazy about *The Messenger*. That was the moment we clicked. 'I love it, I love it, don't you?' she said when the subject came up. 'I love the way he's always sneaking up on people. And when he's amazed by something in our world he doesn't understand he just says—'

“Frozen fireballs ... Count me in!” we both said at once.

I invited her to come to my house and watch *The Messenger* one evening when my parents were out. She had no shame about watching a kids' programme. We sat through five or six episodes on the trot. She mentioned some other shows I'd never heard of, so I guessed at her house she'd got more TV channels. Some of these programmes weren't even shown in the US, I think, they were just made for export to a youth audience.

Every evening I went up on the roof to smoke a cigarette and looked out towards the sea, in the direction of Europe. If you looked the other way, south over the city, the trees and hills soon became semi-desert. It was all brown, with scars of mining and digging, the last attempt to get something out of the sand, with tipper trucks and lorries parked up and conveyor belts of dirt.

But what happened if you looked north? What went on up there across the sea? Spain, France, where the invaders had come from ... Way beyond that, Germany. The people in Europe all had new cars and watches. And green woods and forests. The labels on the clothes had been put on by who they claimed to be, not knocked off in China like ours. The girls were blonde and wore short dresses, showing their legs. The bars weren't hidden in expensive hotels or in underground dives where you might get beaten up by an old alcoholic. The liquor places were on every corner, and women drank there too, ordering wine and cocktails.

Smoking my cigarette, I pictured this, through the low clouds and the grey sea on which I could see a far-off container ship.

I knew I had to go, but it was hard to get the courage up. My father would explode if I said I was quitting college. He really thought four years studying was going to make a difference – that with a degree I'd somehow have life on a string. I knew the only way to escape from all this was to leave the country. All that was holding me back was Laila and the feeble hope of sleeping with her.

Laila lived in a big house about a mile out of town. Inside her own grounds she wore Western skirts and dresses as well as the usual jeans. They weren't very short, but they were elegant and you could see the honey-coloured skin of her legs. There was a housekeeper, Farida, a woman with sleepy eyes. She wasn't old, she was middle-aged, maybe thirty-five. She was tame like a cow. She brought in tea, she swept the floors, pushed back the stray bits of hair that came loose from her clip. She adored Laila, who was the only person who could make Farida lift up her heavy eyelids into a smile. The rest of us she drifted between, putting down cups, picking up ashtrays. Or else you'd see her carrying armfuls of washing down the corridor to a distant laundry. Sometimes lying on my bed at home I imagined that Farida asked Laila to her room at the back of the house and asked her to

undress her and help her shower at the end of her long day's work. There was a lot of kneeling down and straps and buttons to undo and many underclothes before Farida was ready for the shower, by which time Laila seemed to be naked as well, which was only fair.

The trouble with having fantasies was that I was never sure I was alone. In my bedroom wall was a *moucharabia*, a carved wooden screen, that gave on to the landing, where anyone could see through the gaps. In the small towns the shopkeepers spied through the shutters and the screens and only opened up when there were enough people in the street. You never knew if you were being watched. All my life was like that.

Laila had a younger brother called Billy and a cute little sister called Najat and they'd sometimes barge in when we were watching *The Messenger* or playing cards, but they didn't hang around. In the last year at the boys' school, the year before college, I'd given a kicking to a kid who'd been making life difficult for Billy, so he was kind of grateful, plus he could take a hint. I also gave him a Radiohead tee shirt of mine. Actually he was a bit of a dude and was growing up so fast I'd thought he'd soon outrank me.

Was I in love with Laila because she'd given me some encouragement and was therefore my best bet? I don't know. But it pained me to see her and to go home without having done it with her. It really hurt. If I'd been offered the chance to sleep with all twelve girls in our lecture group one after the other or just Laila, just her ... No contest, even if the twelve included Wasia and Kashira, who by any normal standards were both smoking hot.

I didn't discuss Laila with other boys, though we did talk about sex in general when we were hanging out. If Laila's name came up, I changed the subject. But on my own I thought a lot about how great it would be just to feel my *zib* sliding up inside her. Just that simple thing. I thought it might feel really quite



hot, almost burning on the skin. By then of course, thinking about it, I had a huge boner.

