

Edna Shemesh

The Sand Dunes of Paris

Chapters 1 - 4

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Albert first became aware of Anaïs' existence before he'd seen either her face or her body. That first time she'd been only a voice. That first time, which would be etched clearly in his memory, he'd heard only her voice, and sat up in bed, terrified by sudden passion, listening to her moans.

Ohhhh---

Then quiet.

And, again, Ohhh ----

And the silence which had wrapped the old building in which he lived – and all the neighboring buildings, the entire 4th *arrondissement*, the whole beautiful city – grew denser and deeper. He grasped the end of the blanket to wrap it around his back because - even though the heavy rains that had been falling on the city for an entire night and half a day had suddenly stopped, and the weather had warmed, and it seemed as though now summer had come - that night the chill had again invaded the tiny apartment in which he lived, made him shiver, aroused a dull pain in his back.

Ohhh---

He dropped the blanket, tensed.

Ohhh -----

A gentle, pure, fragile moan - a solitary note in the silence - escaping from a barely open mouth through lips parted above a taut chin.

Is a woman crying behind her half-closed, faintly-lit window? Is she moaning in pain? His hand seemed to recover, resumed the motion that had been interrupted in mid-air. He wrapped his bare back in the blanket and his body, which had stiffened, relaxed slightly and his head fell back on the pillow.

Ohhh ----

Albert rose on his elbows, fully awake. He bent his head toward the voice and listened intently. The separate syllables he heard as they reached his ears seemed to him like ripples spreading from a stone tossed into the water; they came to his ears gently, softly, emerged from deep in the throat as if pleading, at regular intervals. He doubted no longer. He heard moans of love. For a moment shame and embarrassment enveloped him, as if he were an accomplice to a crime, as though he'd poked a hole in the wall with a bloody finger, through the layers of paint, through the plaster, through the solid bricks, to watch her where she lay. And listen.

Ohhh---

But, he thought, where's the guy?

He imagined from afar hearing Liliana's roars when he'd burst into the room she shared with his other sisters. He'd been playing hide-and-seek with Taher and suddenly wanted to play a little trick on his younger brother, to really hide from him, to disappear like a conjurer so it would take Taher an hour to find him; the search and ambush would exhilarate him; his sinews would acquire the suppleness needed for escape, the way he'd

felt when he was his brother's age. In fact, he wasn't many years older than Taher because their mother had given birth to them almost one after the other. He darted along the narrow corridor, charged at the door behind which he wanted to hide and burst through.

Albert had never dared imagine Liliana – or one of his other sisters – naked, but that day, in the long, narrow room almost filled by their beds, from whose tall window a soft light splashed on the opposite wall as if emerging from a funnel and illuminating his sister so it seemed she burned with a gentle flame, he saw her lying on her back in the splashes of light, her panties down around her ankles and her slim arm rising and falling between her bent legs. Even now, when an entire country separates them and so much time has passed, even now he doesn't dare form an exact picture in his head or see it fully, and does all he can to blur the image in his brain, until his sister's splayed body is replaced by the momentary paralysis that overcame him and by his stupid flight from his sisters' room toward the echoes of Taher's rising wails because no one was looking for him. Sometimes the picture of his sister Liliana's parted knees was replaced by the comforting image of sweet Maryse, whose two thick braids were always tied together by a white ribbon, whom he'd never kissed before he left - not even once - though he'd wanted to.

Now all three of them were mixed together – his older sister, and Maryse far away, and the moaning woman he couldn't see – and everything, just before he planned to go to sleep, seemed ridiculous, preposterous, made his head hurt as if birds were flying around inside, pecking him. He jammed his nose into the pillow.

But then the woman's moans grew more frequent – he hadn't known how close their windows were – floated from her room to land repeatedly on his threshold, intensified, sounded hoarser and increasingly strained to his ears, as if she were unable to restrain her pleasure any longer, in a moment she'll stop, and he shivered and became hard, refusing to believe he was really hearing it all, turned over on his back, raised himself up slightly and remained in that position, leaning on his elbows, listening to the moans in amazement and shame.

Suddenly the sounds on the other side of the wall grew faint, muffled perhaps behind a palm pressed to a mouth or beneath lips pressed against lips, and one quick, deep groan burst suddenly from a man's throat. Both immediately fell silent.

Albert recoiled slightly in his bed, feeling within a wry disappointment, feeling almost duped. His jaws clenched, crushed his upper and lower teeth together, he opened his mouth wide and moved his jaws from side to side to dull the pain. Then he let his body slowly relax, fell back on the mattress, stretched out his legs and rested his hands, cupped, on his hips.

Though it was now quiet he still couldn't sleep. Again he heard the black swifts soaring among the chimneys. Their cries were sharp, abrupt. Nothing dissuaded them from their incessant flight. Aloft their entire lives, they never collided with the round chimneys or the long windows whose white cloth curtains were usually drawn. Not long ago an errant swift flashed into his room through the open window. It zigzagged through the air in panic, immediately turned toward the light, vanished, and Albert barely managed to glimpse its fugitive silhouette at the moment it entered or at the instant it fled. Now he focused his thoughts on that swift, black and elusive, which had fluttered panic-stricken from one wall to the other, in order to clear his head of the scene which craved to push aside the image of the frightened bird: a man and woman lying naked in bed on the other side of the wall, closer to him than he wished, as if both of them – her head on his arm, his semen on her hip – compelled him by their very existence to participate in their act of love, transforming him against his will into a voyeur, a momentary pervert, arousing his lust. He rolled over onto his stomach and buried his head in the faded pillowcase. Maryse, Maryse, he mumbled, even though he knew that he wouldn't see her, would never see her.

