

An extract (chapters 1-3) from the 1974 novel  
***The Snake and the Sea*** by Mohamed Zafzaf  
Translated by Alice Guthrie

## Chapter 1

Slimane had arrived in the small seaside town the day before yesterday. So intense was the sweltering heat back in Casablanca that it had been affecting his mood, making him irritable and unable to tolerate the world around him. Hence his father's advice to *Go there*, where the sea would give him some relief, at least, and his sense of life's spontaneity and simplicity might be restored. He told Slimane he'd find his maternal aunt Halima there, waiting to welcome him, and that he'd get a break from 'the blaring city din coming at him from all sides', as he put it—and he wouldn't be constantly catching sight of people he had no desire to see looking nosily at him with that insolent expression on their faces. Slimane's father was able to offer his son at least three houses, fruit of his strenuous toil as a driver for the national transport company for forty long years. Slimane was not like his two sisters in any way. They had very much been ordinary women, and so their lives had followed the ordinary trajectory: they got married, had children, and took care of their father. They had never known their late mother, but they wished fervently that she were still alive so that they could take even greater care of her than they did of their father.

Slimane had arrived in the town the day before yesterday, and he was very pleased with the location his father had selected for him. He even wished that he and his father could settle there permanently, away from that infernal racket that frayed his nerves so. On arriving, the first thing he asked his aunt was, “Do those same neighbours still live here? The ones who used to before?”

“Nothing’s changed,” his aunt replied. “Do you really think that a year is long enough for everything to change in a place like this, a place that people are connected to by the strongest of bonds? All the little houses and cabins are still just as they were. There’s been no change here, and there’s no change coming, either. People are simple, and the sea is beautiful. Look at the sea; do you see it?”

At that Slimane looked out of the window. Then he stood and stared, awestruck, unable to pinpoint anything specific he was thinking about.

“You should have got out of the city already, even before your father advised you to travel,” Halima said, for the second time. “You’ve had a long year. Studying is such an exhausting thing to do.”

“I know. But I dislike motion: I prefer stillness.”

A moment later Slimane added, “I wrote to Thorayya, Auntie, so that she could come and spend a few days with us here. She’s the only girl I feel happy with. All the others are so superficial it’s just maddening. Thorayya’s also my classmate at University—she’s a real cultured intellectual. In short, she understands me very well.”

“That’s for the best,” his aunt replied. “It’s a difficult thing, a man without a woman. And a woman without a man is difficult, too. Wouldn’t I at least have someone to talk to, with her here? You spend all of your time with your head in a book, as far as I can tell, or staring into the distance—so much so that I sometimes think you’ll lose your mind!”

“But don’t you consider that a relaxing thing for me to do? And it’s comfortable for you, at least, isn’t it?” With that Slimane asked his aunt to

go and get on with her kitchen tasks, since he was very hungry. He closed the door to the room he was in, stretched out on the bed, and felt exquisitely at ease. A light tingling sensation ran through his body. Then his mind turned to Thorayya, and he ran a thorough review of the way she talked, her facial features, the way her eyebrows moved when she got animated. Slimane was only interested in a few specific characteristics that made a woman stand out from the others. Thorayya was the type of woman who caught the attention of someone like him—someone difficult, not understood at all by a certain kind of woman. Those other women tended to look on him as either their young father or their eldest son, and he didn't like that at all. Thorayya, on the other hand, he felt didn't consider him as this, or as that, no—she was attuned to him, she was right for him. She wasn't like the others. Perhaps he was drawn to her introversion and her misanthropy, her aversion to the world, her interest in books and books alone—that was what made her seem so closely aligned with his own private passions. For he was convinced that he loved complete silence, and would like to remain in peace and seclusion permanently.

“I wish we could live in isolation, tucked away in a tiny village up in the mountains, and not have any children,” Thorayya was always saying to him. “We could contemplate nature, and read books.”

“And make love,” said Slimane. “But then again, what about the boredom?”

“We'd try to keep it at bay with lots of reading and discussion.”

“That's sounds alright, but we can't make it come true—we'd need money.”

“That's easy! We'll work for four or five years and save up for that great day.”

Slimane had laughed at this idea, but Thorayya was actually being perfectly serious. She meant what she said. Her eyebrows shot up, her eyes brimming:

“I’m not joking! Listen to me, Slimane. You joke a lot, even when you’re confronting serious matters.”

“In actual fact, I don’t know,” he said. “I really don’t know anything at all.”