My stepmother did nothing. Like all the women I knew, she lived mostly indoors and went out in the afternoon to the houses of her sisters or her friends. We weren't rich, because my father's schemes never came to anything, but we weren't as poor as some families in the medina. We had a cleaner, for instance – a very large unsmiling woman who came in once a week. She only charged a few coins. And my stepmother did the cooking. I think she was interested in that. The other thing she liked was birds. She had two cages with small songbirds in them. 'They remind me of my childhood in the Rif mountains,' she said. She also left the door open onto the roof terrace so others could fly into the house, which was built round a light well with a glass roof. The golden-beaked sparrows always found their way upstairs and out again.

A couple of days after the guy in the mirror told me to get going, I looked at some flights on the Internet, but they were expensive. Maybe I could get one of the ferries to Europe that were advertised all over town.

*You gotta get out ...* Well, all right then. I'd be better off not torturing myself by seeing Laila every day. I've done so little work I'm likely going to fail my exams at the end of the year. Even if I don't, even if I complete the course, it still won't get me a job worth having. I'll have a degree in economics and business studies with a Miss Aziz Special in politics (including five hours' free history). No one's going to hire me for that. Go to the building site, you jerk, that's what they'll say. Go and join the line with the skilled masons and plumbers. So I *am* going to leave. I'm going ... Somewhere. Somewhere. Somewhere. Somewhere. Somewhere. Paris probably.

I knew almost nothing about Paris, but it was in Europe, they were Christian, they had bars, girls, old buildings, cinemas ... So

before the courage could leave me, I leapt off the bed and went upstairs. As I came near the door of the living room, a strange thing happened. I began to be outside myself, watching. I could see myself as a third person, my tee shirt and jeans, two spots on the chin, skinny arms and messed-up hair.

I saw myself going to tell my father.

There was me, Tariq, going into the living room. My father was sitting on a sofa where he was looking through his glasses at some papers.

‘What do you want?’ he said. ‘Can’t you see I’m busy?’

‘Sorry. What are you doing?’ said Tariq.

‘Accounts. They never end. Why aren’t you doing some work? I’m sure you’ve got reading to do.’

‘No, I’m up to date with my reading,’ said Tariq, pushing back the hair from his forehead.

‘Dinner’s in an hour. You can tell me what you want then. And your stepmother. You know how much she worries.’

‘I’m leaving. I’m going to live somewhere else.’

‘God give me strength. You want to give up your studies?’

‘Yeah, but that’s not the reason.’

‘So what is the reason?’

‘I want to live in a different place, a better place.’

My father laughed and put down his papers – so without them he’d be free to laugh harder. ‘Where? Fez? Algiers? I know you always wanted to go there. Think you’re a man for the big city?’

‘No. That would just be ... bigger.’

‘Where then? Malaysia?’ He was really gasping now. ‘Australia? Why not? Go and be a sheep farmer.’

‘Paris, I think.’

‘What on earth for? You don’t know anyone there.’

‘No, but I’d like to see where my mother grew up. Find out some more about her. And I can speak the language.’

‘Think they’d understand your accent? Anyway, they hate us, the French. They always have.’

Tariq rubbed his chin. ‘I don’t think they’d hate me. I think I’d fit in. There’s a lot of us there.’

‘Oh yes, sure. Living in filthy tower blocks in the *banlieue*.’

‘I don’t mind where I end up.’

‘And how are you going to live?’

‘Like a peasant.’ Tariq seemed to think for a moment. ‘Like a hero.’

My father dabbed the corner of his eyes with a handkerchief. ‘And what are you going to use for money?’

‘I don’t need money,’ Tariq said. ‘I’ll live off my wits.’

‘*Your* wits!’

‘I hope so. You know I can speak English like a native.’

‘Yes, like a native of America. All that TV.’

‘And French. My mother—’

‘You truly are a ridiculous child,’ said my father, his shoulders no longer heaving. ‘Go and do some work.’

He picked up his papers and put his glasses on again. Tariq backed slowly towards the door. It looked like he was hoping my father would stop him. With his hand on the doorknob, he hesitated.

‘Well?’ My father looked up from his papers. ‘What are you waiting for?’

Back in my room I heaved out a backpack and stuffed some clothes in it. I took my passport and all the money I’d saved up. It didn’t come to much, though it included some euros I’d got from a Spanish tourist for showing him round. Then I went into the bathroom and took a long hard look at my reflection. The lighting wasn’t so good as the time before and my face looked a bit greasy.

Oh fuck it, I thought. Let’s go.