And again he closed his eyes and again turned onto his back, and when his bed suddenly creaked in response he stopped moving for a moment, perhaps the couple beyond the wall had heard him. But nothing broke the silence. Far beneath him, through the large

courtyard spread out four floors below, rolled a suitcase belonging to one of the tenants – perhaps they'd just arrived, or were just leaving – its wheels bumping on the ancient paving stones. A gentle wind moved the white curtain tangled in the open window and Albert took a deep breath. It seemed that residents were constantly moving in and out of his building as well as those adjoining, which together formed a connected square surrounding the courtyard he loved because of the climbing vine entwined around the downspouts that for weeks has flowered with vibrant blue clusters. In the center of the courtyard grew a large tree. Sometimes, late at night, his sleep was disturbed. He'd hear hushed conversation, laughter, people arriving, footsteps fading away, doors slamming as if it were day rather than night, and he would wake.

Sometimes, at night, he watches from his window, standing back a little because he's in his underwear, looks out and sees windows illuminated by white neon lamps or by the yellow light of a bulb. Most of the windows are open to the evening air. On the second floor, two stories below, he'd recently seen a portion of a room containing a baby's white bureau whose drawers had been left open as if the room had been hastily abandoned. He'd never heard a baby's voice or saw anyone enter or leave the room, but every evening the light was on.

Through another window he saw a woman, her hair disheveled, lying on a sofa, covered by a sheet, watching television. A bluish light intermittently tinted the lenses of her glasses. A long blouse, or perhaps a short housecoat, covered her knees, and one of her legs hung, elevated, from the sofa's arm. Loud voices erupted from across the courtyard one floor above him; he could see shadows of girls seated in a circle. Heard them laughing. Their laughter rose in waves through the evening air.

And now those moans, moans of love which he heard as if they'd come from his own room, float toward him through its now-dense air. Again he tried to fall asleep, but couldn't (*You can't fall asleep if you're waiting*, his mother said, and covered his shoulders with the blanket). He admitted to himself – he's waiting to hear more.

Later he heard rustling. Albert rose. He was already fully awake. He approached the window barefoot, almost on tiptoe, leaned forward and listened intently. He might have seemed from outside to be inhaling the night air. Then he drew back from the window, pressed sideways against the wall and laid his ear to it. He heard, on the other side, a door open gently and a door slam shut, and the wall between them shook. Water began flowing in the shower. The couple showered for a long time, the man mumbling melodiously in French words that weren't clear, their syllables swallowed by the stream of water. The woman laughed in response. Her laughter was sweet.

Suddenly Albert heard the man call, loudly: "Anaïs, bring me the towel, please. I forgot it on the chair!"

Anaïs. When he learned her name his embarrassment grew. A rude curse in his mother tongue escaped through his clenched teeth, short and bitter. He left the window and stretched out on the bed. He must get up this morning earlier than usual. A large shipment of fresh produce arrives from the south and if he's late – his stern uncle, who did a very big favor for Fadina, his youngest sister, and agreed to give her son a job in his greengrocery until he got settled – if he's late for work, his uncle will give him one of those dark looks in which there's a sheen he never expects to see in the eyes of someone who has no fever, and will rub his smooth temple as if a bit of stubborn dirt was stuck there, or he'd felt a sudden, sharp pain in his head. If he's late his uncle won't say a word, but later, all-day-long-he'll-continue-not-to-say-a-word-about-his-tardiness, his silence will reverberate until closing time and lie oppressively between them.

Fall asleep already, he told himself; those moans – Anaïs' moans - have ceased. There's no encore. He smiled a tired smile into the crumpled pillow. *So some couple did-what-they-did right under your nose, and you heard it all – so what. Go to sleep.*

But he didn't shut the window. He needs air, he needs a breeze. Since arriving he's become addicted to the pure, late evening air that rises from below in gentle gusts, pours through the windows into the small, two-room apartment after the sun finally sets and

frees its interior from the day's oppressive heat. And when he slumps onto the mattress at night the air has already grown chilly and he must wrap himself in a blanket - his back, at least, one side of which hurts. The left side of his back has been painful for a long time because of the heavy crates of produce he hauls every day, and the cartons of mineral water, and the soft drinks, and in the evening, when he stretches out in bed, dying to sleep, he turns first one way and then another and doesn't fall asleep until the gentle breeze begins to ease slightly the burden of the waning summer day.

During torrid nights in the village where he was born and raised, when the walls of the house began releasing the heat they'd accumulated throughout the day, and he couldn't stand the sweat pouring from his temples and dripping into his eyes, salty and burning, he'd take his little brother, carrying their straw mattresses on their heads - his own heavy mattress and Taher's small, narrow one which always smelled faintly of urine - and climb the stairs to the flat, tiled roof and lie down, each on his own mattress, covered only by a thin blanket.

The heat was also oppressive on the roof but less so than below, in the house, and buzzing mosquitoes bit them on their faces and arms and legs and disturbed their sleep. But sometimes, up there on the roof, there was a breeze that seemed to have issued from a narrow tube: concentrated, erratic, like the one now in his room during the chilly nights, which cooled their bodies and slightly eased the heat. Instead of falling asleep immediately the brothers would tickle each other and giggle, drink water from the pitcher that their sister Esther brought up to them blowing two kisses and whispering good night in a voice filled with envy and immediately descending, her bare feet pattering. They lay on their backs and the canopy of stars overhead sparkled so brilliantly that he and Taher stopped laughing, fell silent, watched and inhaled the dust of infinity. Even then Taher had been drawn to that unattainable remoteness, his body tensed, his piercing eyes immersed in the shimmering stars. With pointed finger Albert showed his little brother distant constellations and invented names for them, and also speeding satellites and shooting stars and distant airplanes, until Taher, amazed each time anew, tired from all the excitement, turned on his side, farted briefly, self-consciously, drew his legs to his

chest and slept. Late at night Albert remained lying on his back without moving, Taher's hard skull resting on his collar-bone, rising and falling as he breathed; he lay motionless until his arm fell asleep and began tingling painfully. But for a long time he didn't move because his brother's quiet, regular breathing was so sweet. Finally Taher shifted in his sleep, turned his back to his brother, and Albert moved his immobilized shoulder, now freed from the weight, reached out to the pitcher and drank. Then he linked his fingers, put his hands under his head, scrutinized the dark sky, counted stars here and there, arranged them, silently wove their shapes into stories, vowing to remember each detail so he could repeat them to Taher on the next hot night, perhaps also, at some time, to Maryse, when he tells her about that place, still undefined, that he dreams of and to which he'll go, that beautiful place. One night a huge milky moon rose, shedding an uncertain glow on his surroundings. The light grew brighter until it seemed to Albert he was surrounded. He shut his eyelids tightly and fell asleep. In the morning he awoke chilled, and though he tried he could remember none of the lovely stories he'd imagined before the moon's face suddenly bloomed before him.