After a little while he heard his aunt calling him. She had fried him two eggs and a piece of meat. Trying to throw off the fatigue shackling his body he stood up, stretched, and told his aunt to bring the table into the bedroom so that he could eat there. She did so at once, and sat down across from him on a little chair, but she didn’t have the appetite to eat anything. Slimane’s aunt was not old, but her forty years showed in the curves of her voluptuous body. Her face radiated innocence and femininity. She was sitting opposite him across the table, but her soft eyelids were lowered, as if her mind were elsewhere. Her breasts stood out noticeably under the thin fabric of the elegant *dfina* she wore. It flattered her curvaceous figure. As he chewed, Slimane wondered if there was a man in her life, or a few men, perhaps. She certainly did talk incessantly about someone called Si Ahmed. It was *Si Ahmed says—*, and *Si Ahmed buys—*, and *sometimes Si Ahmed goes to—*, but when he visits Tangiers he stops off in Assila. And *Si Ahmed liked it*. And *that man mentioned Si Ahmed, I heard him*. *Si Ahmed was—*, and *Ah, if only Si Ahmed would do that*. *I don’t know, son, but I’ll ask Si Ahmed*. *True, yes that’s right, that’s exactly what Si Ahmed said*. *Si Ahmed bought—*, and *Si Ahmed didn’t buy—*. But *Si Ahmed—*. *They are like Si Ahmed’s trousers*.

In any case, there might be multiple Si Ahmeds in her life, for all Slimane knew; he had never even laid eyes on him, so he hadn’t had the pleasure of meeting him yet.

When it seemed like Slimane had had enough to eat his aunt said to him, “Eat up, go on. You said you were hungry.”

“True, but I need to rest a little. I’m not really in the right state to eat properly.”

“You’ve got no appetite because you’re thinking about Thorayya.”

“No... I’m thinking about you.”

“About me?”

“Yes.”

“But I’m not Thorayya.”

“Listen, go and make me a cup of coffee.”

“At once! But you’re ordering me around as if I were Thorayya.”

“You’re my aunt.”

And at that she headed for the kitchen, Slimane following her with his eyes. Her voluptuous body was visibly trembling. Slimane started imagining Si Ahmed. Who knew? This Si Ahmed might only be Slimane’s age. Anything’s possible. As she disappeared behind the door and her footsteps receded he concentrated more on picturing Si Ahmed. He felt no strong emotion towards him: he didn’t despise him and he didn’t love him. He stretched out on his bed and fixed his gaze on the ceiling. Although he felt a pain in his back he didn’t turn over onto his right or left side, opting to stay in the position he was already in, despite the pain. He groped around under the bed for the packet of cigarettes, lit himself one, and closed his eyes. His aunt’s voice on the other side of the wall had been raised in song, then the sound grew softer, before eventually fading away completely. Slimane felt a delightful breeze from the window waft across his head. He shut his eyes again, and replayed his aunt’s disjointed jumbled words, her delirious way of talking: *Because Si Ahmed was there—, because women, as only Si Ahmed knows—*

And then she called out, “Here’s the coffee! You’ll need it if you’re going to keep on smoking like this.”

## Chapter 2

In the morning Slimane tucked a towel under his arm and left the house, heading for the sea. The sand was hot, even though it was still early, and the infinite sun seemed to fill the whole sky. Slimane glimpsed some little boats moored in a makeshift harbour, and a few other black ones in the distance. Behind him were the dunes, the trees and dense broom bushes, and the path that separated some low-rise buildings. The buildings housed a tobacconist, a café, some little shops and kiosks, all of which looked sparkling clean. When Slimane got near to the water he threw his clothes onto the ground without folding them and began doing warmup exercises. He spotted two silhouetted figures about two kilometres away doing the same thing as he was, naked. The sea was calm and inviting. Slimane had planned to enjoy its tranquil allure until lunchtime. He broke off from his exercises and began looking closely at his skin, squeezing the little distended yellow heads of some pimples. The soft smooth pustules came squirting out, and he squashed them between his fingertips until they melted away like fat.

Slimane spread out the towel, and tried to gather up the clothes he'd shed with abandon and tossed aside—just some jeans and a sleeveless shirt—with his foot. He had already buried his sandals in a hole he'd dug in the sand. When he noticed the two distant bodies were now chasing each other around in the water he went straight down to the surf without thinking and threw himself in. He soon acclimatised to the cold. He tried to

open his eyes, felt the sting of the salt and closed them again, and decided to dive down underwater this time, squeezing his eyes tight shut so the water wouldn't get in them. But down there the water felt heavy and strange inside his ears. So he came back up, pushing his hair out of his eyes as he emerged, and flapped his arms around to fight the few successive waves that came at him now, without any discernible rhythm, and loaded with sand. He wished then that he could join those two distant figures and play with them in the water. But they were far away, and in any case it looked like they were a man and a woman, so they probably didn't want anyone to bother them.