After walking for about fifteen minutes, I got a lift with a lorry. There were crates of *limonada* and Sprite rattling behind us. The

driver gave me a cigarette. We drove past Laila's house and from high up in the cab I could see over the wall onto the lawns. There was a covered electric lamp glowing on the veranda. I wanted her to come out of the house, but I also couldn't bear the thought of seeing her. I felt for a moment as though someone had grabbed my lungs and was squeezing me to death. Fuck, was this what a heart attack feels like?

I shut my eyes and let the road take me away.

Maybe I shouldn't say how I got into Europe. A long airless night in the back of a lorry in a cargo hold – not something I want to go into or remember. And for sure Marseille wasn't how I'd pictured it. I suppose a freight terminal's not the best place to enter a country.

There are good and bad things about being nineteen. One of the good things is you can sleep pretty much anywhere – on a beach, in a field, or in my case between two pallets on the metal floor of a curtain-sided truck. I wasn't even stiff as I fiddled with the fastenings of the canvas, waiting till we were some way out of the terminal. When the driver stopped at what I thought must be a traffic light, I hopped off.

France at last. Except I could have been in any industrial area. Warehouses, roundabouts, lorries, everything in concrete or metal, the most human thing the words on the signs – Saint-Martin de Crau, Martigues. Even this ass-end of the country looked rich to me. All that expensive fuel turning into smoke as the drivers worked the gears, revving up to get the wheels turning under the big loads. To say nothing of the cargo itself, the loot that was weighing down the giant red artics of Norbert Dentressangle. I walked towards what I thought might be a service area, but turned out to be a weighbridge.

It was an hour before I got myself into a café attached to a filling station where I ate a cheese sandwich from a cellophane

wrapper. I didn't have enough euros for a train to Paris, so I thought I'd better try hitch-hiking. I knew that Lyon was in the right direction and Bordeaux wasn't. But I guessed most of the lorries would be headed for Paris anyway, so it was just a question of getting one to stop.

The toilets were pretty bad. The stench ... It was as though there'd been an outbreak of dysentery. And the mess on the floor. Is it like that in their own homes – with torn paper on the tiles with piss and water squelching underfoot? But I needed to wash somehow, so I did my best while trying not to gag.

Back in the cafeteria, I noticed a girl on her own. She had brown oily hair and looked like she hadn't slept for days. She was maybe four or five years older than me and she didn't immediately look away when I caught her eye, so I ordered a coffee and took it to the next table.

'Where are you going?' I asked in French, trying not to sound African.

'North,' she said.

'Have you got a car?'

She shook her head. 'One of these lorry drivers'll offer me a lift.'

'Is that safe?'

'It's fine. Tonight he'll ask me to suck his cock. I'll say no.'

'Right ... Shall I travel with you? It'd be safer ... I mean, I can make sure nothing bad happens.'

She managed a smile, but she looked so exhausted. 'All right. But if you slow me down, you'll have to leave me on my own.'

'Sure. My name's Tariq.'

'Sandrine. I'm going to the bathroom.'

On her way back she stopped to buy a Chupa Chups and said something to a grey-haired man sitting on a stool, stirring his coffee with a plastic stick. When he'd finished, he nodded towards us and we followed him out to his lorry. It was a

medium-size green Iveco with room for three up front and a bunk behind. The driver had a ribbed zip-up sweater with a shirt and tie underneath.

Sandrine winked at me as he manoeuvred us out on to the slip road. I didn't know what the wink meant. This guy was a soft touch? He was a Christian fanatic? Europe was strange.

One thing was for sure, the French radio was no good. A man and a woman were talking over each other at a thousand miles an hour. But even that was better than the music. French pop! I didn't like to say anything in case Sandrine was a fan too.

The driver turned out to be called Maurice and he wasn't much of a talker. I thought that was maybe why he'd picked us up, for some company, but he seemed happy with his own thoughts and le shit pop music.

It must have been an hour before he said something. '*La vallée du Rhone.*' The Rhone valley. He said it with a big wave of his hand, like he owned it or he'd been born there. Perhaps in his previous life he'd been a schoolmaster.

I asked him where he came from.

'*Le Pas de Calais.*' You'd think it was Hollywood he sounded so proud – and if you came from anywhere else you weren't being serious.

He was headed home after a two-week trip. I asked if it was hard to be away from his family for such a long time and he told me he wasn't married. There was a pause. I said I was aiming for Paris, but he only grunted. Sandrine had been asleep for a good twenty minutes, her head nodding against the back of the cab, her mouth slightly open. I wanted to check her out properly, but if you stare at people when they're asleep it sometimes wakes them up. I felt it was a bit unfair as well – she didn't look that great with her mouth open.