For days on end, until late at night, the heat enveloped the house mercilessly, and though everyone was dripping and the sweat made them break out in a prickly rash, their mother forbade their sisters to join him and Taher on the roof, to sleep next to them under a sky painted a new shade of black every night.

"What about the neighbors?" she said, clasping her hands, "You know how quickly evil tongues begin wagging, how quickly certain people hear things, and then God only knows what will happen!" And his mother gave him a very significant look which made him feel guilty even though he didn't understand what it meant.

"But mother," he remembered Taher saying in his high-pitched, rebellious voice, "We're their brothers, not strangers!"

"It doesn't matter," said their mother decisively, "It's forbidden." Then she smacked his shorn head, "Go do your homework before dinner."

Taher stopped arguing. He made every effort to satisfy his father and mother where school was concerned – diligently prepared all the assigned homework, learned poems by heart without skipping a single line, and long paragraphs, and formulas. His face glowed with intelligence and happiness and he intuited subtleties no one could have taught him. He understood deeply; he almost seemed like a miniature adult (Albert momentarily remembered what happened that time, in the dunes), his words always serious, surprisingly wise, like a sober grown-up, not a small child. Once their mother had told him, affecting despair, “You were born an old man in the skin of a child, *ya* Taher. How can you notice everything?”

I love Taher more than anyone, thought Albert gently, despite the difference in age and the distance that had riven them since he’d left his country. Perhaps he feels that way because his little brother is like him, and both are the same as their father, as similar as two *dinar* coins, and perhaps because Taher was always more full of life than he, and of hope.

The light in the adjoining apartment went out. As it did, the darkness also deepened in Albert’s room. He listened a while longer, but heard nothing more. He sighed quietly. Immediately he smothered his sigh..

Unable to fall asleep he kept thinking, settling his member more comfortably in his underwear. He hoped in his heart to hear “*Anaïs*” again, hear the girl – the woman. He couldn’t really tell how old she was on the basis of the single long syllable she’d uttered – a sound of pleasure, a moan delicate and eager. He already imagined her closed eyelids, her clenched palms, her sprawled body. And before renewed lust could overcome him he turned sharply toward the wall and tightly closed his eyes. The bed creaked softly beneath him and was still.

It seemed to him he'd awakened at the moment he'd begun a new dream, perhaps his sole dream that night. In it he'd stood on his window sill, spread his wings, beat them twice in a practiced motion and soared into a black night sky. He glided through cold, dense air, observing from above the fragments of a dismembered land trapped between buildings joined shoulder-to-shoulder, his avian body feeling the joy of flight; he sensed his vision sharpening, clearing, and slowly swooped for a long time before landing on one of the reddish-brown clay chimneys protruding from the tops of the sloping roofs. As he was about to peck with his curved beak at a bird asleep atop the chimney he opened his eyes.

He immediately erased the vivid images from his head. He hasn't time for dreams. He came here, in fact, to get away from his dreams – the old ones, at least. He left his life behind – his rigid father in despair; his timid mother with distinct relief; his rowdy, clever sisters sadly; and little Taher with an aching heart. And Maryse, sweet Maryse, whom he already loved with all his heart.

“Go,” said his mother, with a gravity and solemnity that effaced her wrinkles and renewed her features. As the time for him to leave drew near Albert felt as though he'd accidentally discovered a new, determined side of his mother's character and regretted he wouldn't have time to comprehend it fully. His mother suddenly spoke as if she'd been kneeling at his side on the roof during all those hot nights, hearing both his daydreams and those when he slept; seeing, together with him, what he saw: the colors of another, imagined life; smelling what he smelled: the scent of distances; feeling what he felt in his feverish innocence: intense, new excitement accompanied by acute fear; but perhaps, at that time, only he saw stardust on every dusty road, an approaching storm in every

passing thunderclap, a keen hope that stopped his breathing as if a spear had pierced his lungs. Later his dreams dulled.

“Go,” his mother said to him. Her eyes were dry now. “Leave, so you don’t end up like your father.”

What do you want, he said to himself a few weeks after arriving in the beautiful city, feeling it close in on him, its foreign streets leading only to other foreign streets, feeling such overwhelming loneliness that he began talking to himself aloud in his Uncle Mordukh’s apartment, certain no one heard him, not even the unseen tenants in the background whose voices and sounds sometimes filtered through the walls, through the windows, giving evidence of their existence: laughter, a tune, water flowing through pipes, even the coarse belch or fart a person allows themselves when alone. And, sometimes, moans of love. One evening his nostrils absorbed the sharp-sweet smell of cigar smoke rising from below; he breathed it into his lungs as if he himself were smoking. And the sudden odor he’d sometimes smelled even late at night – a frying egg, soup cooking – arousing his hunger.

He was happy when letters began to arrive in the mailbox. The first was from Taher. Rectangular wooden boxes like giant bars of chocolate filled the entire wall below the curved, worn wooden staircase in the narrow entrance hall. Before leaving for work in his uncle’s greengrocery he slips two fingers into the slot of the locked mailbox bearing Mordukh Levy’s name - nonchalantly, as if he’s indifferent to whether he finds a letter. Perhaps that’s why, when his fingertips felt the long, smooth envelope through the slot, his joy almost burst its bounds, overflowed. He opened the mailbox with the small key attached to the one for the apartment. Tahar’s letter dropped to the floor.