He spread out face down on the towel and began to ruminate, his thoughts jumping from one thing to another without any apparent connection. He didn't have a book with him, he'd forgotten to bring one. He felt an acute need to talk to someone, even a character in a novel, someone to listen to and to offer his opinion. The other two were still playing, and then he saw them standing close, clinging to each other. He imagined what might go on between a man and a woman in solitude like that... And he wanted Thorayya. The only woman who made him feel that special warmth. When their bodies were cleaved together he felt they would never part—a sensation he hadn't felt with any other woman. The way the other women had looked at him struck him as so sly and treacherous that he felt terrorised. But Thorayya closed her eyes sincerely and gave warm moans of genuine pleasure. He sensed she was being very tolerant of his finite stamina, that she wanted much more, she wanted this thing they were doing to go on until the end of time. But unfortunately his strength was limited. The strength of any man is limited. Isn't that so, Thorayya?

“Yes, Slimane, that's enough for us for now. We mustn't deplete it all in one go,” she said, her fingers in his hair. “Let's save some of it for

another time.” As she spoke his fingertips roamed around the base of her spine. Slowly, slowly, until eventually they both fell asleep.

Slimane went running down to the water to take on a frothing white-crested wave; the thrill of the smooth cold water delighted him.

The place had begun filling up. A number of bathers were spread out on the sand here and there. Slimane could see a dog prowling around his towel, but it didn’t pee on it or spray sand around with its paws whilst digging for Slimane’s sandals. Instead it just stood eyeing the pile of clothes without drawing any nearer. Slimane shouted, trying to shoo it away from afar, but the dog couldn’t hear him, so he walked up the beach towards it, the salt water streaming into his eyes and making him squint. When he got near to the dog it remained motionless, looking at him with a submissive indifference. Slimane flicked some sand at it with the top of his foot, and it calmly ambled off towards the buildings. Presently he saw it coming back towards him, trailed by a small boy. The boy was barefoot, and dressed in blue knee-length cut-off jeans with dangly frayed edges. When the kid was near, Slimane noticed a heart pierced by an arrow inked in red onto the shorts, and beneath it the English letters: LOVE.

“Who drew you that?” Slimane asked the boy.

“Me.”

“And who wrote you that?”

“Me.”

“What does that writing mean?”

“I don’t know, I saw my sister doing it to her shorts, so I copied her. We’re not from here, we’re from Casablanca, we’re here on holiday. My sister’s got white thighs, have you seen them?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”



“Ah, I understand. You were the one who was sleeping with her when Mama and Baba were sleeping in the next room.”

“Exactly.”

“Baba knows you, and he knows my sister’s got white thighs. He said that to my mum, I heard them.”

Then the kid walked off towards a group of people, the dog following behind.

“Hey,” said Slimane, “where’s your sister?”

But the kid didn’t hear him. Slimane went and plunged back into the water, overcome by a surge of elation without any idea whatsoever of its cause. The sensation of the water flowing over his body made him feel a strange release, as if he were being launched from a beautiful enchanting world into a dream. Like that dreamworld he’d read about in a certain series of books. A magical world.

Thorayya had said: “I don’t like magic, I don’t understand it. I just love contemplation.”

“I am a materialist,” said Slimane, “and like you I too love to contemplate matter, nothing else.”

“Matter such as what, my love?”

“Such as I don’t know what, my love,” said Slimane. “You have a very well proportioned body. I must contemplate its symmetry...”

Slimane raised his head up out of the water and saw the boy running around in all directions, the dog following him.

The dog kept on standing up on its hind legs but the kid took no notice, dashing off into the water instead. He went in just far enough for the waves to break against his knees without reaching his thighs. Slimane remarked to himself that the boy’s caution would surely do nothing to stop him getting completely drenched in due course. Putting his hands around his mouth he shouted to the boy: “Oiiiiiii.... Heyyyyy!”