At some point I must have nodded off too. The jabbering of the man and woman on the radio wove in and out of a dream.

Then my stepmother merged into the *speakerine* to tell me off about running away from home. Several times she told me how wrong it was.

‘*Lyon,*’ said Maurice, waking me up. ‘*On s’approche de Lyon, le ventre de la France.*’ The belly of France. I sleepily asked him why and he told me it was known for its cooking. Snails in garlic, fried liver with sage, apple and cherry tarts with cream ... Maurice’s little speech seemed to exhaust him. ‘Too many Algerians in Lyon, that’s the trouble,’ he said and slumped back into silence as the lorry ground to a halt in the traffic of the ring road. ‘Always have been.’

It was getting dark and my stomach was rumbling as I pictured the kind of restaurant Maurice had described. Sandrine said she needed to go to the toilet, but he told her to wait. Eventually we came to a service area about an hour north of Lyon and left the autoroute.

We pulled over in an area reserved for lorries and Maurice said he was going to a truckers’ café. He told us we could get food at the petrol station. Could that really be it?

Sandrine and I looked at each other in disbelief. Then she led me over to the place where Maurice had gone and we looked through the steamed windows. Inside it men were eating pâté with long loaves of bread and plates of sausages with mashed potatoes and ketchup. It sure wasn’t the menu Maurice had talked about, but it looked pretty good and there were bottles of red wine with no label at intervals on the tables among the fat *camionneurs*.

‘*Salaud,*’ said Sandrine. Bastard. In the garage shop, while Sandrine was in the toilet, I bought another sandwich in a wrapping. It was meant to be cheese, but it was nearly all crumby white bread. A thin rain was falling when we crossed the parking outside and Sandrine pressed something into my hand. It was a chocolate bar.

‘Have it. I took a whole lot while the guy was changing the paper roll on the till.’

‘Where are we going to sleep?’

‘In the back of the lorry. If he lets us. Do you like sausages?’

‘I’m not sure. Are they pork?’

‘Not really *pork*. They’re just odds and ends. Come here and keep watch.’ She led me round to the back entrance of the drivers’ canteen.

I was left standing in the rain for at least fifteen minutes before she came back with a plate in her hand.

‘Have some. Use your hands, boy.’

I took a sausage and pushed it through the mashed potato.

‘Put some ketchup on it. Do you like it?’

‘Yes. How did you get it?’

‘Waited for the right moment.’

‘No one saw you?’

‘No. They don’t care anyway. Most of the people in the kitchen are kids. Some of them probably illegal.’

The sausage had a peppery taste. ‘Are you illegal?’

She laughed. ‘No. I’m French.’

Sandrine took the plate to a bin, then marched into the café where Maurice was finishing his dinner. She certainly had balls, this girl. Through the steamed-up window I could see the drivers laughing and pointing while Sandrine stood with her hands on her hips. Eventually Maurice stood up and came out into the drizzle. He walked over to his lorry, took a blanket from the bunk behind the driver’s cabin then unlocked the back and told us to get in. There was room to lie down on a wooden pallet between the tied cargo.

‘Don’t fuck in my lorry. I’ll hear you if you do,’ said Maurice, throwing in the blanket and closing the doors behind him.

We lay down and made ourselves comfortable. There was a bit less space than I’d thought and Sandrine’s hip was touching mine.



She wasn't my sort, Sandrine, with her lank hair and grey skin, but it was dark now and when she turned over I felt one of her breasts for a moment on my elbow and I immediately got a hard-on.

'Is it okay?' I said. 'Will you have to . . . You know. Do anything with Maurice?'

'Nothing. No. I'm not his type.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm too old for him. He's a paedo.'

'How do you know?'

'The shirt and tie. That's why I chose him. The worst are the married ones. They want you to do disgusting things.'

In the middle of the night I woke myself up coughing. Sandrine was sitting up, smoking a cigarette.

'Is that safe?' I said. 'We don't know what's in the cargo.'

She ground it out on the metal floor of the truck. 'I couldn't sleep,' she said.

'Where are you going?' I said.

'Don't know. Paris at first. Then maybe England.'

'Why do you want to go there?'

I sensed she was smiling in the darkness. 'I want to see the rain and the fog and the Queen on horseback in her crown.'

'Really?'

'Not really. I know some people there. I think I'll be safer in London.'