That night he phoned his mother for the first time since leaving, despite the exorbitant cost of the call, to thank Taher for his letter, hear his voice, retrieve his odor – the smell of cheap soap and sweat – from memory, ask when he’ll come visit Uncle Mordukh and

Aunt Alice. In his hurry he'd called too early. His mother, surprised to hear his voice, said Taher was still at school and Father had gone to the market, and how are you, *ya ibni*, how is it there, and how is my brother Mordukh and his children, and cried hoarsely in his ear and said nothing - for some reason - not a word about Alice, her sister-in-law. Albert gripped the receiver tightly, moved it away from his ear with mixed feelings. His mother exhausts him; he craves most for her to give him strength - at least once. She talked on, now immersed in her conversation with herself. Her voice became distant, grim, but also stubborn.

"I can't hear anything, *ya Umi*, he said loudly; "Kiss everyone," and replaced the phone in its cradle.

In the morning he rose, neatly made the bed as his mother had taught him when he was a child and quickly showered in a drizzle of hot water. His uncle Mordukh doesn't charge him for water and electricity, only rent, but he was pleased with his own frugality – hadn't he lived most of his life on the edge of the desert and known the value of fresh water.

On the day he arrived his uncle had explained he could afford not to charge rent but wanted him to pay six hundred fifty euros a month, not much for such an apartment, especially in a neighborhood like the Marais! And when Albert's eyes widened – how could he pay that amount – his uncle lectured him about how important it was to raise young people properly, including Albert – whom he considers his own flesh and blood, one of his own children – who must learn life is hard everywhere, also here, and if he wants to succeed must work hard, as he himself has worked his entire life. Albert listened irately to his uncle who, as he spoke, bent to quickly arrange with his broad hands fleshy tomatoes one atop another in a wooden crate tilted at a fairly sharp angle to dissuade customers who had their eye on other tomatoes lower down, still fresh and firm. His uncle kept talking; Albert shifted his weight from one leg to the other. In fact, he felt very hungry. He couldn't remember when he'd last eaten, or what he'd eaten, but his uncle ignored his nephew's signs of restlessness as if he'd restrained himself for too long and must now, before doing anything else, lecture his relative. Albert begrudged him that harangue, submitted to it, smothered his resentment, though that kind of grudge was the worst and didn't ease for days.

He remembers clearly his first day in the city. He came off the train which sped swiftly away as if it had paused only for him to alight safely. His uncle awaiting him on the platform took the large suitcase, grabbed him by the shoulders, shook him affectionately

until the knapsack on his back bobbed back and forth and drove him home in his old, blue car to meet Alice, his much younger wife, and the children, and eat and rest, and sleep there as he had repeatedly promised his sister, Fadina, which made her feel a little better. Then, he said, in a day or two he'll teach him what to do in the greengrocery and take him to the small apartment he owned in the 4th *arrondissement* where he'll live.

Nor, as they drove, had his uncle asked about the family he'd left behind years ago. He drove easily, nonchalantly, like someone used to driving who enjoyed it. Albert looked through the car window, watching the landscape passing quickly, his eyes straining to take in the broad grassy swathes dappled with little white flowers, the boulevards of trees rushing by. He'd never seen such lovely, vivid green foliage. He yearned to shut his ears against the drip-drip of his uncle's words but Mordukh didn't let up or stop his chattering, and as they drove he told Albert how – until he'd found Alice and married her - he'd lived alone in a “miserable hole” for a few years, first in a distant quarter, a neighborhood of Africans and criminals and illegal immigrants like himself which hadn't much changed since then, and might even have become worse. When he'd lived there, said his uncle, as he rolled down the window so they'd have some air, he'd actually been afraid he'd wound up in Senegal or the Ivory Coast because he saw so many African men and women in colorful robes, and although his own skin isn't particularly light in color either he'd felt whiter-than-white by comparison.

After Albert started working in the shop his uncle continued to tell him those stories. His hands quickly separated a large bundle of herbs into smaller bunches and the mingled scent of mint and sage filled the air, mixing with other fragrances Albert couldn't yet identify but which aroused a keen longing for home.

“When I still lived in the apartment which now is your castle,” laughed his uncle, “I was already married to Alice and Jacques and Danielle had already been born, but I still had nothing in hand.”

The sharp odor of mint now pervaded the air, intensified. His uncle glanced down at his rough hands whose movements hadn't ceased and which resembled two elongated beings whose appendages possessed a life of their own.

"I came here because I had a profession, but Nissim, you know, your mother's and my middle brother, never made any effort to come. He didn't want to. He left home, went straight to Israel. Didn't know what it would be like, couldn't imagine all the problems in a new country where people come from all over, didn't believe – the poor souls – they'd be fighting the Arabs for years, they'd be dumped, just like that, in some miserable hole where they'll have to spend their whole lives! When I already had a small apartment and a shop here, and had begun to breathe a little, Nissim still didn't have anything there in Sderot. Have you ever heard of that place? No? How could you. Anyway – hand me that empty crate over there – for years Nissim was ashamed to write how hard it was for them there, kept writing that the air in *Eretz Yisrael* was better than perfume, and almost every letter – and there weren't many – would end with a highfaluting sentence, always the same one – can you believe it – he'd write, 'Better a humble tent in the homeland than a golden palace in a foreign land,' or something like that."

And he coughed, adding, "Now *you* – it's good you came here."

His uncle spoke to him in a mixture of French and their mother tongue. Albert was pleased to discover how much he understood of what his uncle said to him in French, if he didn't talk too fast. He already longed to speak French like that, like his uncle, fluently, as fast as he could think. Now he openly studied this heavysset man, Mordukh Levy, his uncle. Could he have detected a hint of envy – implicit, confusing – when he spoke of his brother, Nissim?