Then, turning around on the spot to check no one could hear him, he said to himself out loud, “You’ve made your bed, so now you’re going to have to lie in it”. He wondered briefly why he was quoting an old traditional saying that he’d come across in his studies of rhetoric, and to whom he was addressing it—but he wasn’t actually interested in the answer. For the place around him was deserted, and life was beautiful. Then the glorious proportions of Thorayya’s body struck him anew, and he tried to imagine that boy’s sister with the glorious thighs, and to imagine the person who was sleeping with her in the full knowledge of her father and mother. Doubtless the girl was beautiful. But that wouldn’t prevent her being stupid, never discussing books and culture, just going on about the Western singers she’d seen in pictures in cheap magazines. Slimane was disgusted at the thought of her: he didn’t like those bourgeois vapid types, unconcerned with anything except raising dowries, and marrying their children off to people whose names begin with Bin. It was the Bins who got married and the Bins who had children, and it was the Bins who mourned and the Bins whose business expanded throughout Africa, and a Bin who paid the bribe in order to get a position in a Moroccan embassy abroad, in order to stymie every last aim of that other Bin inside Morocco. That was how the Bins ran around after one another, and whoever wasn’t a Bin would have to become a Bin in order to get in with the Bin crowd.

Slimane thought that that boy’s sister had to be a Bin, and a granddaughter of a Bin, and that whoever was sleeping with her with Mr and Mrs Bin’s knowledge must also be a Bin, like them. He was disgusted by this vulgar mentality, this sickness, this “Bin” affliction, and he thanked God that his girlfriend was named Thorayya, and that her family name didn’t begin with Bin. Otherwise the repulsion it triggered in him would have been boundless, given how wound up the morals of those Bin types got him.

Slimane got back out of the water and ran across the sand doing sport exercises to drive the cold out of his body. He noticed that the number of

swimmers was increasing, but they were far enough apart from each other that the beach still seemed empty. He spotted the kid still running around, and the dog copying him and rolling around in the sand, in his element. Slimane called out to the boy and he came over, saying, “My sister’s coming down to the beach in a bit, you’ll see her.”

“Will you introduce her to me?”

“She already knows you.”

Slimane thought the boy must either have learning difficulties or suffer from a psychological disorder. This came as no surprise to Slimane. On the contrary, it struck him as something natural, given the fact that the Bins were by no means exempt from such issues—or from other things, either, for that matter.

He asked the kid, “Do you have special needs?”

“I don’t understand those words,” answered the kid.

“OK, so what about your sister, are her thighs beautiful?”

“You’ve seen them for yourself. I saw you when you were running your fingers over the hair around that red thing.”

“Your father must be mentally handicapped,” said Slimane.

“No, my father’s bald, and he knows you. You’ll see, he knows you. But he’s unlikely to come down to the beach now. He’s embarrassed about his paunch.”

“Can you show me the way to the house you’re staying in here?”

“We’re not staying in a house, it’s a villa. My father always tells us ‘Say villa, don’t say house’”.

Then the boy ran off in another direction, the dog following along behind him, so Slimane stretched out on his towel, his back to the sun. He rummaged around for a cigarette he could smoke half of and save the other half until he fancied it. He stayed there, stretched out on the towel, enjoying the sun rays nibbling at his back. He’d have to wait for the boy’s sister to get there, he thought to himself: he had to see her. He had already

imagined everything about her. Especially those beautiful thighs. For what turned Slimane on about a woman was her legs, and especially her thighs. He often wished he could put his head between two beautiful thighs, then wrap his arms around them, and just stay like that for as long as possible.

Thorayya said: "You're tiring me out with that, Slimane."

"I find the utmost pleasure in it," said Slimane.

"And me? What about my pleasure? I want to embrace something, as well. Don't be selfish. Come here, let's hug in a normal way."

"I'm a worshipper of your thighs."

"You're lying. If my thighs were what you loved, you'd be able to find better ones on another woman. Why don't you say that you love *me*?"

"But they're your thighs, Thorayya."

"I don't understand. Get up. Hold me like this, don't be a pervert."

Slimane raised his head, and looked up at the narrow street running between the buildings at the back of the beach. A man caught his eye. He'd been pushing a bike along with a box on the back of it, and it had toppled over and fallen on top of him. Slimane started laughing loudly and scratching the skin on his bottom. As always happened when his body was exposed to the sun for a while his skin was going to become inflamed, and eventually yellow blisters would form. But they wouldn't last. They would disappear, giving way to red patches that would in turn fade to nothing. And then after that, over the course of a few more days, his skin would start to peel. He would fret about the way his body was peeling for days. Slimane thought that shedding his skin made him very similar to a snake.

Thorayya told him:

"You're like a snake, you sneak into my body in bed like a snake."

"I'm not a snake, or I would've bitten you."