'English people?'

'Yes.'

'What are they like?'

'English people?'

'Yes.' I'd never met one. Except an old pervert who lived in the casbah.

'I'll let you know. I really want a smoke,' said Sandrine.

'You just had one.'

'I mean weed. Have you got any?'

‘No. I didn’t want to be stopped.’

‘I can’t sleep without it. Unless I have sex.’

‘Do you want me to—’

‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-three,’ I said.

‘I don’t believe you.’ She put her hand on my trousers. ‘Oh. Sorry, boy. I thought you might have ...’

I thought about Miss Aziz’s skirt and Laila’s *qooq* and Farida’s breasts and all the usual things, but for once it was no use. My *zib* was like a dormouse.

Eventually we both fell asleep and in the morning I found I’d come in my underpants, something that often happens if I’m not at home but in a strange bed, or in this case lorry.

Maurice opened the doors and the grey light came pouring in. I squinted out and saw he had a smirk on his teacher’s face.

‘I’m going to get breakfast,’ he said. ‘We leave in twenty minutes.’

By noon we could see the outskirts of Paris and half an hour later Maurice dropped us at a junction as he headed round the Périphérique until he could pick up the road for Calais, the Hollywood of the North.

I watched the green Iveco indicate then merge. Sandrine and I walked for a long time towards the middle of the city. It was a relief to get away from that music on the radio.

‘What are you going to do in Paris?’ said Sandrine eventually.

We were still on a dual carriageway with modern blocks on either side, but at last there was a Métro station, Maison Blanche.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘Maybe find out about my mother.’

It was hard to talk against the roar of traffic.

## Two

## Gare du Nord

I lowered my cases from the train on to the platform at the Gare du Nord. 'I'm sorry . . . *Pardon*,' I said to the people behind me, as I flipped the pack on to my back and set off to drag my luggage up the length of the Eurostar. The castors roared on the concrete.

There was no ticket collector at the gate, but as I headed for the taxis I was met by a man who, like many others circling, looked North African. '*Où allez-vous, Madame?* Where you go? You want taxi?'

'Yes, I do. Isn't there a line?'

'Where you go?'

'La Butte-aux-Cailles.' It sounded odd when spoken aloud; in English, it was 'Quail Hill'.

'Eighty euros.'

'What?' Did I look especially gullible or was it just that I was female?

'See here.' The man produced a book of tables that looked official, like logarithms. 'Is good price. Look.' He jabbed a column. '*C'est bon.*'

By now we were outside the station, where the taxi line doubled back beneath a glass-roofed awning.

'*Non, merci,*' I said. '*J'attendrai un vrai taxi.* I'll get a real cab.'

There was some muttering among the men, but they didn't linger, seeing other confused travellers coming their way.

'*Salope*,' said one.

'And fuck you, too,' I said, at the back of the line but shielded from the hustlers by a later arrival. I felt like smacking a cigarette from its pack and had almost got as far as opening my bag before I remembered that after years of struggle I'd quit six months before. It was raining lightly on the roof of the shelter.

The next North African was a licensed driver, who loaded my bags into the trunk of his Renault and waved away my apologies for how heavy they were. I sat back and sighed. *Allez*.

He swept me down boulevards of obscure character – Magenta, Beaumarchais, L'Hopital, with travel agencies, peeling plane trees, refrigerator showrooms, offices, more travel agencies ... What was there so urgent to escape? And could the journey really be this far? I'd always thought of Paris as compact within its various gates or *portes*. At last we came to somewhere I'd heard of, the Place d'Italie, after which the satnav took us down streets that seemed unfamiliar.

I saw a name, the rue de l'Espérance, and thought it was an omen. 'Dear Mom and Dad, I am living off Good Hope Street in Quail Hill.' It sounded like a tony address in Boston; perhaps I'd be invited to a dinner given by the Lowells so I could meet the Cabots from next door.

There was something strange about the narrow street where I was let out. The buildings were not on the usual Haussmann design of grand but repeatable efficiency; there were low stuccoed houses with iron railings in front. The street itself had the bare trees and flat light of an Utrillo painting; and, as in the Montmartre townscapes of Utrillo, there was no one there.