"Do you understand what I'm telling you?" thundered Mordukh, tossing the green bunches he held into the empty crate beside him. His expression grew scornful, perhaps at himself, perhaps at his life, as if he were, in some sense, living in sin; and for a moment it seemed that the entire brick wall his uncle had worked so hard all this time to

build - all these years - was suddenly collapsing before their eyes and flinging fine grey powder straight into their faces.

At first Mordukh had also worked illegally and, like the others, dreaded the police because the French he had learned at home and in school and the way he spoke betrayed his origin whenever he opened his mouth. By day he worked at whatever came his way - painting houses or as a temporary laborer in the produce markets. And at night, almost sleepwalking from exhaustion, he'd slip through dark streets to hang posters for a clandestine Communist organization whose name he no longer remembered and was demonstrating energetically at that time - probably against capitalism - or for a Jewish group protesting the spread of anti-Semitism, all for a few measly francs which were barely enough to feed his children. And the whole time, he said, he lived in constant fear that one night he'd hear the piercing shriek of a whistle and be caught by the municipal police or immigration officers, holding his brush and rolls of paper, and his wife would never know what happened to him and where he disappeared to.

"So you," said his uncle, his back to him, vigorously scrubbing his hands with soap and water above the sink on the wall of the store, "you'll at least pay me rent."

After he'd worked for ten years his uncle had saved enough money to buy the small apartment in which Albert now lived. That was before he'd obtained his documents and moved to a different neighborhood with a much better reputation. It was then, more or less, that his temporary residence permit had been extended and he no longer had to show up at the police station every twenty-four hours - that's right, every twenty-four hours! Can you believe that? But, fortunately, he earned a good living from his temporary jobs because, as he said again, proudly, he had always worked hard and been ambitious, and anyway there wasn't anything in that neighborhood other than prostitutes and homosexuals and apartments were cheap. Almost free. The greengrocery? He'd bought it from an old, solitary Moroccan Moslem who no longer had the strength to work nor anyone to inherit the store, so he sold it to him so he'd have enough money to travel once more to Tetouan, his little Jerusalem, as his lovely city used to be called, before he died.

The stupid old man who, said his uncle derisively, could have asked much more for the store, also neglected to include in the price the extensive clientele he'd built up over the years, and so, exulted his uncle, he was able to buy a more spacious apartment for himself and his growing family without having to sell the "hovel" he's now renting to him. For years he'd rented it to couples who happened to turn up and actually took very good care of it, or to artists of every nationality who'd arrived with lots of grand aspirations and half-empty pockets and whom no one had ever heard of, neither before they arrived nor after they'd moved out of his apartment.

His Uncle Mordukh placed bottles of soda on a shelf, straightened with a sigh and said – with a look in his eyes of amazement mingled with scorn – "You know, Albert my dear, I think I'm the only Jewish greengrocer in this entire city! Once, everyone who arrived had a profession – executives, accountants – no one was a greengrocer. Look around – other than me, they're all Moslems! Sometimes they call me *L'arabe du coin*, "the Arab at the corner" – you understand?

And his uncle gripped Albert by the hand as if he had something important to show him and practically dragged him to the entrance of the store.

"Here's one!" cried Mordukh. His voice trembled with rage, his words spraying from his mouth in a mist of saliva. "One what?" asked Albert. He didn't at all understand why his uncle was so belligerent.

"Here's the real 'Arab at the corner'!" pointing to the greengrocer across the street.

Albert's lips bent into a smile. There was nothing unusual about the shop across the street. It was almost a mirror-image of his uncle's store.

"That's just the point," glowered his uncle and turned on Albert. "Tell me - what don't you understand? I was here long before him - a long, long time before him! I was the

only greengrocer on the whole street, made a good living – and all of a sudden this Moslem shows up!”

“Not – God forbid - that I have anything against Moslems,” his uncle said, curbing his anger, “but when things are tough there’s no place for two greengrocers so near one another. For ten years already that Shehadeh has been driving me crazy: I bring Japanese shitaki mushrooms that the French don’t yet know about – he brings shitaki. I offer a special on black grapes – he sells them more cheaply. I install a display case for ice cream – he installs a bigger one! And he keeps sending people to sniff around my shop and I can’t chase them away. They buy something, but they’re spying for him!”

And his uncle practically dragged Albert back into the store and slammed his fist on the counter because he hadn’t yet cooled off. “Let me tell you something, Albert - we fled here to get away from them, but we won’t be able to run away much longer. I’ll tell you this – if anything leads me to an early grave it’ll be that greengrocer across the street.”

Then he calmed down, went to the rear of the store, sat down at a small table and worked on the accounts.

If he does well, thought Albert, as he swept with broad movements the celery and parsley leaves that fell from the bunches his uncle arranged neatly on the counter next to the cash register, if he really does well, maybe one day he’ll be able to buy this apartment from his uncle. He grew angry. Where could these stupid ideas have come from? He looked down. Their house in the village must have been made of elastic: when he was a little boy it seemed almost boundless. The walls drew apart and the room between them became larger and larger, living and breathing like an animal. And there was also much above, and below, and underneath, and within. The house gradually became smaller, shrank as he grew. And when the suitcase was already packed and it seemed to Albert he was ready to take the step across the threshold that would change his world completely he took another look around, perhaps for the last time, almost surreptitiously, and felt the walls closing in on him, felt suffocated.