"You've done that many times! Stop biting me, it makes me shudder, it makes me feel funny."

Then Slimane saw the man wrestling with the bicycle on his own stand up, yank his trousers up higher around his waist, and get back on his bike. He watched him peddle slowly off, leaning forward on the saddle. Then a car passed him and they almost collided. The man veered away from it at the last moment, and disappeared from Slimane's sight.

Slimane got up, went down to the water and plunged back in. Hundreds of people were around him in the water. The little boy and his dog had disappeared from view. Slimane was still wishing he could see the beautiful sister. He was also wishing he could see the paunchy father, and he told himself *I'm gonna talk to him even if his surname does begin with Bin. That won't stop me being able to get something out of him. Or at least get to know his daughter.* Then he started playing with some seaweed floating on the surface of the water. He went after it and stuck it to his chest, but it was so smooth and glossy it slipped off, so he chased after it and returned it to its rightful place on his chest. He asked himself whether these plants carried skin-damaging microbes. He stopped doing it then, and dived back underwater, and began scouring his body, kidding himself he was getting it clean.

## Chapter 3

Five days passed, and Slimane was still there. He was reading little these days, and ruminating a lot, about significant things, and talking to his aunt about Thorayya and about Si Ahmed. But he wasn't really at ease enough in that place. Solitude truly was harsh, he reflected, and he was considering going into permanent isolation—how would that be? He grew certain that it would be completely impossible for him. There were people all around him, and sometimes he talked to them about things that really didn't matter to him at all. It was different in Casablanca, or even during the academic year at University, things mattered differently then—there were conversations about culture, and people had ambitions that were unlike those of people in ordinary life. In any case, Slimane told himself that he would be forced to wait for Thorayya, and carry on talking about Si Ahmed, until his situation changed. He would go out to the nearby forest. And of course there was the sea, in all its immense majesty. And it wasn't crowded here, and he could read. And maybe he would try something he never ordinarily considered doing: writing down his impressions, to record his own personal philosophy. But he believed that he was not mature enough for that yet. Perhaps he would co-author a book with Thorayya one day, the two of them isolated in a house of their own, on a mountaintop in the South near Tamanar or Smimou. But Slimane was perplexed as to what the book's subject should be.

His aunt said, "Thorayya is very interested in politics. That's the only shameful thing about her."

“Thorayya is beautiful,” said Slimane, “And she has a well proportioned body.”

“Yes, that’s why all men lust after her, and why she’s interested in politics.”

“Any man interested in politics is bound to fancy her.”

He saw a fly buzzing around near him. He caught it and grabbed it by the wings. He considered tying it up with a little thread like he used to do when he was a young schoolboy. The fly would take off, trailing a coloured or white thread, zigzagging through the air.

“Leave that fly alone,” his aunt said now, “it’s filthy.”

“But when we were little we used to tie a thread to—”

“Do you think you’re still a little boy? Go out for a wander, go sit in the café and have a glass of tea and watch the pretty girls going past.”

In reality, there weren’t many young women around. It was a small town, and hadn’t been spotlighted by the official advertising campaigns. There were some villas that the rich bought or rented, and there were many poor people who sat in the cafes sipping green tea and listening to the radio, and chatting about the coming fishing season. As for the rich, they frequented the Chalet with their wives, and their daughters with the gorgeous thighs, and looked down on everyone, and pronounced the letter R in a particular way. And their surnames usually began with Bin. Although Slimane didn’t like that lot at all, he occasionally went to the Chalet and ordered a beer behind the glass facade and gazed out at the water. Or he’d order an espresso out on the corniche, and read the newspapers. Slimane told his aunt:

“I need Thorayya. I feel with every day that passes I need her more. A letter from her should be reaching me today or tomorrow, but I’m not sure if the postal service works normally out here.”

“The postman passes the house every day. If he had a letter for you he wouldn’t forget it. Do you honestly think things are so chaotic here that a letter won’t reach you?”

Slimane caught another fly, making his aunt cry out at this filthiness. He released the fly into the air and wiped his hands in disgust on his trousers.

“Do you think you’re still a kid? Look at your moustache.”

He didn’t have a moustache, so he touched the skin beneath his nose to make sure his aunt was certain of what she was saying.

“I’m not sure what it is I like about that fly game...”

“I’m not interested. You go on out now, take a little stroll around.”

So Slimane did as she wanted, he left the house and set off towards the Chalet. The weather was mild, so he wasn’t planning on taking off his clothes and swimming. Then he felt a hand touch his shoulder, and he spun around in surprise. It was one of his friends from Casablanca.