The key was with the manageress at the *laverie-pressing* on the corner. A few minutes later, I'd hauled my bags to the door and let myself in. The apartment was on the first floor and it didn't take long to get the feel of it. The living room or *salon* at the front had a small balcony; a hallway opened on a bedroom to the left with an

internal bathroom. At the end of the hall was a tiny kitchen and a second bedroom, large enough only for a single bed and a nightstand. The original parquet was intact throughout the apartment under thin rugs; the main rooms were bigger than they'd looked in the e-mail attachment, but the furniture was cheaper and more worn. It was no problem; some flowers and a couple of woollen throws would fix it.

After moving round the lamps and chairs, I had the *salon* set up as a place where I could work. The dining table was big enough to hold books, a laptop, city maps and papers. I wasn't planning any dinner parties, so I could push it up against the wall. In the kitchen I found some UHT milk, but there was nothing else in the refrigerator. On a shelf in a cupboard were some half-used packets of pasta, folded over and held by elastic bands, and some ginseng powder capsules.

In the hall, by the Wi-Fi router, there was a child's exercise book with details of local services. The nearest supermarket was three blocks away, which would do for coffee, bread and milk for the morning; the notes recommended several better shops, but they could wait. And as for dinner . . . It was still only a little after six, but I was hungry – and what was the point of Paris if you couldn't just wander into the street and find somewhere? I grabbed a book to read and, as I was getting ready to leave, remembered my parents and my brother Warren, who was currently visiting with them. I managed to send an e-mail on my baffling new phone, the loan of which had been my department's farewell gift. The Wi-Fi seemed erratic, but it lasted long enough for me to hear the whoosh as the message left. 'Arrived. All good. More later. H. x'

As I was putting the phone away, it pinged. Surely my parents couldn't have answered so quickly? No; but the connection had lasted long enough to download three mails. Two were junk and the third one read:

‘Hi Hannah, hope this finds you. I heard from Nathalie at UCL that you were bound for Paris, maybe even here by now. I’m still labouring over the Romantics (though Sylvie and I parted company some time back) and would love to meet up one day if your work allows. Best wishes, Julian F. x’

Julian Finch was an Englishman I’d met during my first visit to Paris, when I attended some of the lectures in a literature course he taught. His specialities were French Romanticism and New Wave cinema (his course on Truffaut and *Les 400 Coups* was his big draw with the students). It would be interesting to see how he was getting along without the large Passy apartment that had belonged, I was pretty certain, to Sylvie.

‘Of course,’ I replied. ‘Just arrived. Maybe one day next week. H.’

Before I could gather my things, Julian had e-mailed back, asking for my cell number. A minute later, my phone rang.

‘I don’t suppose by any remote chance you’re free tonight?’

I looked again at my watch. ‘Well, I guess I could be.’ What was the point in pretending?

‘I live off the rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis. Bit of a comedown from the rue des Marronniers, I know. If you go to the Métro Strasbourg–Saint-Denis and start walking, there’s a bar on the right about five minutes up called the Mauri Sept. Could you make it by eight?’

‘I don’t see why not. The Morissette? Like Alanis?’

‘What?’

‘Never mind. See you there.’

The reason I’d first come across Julian ten years earlier – the reason I’d been in Paris at all – was that I’d applied for a junior-year program there. I was a history major and most people going on the course were language students, but there were two places reserved for non-linguists; the idea was that as well as some compulsory classes there would be time to research your own

project. My knowledge of France at the time was limited to a half-semester's work on the Algerian War of 1954-62 – in which the Algerians had defeated their French colonial masters in a conflict of insane savagery – and an essay on Léon Blum's socialist Popular Front in 1936. I doubted that my high-school French would be good enough, and was excited when my application was accepted.

I went on a crash course in spoken French in Boston in the summer and waved goodbye to my parents in September with a breezy *'au revoir'*. From Paris I sent long letters home that my mother and father, so they said, were delighted to receive. But did it ever worry them that I seemed to have time to write at such length? Shouldn't I have been going to parties and exhibitions, or picnics on the Seine? Maybe my parents didn't think like that; neither of them, for all their European roots, had ever left the United States.

The truth is that, however much I may have been struck by Paris and its beauty, by its pavement cafés and its trees and bridges, by its cathedral floating on the stream and all the other charms to which no sane person could fail to respond a little, I was lonely. The language students stuck together and I found them childish. I sometimes visited a boy from England who had a room in an old woman's flat off the Avenue de la Grande Armée; but it was not enough to take away the sense of isolation. And as for making friends with any Parisians, the language seemed too great an obstacle. It was one thing being able to make myself understood in my faulty French, quite another to follow a Parisian conversation in a noisy bar.