“May Taher come too?” he asked his uncle hesitantly as he sorted long cucumbers in the rear of the store, a kind he’d never seen before and which, in his opinion, already felt too soft. He covertly broke one of them, put a piece in his mouth and quickly chewed. It was soft, watery, its peel bitter. He immediately spat it into his palm and hurriedly washed his hands. Why should people buy them? But other cucumbers don’t grow here, the small, firm, sugary ones like those from the sparingly watered vegetable bed near his mother’s chicken coop in the courtyard of his parents’ home. And he remembered the day he and Taher had walked to the movie theater in the neighboring village which wasn’t very far from theirs. He’d left school that day before classes ended. Anyway, he wasn’t required to attend the Koran class. Taher was stretched out on the courtyard’s hard earth watching ants run around.

“Let’s go,” he said to Taher, pulling him by the arm. Albert strode along, Taher running alongside under the hot sun, past the blinding white dune that filled their mouths with fine grains of sand. His little brother didn’t even ask where they were going, just hurried to keep up. As they saw from afar the closest buildings of the next village spread out before them on the broad limestone plain they heard the bray of the trotting donkey and encountered the cart of the oil seller who knew their mother. They rode with him the short distance that remained and when they jumped down from the cart, not far from the entrance to the market strewn with rubbish and junk, he tossed them two small cucumbers he’d pulled from beneath his seat and drove off. Taher crammed the cucumber into his mouth and Albert also ate his quickly, peel and all. They both were still hungry. Albert grew thirstier. The sweet taste of the oil seller’s cucumber merged with the odor of the donkey’s sudden, dark droppings and the brays of pain when its owner pulled hard on its reins and beat his heels against its ribs.

“What should I do now, Uncle?” asked Albert from the depths of the store.

“Take a rest.”

Albert glanced sideways and sat in Mordukh's chair. He wanted to tell him the cucumbers here were no good, big and tasteless, but said nothing. He sat on the chair, arms extended, palms resting on his knees and felt like an old man. And he saw Taher's eyes following with horror the thrusts of the curved sword in the hand of the masked Emir who mercilessly massacred his enemies on the screen of the old movie theater and his ears filled with the distant clang of clashing swords. He no longer tried to hide his longing for his little brother, his urge to see him, to tussle with him, hear his wild laughter, wipe the tears that fell from his squinting eyes after they'd returned home and been slapped in turn by their father. Dusk descended slowly as they walked home. They listened intently to the silence. Not even the wind that had risen breached it. He held Taher's sweaty hand, the waning sun at their backs, the trail of their footsteps stretching behind them in the sand – four hurrying footprints which were sometimes no longer visible where the wind had swept away the sand to expose the hard ground underneath. Little Taher didn't say anything all the way home, didn't ask anything about the scary man in the black cloak whose face was never revealed, even for a moment, on the yellowed screen covering the wall; the man who never said a single word while he flickered on the screen, just slit bellies and cut off heads with his darting sword, and Taher again tightened his small hand in his brother's as they hurried and in a thin voice said he was hungry.

"Sure, Taher can come too," said Mordukh, laying his hand on his nephew's shoulder – Albert hadn't even heard his approaching footsteps – "You think you're an outstanding worker, Albert? Another pair of hands won't hurt. He'll finish school and come too. Are you done resting?"

His uncle's apartment was so small that Albert's bedroom was only a few steps from the nook where he cooked and washed dishes, and the shower, toilet and small washing machine were also crowded together, separated only by a narrow sliding door. Nevertheless, his uncle's apartment seemed from the first moment like a palace compared to the scant corner he shared at home with his brother, its walls roughly whitewashed,

containing only the two beds and a high rectangular window covered outside by chicken wire to keep the crows and pigeon droppings from his sill. He'd already fallen in love with the river and the beautiful bridges that spanned it whose sight made his mouth and eyes open wide. He'll have to get used to the fact he's actually here, living here. How amazed was he to discover that some of the city's enthralling, ancient sites were located only a short walk from the tiny apartment in which he lived. He felt lucky. Took a walk every evening, each time in a different direction, letting his feet lead him, letting the streets carry him along. He seldom lost his way. Gradually he extended his range, feeling a bit like the locals walking smugly along. Sometimes a sudden anxiety or a bitter, corrosive taste impinged on his feeling of satisfaction, but he soon understood he'd never want to live anywhere else on earth, his heart sang and Albert sensed his life slowly taking off. He didn't yet know – how could he have known – that one day he'd walk into his uncle's store, find him sprawled on the floor with his skull crushed and nothing would be the same again.

One evening he dared to enter a dimly lit pub. He could barely make out what was happening inside but the commotion, the strong odor of beer, the acrid cigarette smoke and the searching eyes of drunk youths drove him back into the street and to his uncle's apartment. Weeks passed before he again went out at night to one of the clubs from which many good-looking, well-dressed young people poured as from a cornucopia until they filled the sidewalk and overflowed into the narrow street between the buildings where cars seldom appeared and parking was prohibited. He slipped inside, weaving from side to side to avoid bumping into the young people crowded in the small space or brushing against them as he passed, and ordered a glass of beer. The bartender smiled at him politely, said "*bonsoir*" and asked for five euros, "*s'il vous plait.*"

Albert's hand, reaching for the glass, froze momentarily. He had no choice but to pay the exorbitant price, leaned against the narrow bar and drank, his eyes following the slim young women in short, tight dresses and the gaunt guys whose fashionable one- or two-day growth of beard shadowed their faces. Surreptitiously he passed his hand along his smooth cheek and took a sip of beer. He didn't like its sour smell and bitter taste – not

the first sips, at least. And when he became uncomfortable standing there alone, and the smoke burned his eyes, he placed his empty glass on the bar, stifled a belch and exited into the night air.