“No way!” exclaimed Slimane.

“Way—everything’s possible!” replied his friend, whose name was Karimo, and who didn’t like women. “What are you doing here?”

“Well what about you, what are *you* doing here?” retorted Slimane.

“I’m from here.”

“What, from this little town?”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

Slimane suggested they go to the Chalet, to drink a coffee or a beer and look at the sea and the people. At first Karimo held back. But in the end he accepted. And he thought *What could a person do in a little place like this if he didn’t accept such an invitation, and from someone like Slimane?*

The Chalet was set back from the sea a little way, but people always got the impression that the water flowed right underneath it. There weren’t many customers. People were lying on the beach instead. Slimane



chose a specific corner over by the jukebox. The waiter came over and put a coin in it, then asked them what they were drinking. Karimo hesitated a little, but he didn't order coffee—he asked for an ice-cold beer.

“I didn't think I would run into anyone I knew here,” said Slimane.

“Do you know Thorayya?”

“Which Thorayya? I don't think so, no.”

“My beautiful girlfriend... And since your name'll surely appeal to her, I'll introduce you to her. But I don't think she'll be into you.”

“Well then, there's no need to introduce us.”

Slimane had already moved on—he'd begun running his imaginary picture of Si Ahmed through his mind. He was trying to pin down in what way Si Ahmed and Karimo resembled each other, but to no avail, since he had never in his life laid eyes on Si Ahmed.

“Karimo, do you know Si Ahmed?”

“Who's this Si Ahmed, then?”

“It doesn't matter. I thought you might have heard of him. He's a man.”

“Well yes—did I think he was a cat?”

“A cat and a man rolled into one?” said Slimane, starting to laugh. Then he said to his friend, “Why aren't you laughing? You seem like you're in a bad mood.”

“Not at all, I just didn't hear what you said.”

Karimo was staring off into the distance, where some small villas had been built in a very contemporary style. “You see those villas? Seven years ago that was a wasteland, that place. That's the latest fashion in architectural engineering. People say they were built with those ministers' money; the ones who were charged with bribery, and misuse of funds.”

“I don't know about that,” said Slimane.

“No way.”

“Way! Everything's possible.”

Slimane swirled his spoon around in his cup, and savoured the flavour of the coffee. He took out a cigarette and began to smoke. He didn't offer his friend one as he seemed to remember Karimo didn't smoke.

"You should really be called Makamich," he said to Karimo.

"Whatever—Makamich or Karimo<sup>1</sup>, what's the difference?" asked his friend. "They both mean the same thing really. I thank God for sparing me from bad habits like smoking and women. But that doesn't keep me from loving life."

"I'm glad I ran into you, what a nice coincidence," said Slimane.

"That's right, a really nice coincidence. And I can show you places here that you haven't been to yet. Don't imagine that this town's too small to deserve visiting."

"That wasn't what I thought, actually. But I came here with the intention of getting a rest, and spending some nice times with Thorayya and my aunt Halima—do you know my aunt Halima?"

"No... I haven't had the pleasure of meeting her."

"Some of her relations' surnames began with Bin."

"That's true."

"And they pronounce the letter R in a particular way."

"That's not true."

"How so?"

"You'll be on trial accused of incitement and discrimination and racism if people hear you say those words! We're all Moroccan."

"Well, I didn't buy a villa with bribes."

"Even still..."

"Alright then, let's change the subject. From beautiful villas to girls with beautiful thighs—"

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<sup>1</sup> In Derija, makamich literally means 'he didn't smoke', and is used to refer to someone moody, or who is suddenly in a bad mood. By contrast Karim, a common Arabic name, and the familiar / diminutive form 'Karimo', means generous and kind.

“I’m not interested in any of that,” said Karimo, gulping down the last of his beer. He called the waiter to bring him another.

“You’re definitely up for getting drunk in this beautiful mild weather,” said Slimane.

“I don’t want to get drunk, I want to go down to the water. I’ve got my swimming shorts on under my trousers. Have you got yours with you?”

“No... and anyway I can’t swim right now, I’m afraid of catching cold.”

“Is your health really that fragile?”

“Yeah, that’s the least of it. You can ask my aunt the details.”

“Let’s see what happens.”

Then Karimo finished his second beer. “Wait for me,” he told his friend. “I’ll just pop down to the water. After that I’ll drink a coffee, and we can talk.”