Everything changed one evening at the American Library. Julian Finch had alerted us all to the existence of this excellent refuge, well stocked and all but free to students, and he himself was that night chairing an event, which, having nothing better to do, I'd decided to go along to. There I met a man who put an end to my sense of isolation, but at a cost that ten years later I was still

paying. For a few months, my letters home became euphoric. And then they stopped.

When I finally returned home that July, I'd lost almost twenty pounds in weight and my parents were shocked by the sight of me. Reluctantly, I agreed to a course of weekly visits to Dr Pavin, a psychotherapist, though she seemed to think my problem had its roots in childhood. No sympathy from my mother or arm round the shoulder from my father could persuade me to confide in them – though at the beginning of my senior year, back in college, I did sit up one night talking with my room-mate and best friend, Jasmine Mendel. Even with Jasmine, I was unable to describe the extent of my unhappiness. There was nothing in my own experience or in my knowledge of the lives of others with which to compare it; so I thought it best to lock it all away and try to think of other things. My mother told me I seemed 'cold', and I found it impossible to convince her that when you've found yourself so far out of your depth you cling to certainties, things you know you can deal with. And you keep clinging for as long as it takes.

During all that time in Paris – the lonely part and the ecstatic later days – Julian had been a background presence. To some, not me, he was more than that. He was not what you'd call handsome and he had this sort of British reserve, but I think many of the female students were a little in love with him. It happens. He was both professional and happily married, or so we thought, to a Frenchwoman called Sylvie, who made the occasional appearance at functions or readings, looking friendly in a bored sort of way, smoking and checking her phone for messages. The male students also liked him because as well as movies he sometimes talked about soccer (which he called 'football') and he didn't condescend to them.

In the course of the year, Julian quite often had lunch with a group of students at a café on the Boulevard Raspail. He always ordered a pitcher of Côtes du Rhône for us all to share, though I



didn't drink wine in the middle of the day; and almost every time, I remembered, he got a beer, a *demi pression*, then the eggs mayonnaise with anchovy. The only time we'd ever met *à deux* was when we had dinner after seeing a student play near the Bourse and I embarrassed myself by confusing 'onglet', a cut of steak I'd never heard of, with the identically pronounced 'anglais'. He teased me about being so serious; he called me 'Mrs Jellyby' after a character in Dickens who was obsessed by helping the African poor, and once wondered out loud if I was a born-again Christian.

His sense of humour wasn't the same as mine, but I could see he meant no harm and I liked the way he dealt with his students. Perhaps I also sensed something strained or unhappy in him then – a sense that the large apartment in the Sixteenth, the glamorous wife and the offer of publication of his book were not as satisfying to him as others presumed. But probably I'm imagining that, because at the age of twenty-one I'm afraid I was too preoccupied by my own feelings to wonder about people older and more secure than I was.

Dinner with Julian, I decided as I took a bath and washed my hair, would help ease me back into Parisian life. I chose a black wool dress that showed I'd made an effort. I wore it with boots, a leather flying jacket and a silvery costume necklace. For a moment I worried that it all looked a bit much, like a rock star attempting a comeback, but the outfit made me feel safe.

I was early at the station, so I walked up and down the noisy main road to kill some time. At the junction with the Boulevard de Strasbourg, middle-aged Chinese women with shopping bags and parkas were leaning against the rail in pairs, catching the eye of solitary men. It was a strange version of domesticity: come home and pay me for sex, but not till you've helped unpack the shopping.

Going up the rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis, I found it hard not to smile at how different it was from the smooth stone expanses

of the Sixteenth, where Julian's married home had been. On the rolled-down metal blinds of the shopfronts were the solid blocks of graffiti that had shocked me when I'd first seen them as a child on the New York subway. This was an old street that seemed to have lost itself without finding a new identity; its life was only in the people outside the bars, smoking cigarettes. I passed several such places, heard music, but couldn't find a bar called the Morisette. I had by now been walking for ten minutes so it was clear I'd gone past it. Retracing my steps, I came eventually to the red awning of Le Mauri 7.

The Morisette, the Mauri Sept ... Of course. Typical of my problems with French. Inside, everyone seemed to be twenty-three years old and most were playing table football. Julian was sitting near the door. When he had returned with drinks, I apologised for being late and explained my confusion over the name of the bar.

'Alanis Morisette was a big thing back in ninety-six, the year I was last here,' I said. 'We all listened to that record "Jagged Little Pill" a hundred times.'