For a long time, Albert lived out of his suitcase. He'd take out a shirt, wear it, then toss it, dirty and sweat-stained, next to his three or four clean shirts, but soon the disorder, the dirt and the unpleasant odors began to bother him and he emptied his suitcase and shoved it under the bed. He smelled dust as he folded the bedspread and thrust it, too, under the bed. Then he folded his clean clothes and arranged them more or less neatly on the two narrow shelves opposite his bed. He'd bought almost nothing for himself since he'd arrived. Whatever he needed he bought sparingly. He had a sizeable amount left in his pocket at the end of each month. He put part of his pay in a long envelope, sighed resentfully but also with a certain satisfaction, wrapped the bills in a few sheets of paper so they couldn't be felt and sent the money to his mother and father. Sometimes he'd add a few words and sign "love, Albert;" sometimes he was too short-tempered and didn't write anything, hushing the voice which grated at him: You're being spiteful, *ya* Albert; she's your mother, isn't she? And your father? You send them a little money – and that's it?

More than once he considered an idea that was more seductive than he'd anticipated – maybe he'll stop sending them money? How long will he have to support his parents? But every few weeks a letter arrived from his mother – his father never wrote to him – and he drew the creased envelope from the small mailbox in the entryway as if he were dealing with a poisonous scorpion. The letter was written in his mother's ragged script; as always, she sent her reverent love and fevered kisses, wrote apologetically on behalf of herself and his father – how she'd kiss his forehead, his hands if only he were there – phrasing her sentences as carefully as possible, as if she were addressing a dignitary, not her eldest son who'd gone away and now, thank God, he's relieving their dismal poverty; she prays for him every day, hopes every day that he's well, and wishes him a long, happy and gratifying life. Amen. His mother writes the same thing in every letter, almost the same words, the same annoying sentences which immediately make straight

for a hidden place in his heart to arouse his sympathy but instead cause unavoidable pain, her uncontrolled tears dampening the coarse paper, repeatedly thanking him, her eldest, for helping send his brother and sisters to school so their fate will be better than hers and their father's. And, as if she'd read his bitterness and longing for Taher between the brief lines he'd written in reply on the pages in which he wrapped the money he sent her, she deliberately said little about his sisters, as if she didn't consider what was going on with them to be important – Flor had recently married a postal clerk and accepted her modest life – but couldn't write enough about Taher. Sometimes she included a small photo in her letter so he could see how his little brother had grown, not forget, God forbid, what he looks like. The photos became Albert's small treasure: here's the little boy who'd laid his head in his lap positioned so that he always saw the broad scar on his scalp caused when he fell from the second-floor balcony and received a deep cut on his head. In another photo, his unexpectedly closely-cropped hair had already grown back and the scar was no longer visible; and how much bigger he'd gotten during that time. Taher couldn't possibly be taller than he. Still, Albert had his doubts and worried that if he wanted to hug him he'd have to climb up two rungs of a ladder to look him in the eye.

Albert filled a glass from the faucet and watered the small geranium growing solitary in the middle of a white plastic window box on the sill facing the courtyard. It wasn't he who'd planted it. Perhaps his Aunt Alice, perhaps one of the former tenants. It will live if he waters it, wilt if he forgets. Sometimes he forgets. His sister Flor's small herb garden was planted at the edge of their courtyard next to the shed in which his father piled rusted tools and the corroded metal bed of the firstborn son who'd died before any of his other children had been born. Not much grew in the hard ground at the edge of the desert, and what did grow was always poised tormented between life and death. Flor was stubborn. No one knew from whose poor garden she'd secretly uprooted small, half-wilted sprouts of tarragon, cilantro, garlic – once she even found a plant with dense roots and a pleasant fragrance which survived and then flourished, spreading uncontrollably; their mother crushed its leaves for *za'atar*. Albert cracked his knuckles. Was his sister Flor happy with her new life? Perhaps she's already with child, like all the girls who marry and whose midriffs begin to swell. Does the postal clerk treat her the way his

uncle treats Alice? Does she work hard, like their mother, to take care of her new home? Albert crossed to the kitchen nook, refilled the glass, returned to the window, bent and watered the geranium which had already begun to bud and whose blossoms might be pink when they open. The water was immediately absorbed by the earth, seeped to the bottom of the window box and Albert heard the drops falling onto the paving stones below. Before going to sleep he pressed his ear to the wall and listened. He might hear Anaïs.

Four flights of a spiral wooden staircase, seventy-seven worn stairs, lead Albert down from his uncle's small apartment. He locked the door securely and descended, round and round. No matter how hard he tried to muffle his steps on the ancient, curving stairway they kept echoing down the cylindrical stairwell. He could always hear from inside his apartment the footfalls of people ascending and descending, the rattle of keys bolting or unbolting locks, some doors slamming loudly and quickly, others closing hesitantly. Even so, he hardly ever saw his neighbors. The few times he meets someone hurrying along, their lips emitted conventional frilly greetings – *bonjour*, *bonsoir* – and no more, and usually, because of his unfashionable clothing which is often worn-out and because of how they look at him he tries to avoid these accidental encounters and when he hears footsteps outside his door waits until they fade and only then emerges.

But he knows a good deal about his neighbors even without having seen them: one floor up, above his kitchen nook, lives a woman he saw only once through the window which opens to the shaft beyond. She'd only passed by the window and he'd only managed to see the fleeting silhouette of a tall woman with thick gray hair. Now he knows her routine by heart: she rises early every morning, walks quietly on the floor of her apartment above him, as she does late at night, striding barefoot or wearing socks, as if aware of possibly disturbing the tenant below. He hears her pacing quietly on days his uncle allows him to arrive at the greengrocery later than usual instead of leaving in the afternoon ("So you'll have enough energy for the French lessons and start speaking like a local instead of a Mughrabi who'd learned the language *b'il ya'ani*," he says again) and Albert is grateful to her, his upstairs neighbor, for being considerate. At exactly 7:45 she slips on her high heels, walks briefly back and forth, does what she must before leaving the house, then finally exits, closes the door with the key – other neighbors usually slam

their doors hard, startling him, making his heart flutter for a moment – turns the lock once and hurries down the stairs. Click-click, click-click, her heels tap on the wooden stairs. She returns every evening at six o'clock, never one minute before six, and as soon as she returns the hushed sound of a radio can be heard from her apartment. She loves old French songs, that woman with the thick gray hair who lives on the floor above him, in the attic; songs which make him strangely uncomfortable because he doesn't like the smugness expressed in the manner they're sung. He never saw Anaïs. And until he heard her moans of love he'd had no idea anyone lived on the other side of the wall; that the window of another apartment on his floor is so near his own window. He'd never seen the lovely young woman with long black hair and large, flashing dark eyes – that's how he had imagined her – descending the stairs. For a moment he recalled again the sounds of her *Ohhhh* –

If he'd blushed, no one noticed.