Karimo loved beer, but he didn’t want to get drunk, because in his opinion that would distance him from his own harsh reality. Sometimes, however, he preferred getting drunk even to discussing Rilke, whom he loved to the point of worship. No one understood why Karimo tried to link Rilke and Abu Ishaq al-Saabi; he wasn’t highly cultured, but he was a semi-specialist in the poetry of Rilke and Abu Ishaq. He even knew their eating and sleeping habits. And sometimes he would recite Rilke’s poems for no apparent reason, and try to give those stanzas new dimensions that neither they nor Rilke himself would ever have tolerated.

Slimane thought about Karimo as he watched him make his way down to the sea, weaving his way between the people spread out on the sand. Karimo really was a strange person, and extremely idealistic. He was different to Slimane in every way. But Slimane adored his calm spirit, his love of animals, and even his hatred of women. Karimo shunned women on principle: as a doctrine, not out of some perversion. That could not be easy for anyone. Slimane asked himself whether it would be in his own ability to shun Thorayya. To renounce her, give her up. He tried to analyse this

notion, seeing if he could convince himself even temporarily, just in this moment in time, that distancing himself from Thorayya would be possible. All of that was utterly futile though, as she immediately appeared in his mind's eye: he saw her naked, sighing, sometimes crying, closing her eyes, writhing in his arms, under his weight. He also saw her beautiful black hair covering her whole face. Her breasts were round and pert and the cleavage between them was a soothing sight. To him she was all soul; she was everything. He would lie on her, but he was unable to fuck her. He constantly ran his fingers through the exposed hair beneath her belly. He imagined his fingers in that hair, and thought about this beautiful creature that provoked old narcissistic feelings in him. Ultimately it was beyond him to convince himself that he could part from her. And he was sure that it would be the same for her.

He swatted away a fly hovering around his face. And then right where Karimo had disappeared from view, Slimane spotted his young friend whose family name doubtless began with Bin. He decided to go and ask after the boy's sister, or even his mother, if possible. Most likely his mother would fulfil Slimane's desires more than his sister would; for the sister might well be an arrogant adolescent, a bit too pleased with her own thighs and the way her bum stuck out and how round her breasts were. That kind of person would be a bore to him in every way. In ordinary friendship, and in lovemaking too. There were also many problems caused by the extreme negligence that was characteristic of that particular subcategory within the second sex. The cost of that first little spurt of semen could be an abortion or a court appearance.

He jumped down the steps and walked across the burning hot sand. He was heading for the boy, who was running back and forth and leaping acrobatically up into the air. Slimane could see that although the boy did not seem to be going in any particular direction, he was in fact on his way over to a woman. Slimane was happy about this, as he thought she must be

the boy's mother or sister. Most likely the sister, he thought, since she was tall with a very slim waist that was perhaps the result of the great care she took to stay that way, maximising her fibre intake and sticking to an excellent diet. The boy's mother surely wouldn't have a tall and slim figure; she was bound to be as fat as a heifer, and flabby, and constantly joking around. She'd do anything to gratify the young men who sated her voracious appetite. That was the image Slimane had of this type of women. His aunt came quite close to it, to a certain extent, but she wasn't really like them.

"Hey!" yelled Slimane, but no one heard him. So he started whistling and making various other sounds in an attempt to catch the boy's attention, drawing instead the attention of a number of other people, without the little boy noticing him at all. He resolved to chase after him until he caught up with him, so that he could talk to him. But the boy moved away from the woman and set to running around again. So Slimane ran after him. The sand was so hot it hurt his feet. Then a man's body blocked his path. It was Karimo. Slimane didn't take any notice of him, and carried on running.

"He must've gone mad," Karimo said, and watched in astonishment as Slimane came to a halt beside the little boy. Karimo couldn't understand what was going on. He saw the two of them heading towards him, and said to himself *The little boy must be one of his relations*. The two of them were talking to each other like two wise men who shared mutual respect. Karimo was amazed by this, and said to himself *This young man is turning out to be an idiot. He's not normal at all... he's not normal at all... I don't see how he understands life*. He was on the point of going up the few steps to the Chalet, but hearing Slimane calling out to him he stopped, the sand burning his feet and the sun stinging his wet body, especially between his shoulder blades. Water dripping down from his forehead was running into his mouth, so he spat.

“This is the friend I told you about,” said Slimane. “He’s got a beautiful sister and a beautiful mother, too. I bet you can’t guess how stunningly beautiful she is.”

“You didn’t tell me about a friend of yours. Have you gone mad? How have you made friends with a little boy?”