'I had you down as more of a Joni Mitchell type,' said Julian, clinking his beer glass against mine.

'I liked her too. They know how to pour their hearts out, those Canadian girls. So you live nearby these days?'

'Yes. In a small street just up there. It's what in London they call a mews. It's where they used to keep horses. I live above a brasserie. I originally had my eye on a place in the Passage du Désir, just up the road, but the gates into it were closed when I came and I never got to see it.'

'So your way into the passage of desire was barred?'

'Story of my life.'

I didn't mind providing the feed. I knew Julian had always thought of me as a humourless social campaigner, and I liked it that he had me slightly wrong; it gave me some extra protection.

‘And what exactly is your project in Paris this time?’ he said.

I felt myself pushing my hand back through my hair as I exhaled.

‘It’s a long story.’

‘There’s a short version?’

‘Yes. I’m here to research the experience of women in Paris under the German Occupation, nineteen-forty to forty-four. It’ll make a chapter in a book my head of department, Professor Putnam, is putting together.’

‘It’s a fascinating period. But someone told me you’d given up university after your doctorate? I thought that was a shame.’

‘I did for a time. I went to work in Africa for two years on an AIDS education program. When I got home I was a little lost. My old friend Jasmine Mendel suggested I apply for a position as a postdoc. The department had some money for once.’

I felt the short version of my life had gone on long enough. ‘And what about you?’ I said. ‘Are you still in the nineteenth century?’

‘Yes. I’m half way through a biography of Alfred de Musset for an English publisher. You know who I mean?’

‘A Romantic, wasn’t he?’

‘Yes. Famously George Sand’s lover. He wrote plays, a memoir and a lot of poetry. Not a front-rank poet, I suppose, but an interesting one.’

‘He wasn’t the guy with a pet lobster on a lead?’

‘No. That was Gérard de Nerval.’

‘And there are publishers in London who’ll take a book on a not-front-rank nineteenth-century French poet?’

‘Luckily there’s *one*. I’m putting quite a lot of stress on the autoscopia angle.’

‘The what?’

‘Autoscopia. It’s when you have the sense of being outside yourself and seeing yourself as another person. Auto, self, scope, vision. De Musset had it a lot.’

‘As a poetic device or a nervous symptom?’

‘That’s the question. Both, I think. But it’s not the doppelgänger thing, it’s more interesting. Sometimes he found himself walking towards himself in the Tuileries.’

‘That sounds good.’

‘Yes. He made it very sad. In his best poem, “La nuit de décembre”, he describes this person who’s dogged him all his life, in different cities, at different ages.’

‘And who is it?’

‘I’m not going to tell you. You’ll have to read the poem for yourself.’

I stood up to go to the bar. ‘You were always good at tantalising your pupils. At tricking us into reading more.’

‘I never really had a gift for teaching, I’m afraid,’ said Julian. ‘I always looked on it as a nuisance that took time away from my own work.’

Returning with the drinks, I said, ‘I was sorry to hear about Sylvie. What happened?’

‘God, you’re quick off the mark. Not even waiting till dinner.’

‘I didn’t know there was a set time for personal questions.’

‘Between the main course and the cheese, I think,’ said Julian.

‘You used to like me being frank. Or “American”, as you called it.’

‘I like your honesty. The way you admitted to being free tonight.’

‘A Frenchwoman wouldn’t do that.’

‘No. I’m sorry if I seemed pushy. I’ve become rather impulsive, living on my own. But I knew you’d be—’

‘Hungry?’ I said, putting down my beer glass.

Two hours later, when I was walking home from Tolbiac station, a little flushed by wine, I saw a figure slumped on a step at the end of my street. It didn’t look like a regular doorway sleeper, a *clochard*; in any case, the Butte-aux-Cailles was not really hobo country and this was not a bearded man but a young woman, in dirty but once-good clothes.

'Are you okay?'

There was no reply.

'What's your name?'

'I came out to get some food. I got lost.'

She looked feverish.

'Where do you live?'

'The Olympiades.'

'I don't know that. Do you have a phone?'

'No.'

'You'd better come with me. We'll get you back there tomorrow.'

'All right.'

'What's your name?' I asked again.

'Sandrine,' the young woman said, allowing herself to be helped to her feet.

Back at the apartment, I put a duvet and blankets on the bed in the little storeroom and moved my suitcase out of it; then I heated some vegetable soup from a carton. I saw no reason to distrust this feverish kid.