“There’s no difference between adults and kids. All that matters is for there to be a dialogue between the two. And I could talk with this boy endlessly. He’s clever, even if he does belong to that filthy social class.”

“What do you mean?”

“The bourgeoisie. Don’t you understand? Whatever else, the bourgeoisie girls know how to fuck, and they do it a lot. They’re clean and easy, if you can bear their empty talk and meaningless claims.”

“I’m off,” said the young boy, “my sister’s waiting for me.”

“Is there a man with her in the house right now?” asked Slimane.

“No, there’s no one with her in the villa. She’s painting her nails, and my mother’s in the bathroom—she’s made a big white tomb of soap bubbles. Do you know that my mother is actually really nasty? One time she squashed my father with her body so hard she almost suffocated him. He was shouting for help and calling on saint Moulay Idriss to save him. I started crying, and so did my sister, so she slapped him and left him knocked to the ground.”

“This boy is definitely mentally handicapped,” Karimo said now. “And you’re definitely a total idiot, Slimane. Let him leave, come on, we can go and carry on our conversation, and have some more beers.”

“Hang on, I don’t want to! I want to meet this boy’s sister. A girl who draws a heart pierced by an arrow on her thighs, and writes *love* in a clashing colour. Don’t you know what that means? That she’s looking for someone like me, and like you.”

“And what if she’s a virgin? Then she’ll only bring you trouble.”

“I’ll rape her, like I raped Thorayya.”

The hair stood up on Karimo's scalp. Enraged, he tried to leave for the Chalet. But Slimane grabbed his arm, saying, "OK then, don't do any raping. The spoils can be divided: the mother for you, and the daughter for me. Or whatever—you can choose."

"I don't want that! You know I don't like women. So let the boy go. I can see a woman calling to him."

Slimane turned and saw a woman calling out in their direction. But she wasn't calling to any of the three of them. He was sure of that, because a young woman near them was answering the woman in gestures.

Slimane asked the boy: "Is your father in the house at night?"

"My father is always in the villa. Day and night. He's afraid of catching cold. He's got a belly and a bald head. He's only good at counting money. But my sister steals from him and buys me ice-cream and lets men in through the back door."

"And your mum? Does she know about this?"

"Yes. Sometimes there are two men, one for my mother and one for my sister... But there aren't any men for me and my dad, or any women. Anyway, I'm only little and I don't know about that stuff."

Karimo was utterly horrified by this, hugely offended, and left for the Chalet without saying a word.

He sat down at his usual table, ordered a third beer, and sank into enjoying the music. Then a picture of a big green frog drawn on the window of the Chalet caught his eye. He asked the waiter about it.

"Well, if you want to enjoy yourself, the *plat du jour* on Thursdays is frogs legs," the waiter told him. "Our restaurant has maintained this tradition since it was founded, back in the day, despite the fact that Muslims like me and you don't approve of eating frogs. Shall I tell you a story?"

"No," said Karimo. "You have no right to upset the customers by talking about whatever you feel like."

“True,” said the waiter, and walked away.

Then Karimo saw the kid leaving, leaping along and kicking up sand as he went. Slimane was standing stock still, as if deep in thought. Then he span around and leapt briskly up the few steps to the Chalet. Joining Karimo, he said: “I found her. Tonight’s going to be fun. If you want to live a little, well—life is short. Come with me tonight: we’ll scale the wall of the villa, and there’ll be one for me and one for you.”

“I don’t like women. You’ve lost it! You can drink beer until you repent and come to your senses.”

“Yes, I understood. But Rilke loved women.”

“I don’t care.”

“Alright, so do you want to marry a man? That would be a real scandal. Do what Oscar Wilde did, if you want.”

“I couldn’t care less about Wilde and who he did or didn’t marry! That’s nothing to do with me. I don’t like women. I love myself, and I’ll torment myself however I want to. I don’t want to replay some old historical legend.”

Slimane’s interest was piqued by this. “Tell me frankly,” he said, “do you masturbate?”

Karimo was embarrassed by this question. He glared at his friend in disgust. Slimane repeated the question, much to his friend’s resentment.

“Listen,” Karimo said, “I don’t like this kind of talk. If this nonsense is going to continue then it’s best we don’t hang out anymore.”

“But you haven’t seen my aunt yet.”

“Show your aunt to some other bloke, and leave me in peace!”

“I’m sorry,” said Slimane, signalling to the waiter. “Let me stop joking around like this—you can think of it all as just a joke, if you need to, and I’ll take back everything I said. Happy now?”

“Alright then, do it,” said Karimo.



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