Maybe you only dreamed her, he said to himself again. But since he'd heard Anaïs's voice he's paid more attention to the people ascending and descending the curving stairs. And when he hears a woman's light footsteps he quickly stands, or turns, facing the door, ready to open it surreptitiously and see Anaïs for the first time. But it's usually only the gray-haired woman who lives above him, and sometimes other women. Once he dared call out "Anaïs," his voice breaking, to a woman who was already two flights below him whom he didn't manage to see, only heard her steps, and called again, louder, "Anaïs!" But the steps continued, rhythmic, retreating, until they could no longer be heard and the entrance door below slammed. He withdrew into his apartment, hurried to the window overlooking the courtyard and peered down, leaned over the railing, careful not to sever the only blossom on the plant in his window box, and managed to glimpse a woman carrying a folding umbrella, dressed in a pale blouse and tight skirt moving left toward the huge wooden door beyond which the street is filled with noise and with people. He hadn't known rain was forecast.

He met his uncle at the entrance to the shop. His uncle was bending over, attempting to screw a nut whose threads were stripped onto one of the large bolts supporting the metal shelves on which the wooden crates with fresh produce would be placed. A faint light shone down from a dusty lamp above the entrance, puddling on the sidewalk. Albert hurried over to help his uncle.

“Ça ne marche pas,” Mordukh straightened with an effort, it’s not working. His shadow appeared briefly to be swimming in the puddle of light. His uncle, expressionless, rubbed his sore back. Lately he’s been speaking French most of the time, as if he’d forgotten his own language, their language, as if conversation in his mother tongue would require too great an effort.

Albert screwed the nut in place and tightened it, then rubbed his eyes. No matter how hard he tried he never managed to arrive at the greengrocery while it was still dark, before his uncle.

“If I come half an hour later,” he grumbled to his nephew, “the Peugeot’s parking spot has already been taken.”

And if I don’t come early – Albert already knew, practically by heart, everything his uncle said to him over and over again – “If I don’t arrive early, the merchants who bring the fruits and vegetables and bill me only at the end of the month, they don’t care at all, they dump the crates outside, in front of the entrance, as if they’re dumping garbage, ruining the merchandise.”

“It’s age,” laughs his wife, Alice, to Albert at Friday evening dinner to which he’s always invited but doesn’t always come, and bends over her husband who’s seated at the head of the table, a shiny white velvet skullcap on his head for the Sabbath, and kisses him lightly on his weary forehead, “That’s why you get up so early, and if you didn’t argue so much with the suppliers, *chérie*, you’d sleep better at night,” she says to him scathingly, turns and moves to the kitchen. Mordukh’s eyes followed her retreating back. Alice treats him

with the affection a woman feels for a man whose better days are behind him and who must make him face that fact. For a moment Mordukh appears to recall Alice's once-lovely body, her breasts once firm and high but now, what can you do, soft and limp from all the breast-feeding and the years, her waist now thickened, and he sighed and his eyes dimmed.

Toward evening, shortly before closing the shop, his uncle said, as if the subject hadn't yet been exhausted, "To tell you the truth, I get here early in the morning also because of these miserable homeless people who'd rather live like dogs than work," who swoop down on his produce if there's no one at the entrance to the store. Especially Jean-Luc, the crook who lives no more than five meters from the shop, right on the Metro's ventilation grate, yes, him, who's usually dressed in clean clothes, the devil knows where he gets them or who does his laundry.

Albert already knows who Jean-Luc is. That bastard keeps waiting for a moment of inattention and then grabs a small tomato, pops it whole into his mouth, almost choking before he retreats, or suddenly appears without warning to scoop up a handful of berries, which are among the most profitable items, stuffing the plunder into his reddening mouth as he flees. Occasionally he attempts what are intended to be sophisticated maneuvers that are even more pitiful.

"I have no idea where they're all coming from lately, all these street people," cries his uncle, "creeping on all fours like hyenas scenting a carcass."

He hadn't realized Albert had tuned out, stopped listening. Perhaps it was because of the impression the moment had made on him that warm evening when he passed Jean-Luc's usual spot on his way to the post office to buy envelopes and stamps. He was very surprised to see not only Jean-Luc's wooden crate – on which he always sat – pushed against the wall, but another crate, upturned as well, and a small girl, perhaps ten years old, perhaps a little younger, seated on it, leaning slightly. Her short, tangled hair

covered her ears, and had she not been dressed in a flowered blue dress whose sleeves had once been puffy she might have been mistaken for a boy. The girl extended her hand just as Jean-Luc did, holding out a cracked styrofoam cup. He'd never seen her before. Her face was long, like Jean-Luc's, her chin pointed like his. For a moment they resembled a teacher and his pupil or a man and his dog. Albert still wonders whether the girl is the homeless man's sister or his daughter, and why he had never seen her; and whether from now on, if he drops a coin in Jean-Luc's styrofoam cup, he'll have to add one for the girl. And he recalled, clearly, the strange look Jean-Luc gave him when he walked by them, which had only one meaning: an indecipherable glimpse of victory.

"Finish sweeping," called his uncle, "then move the two crates with rotten produce to the back, to the storeroom. We'll put them out towards evening, as usual."

It was already almost evening. Albert gathered his strength for a final effort. He was seething within, on the verge of rebellion: his uncle works him too hard. Once he'd said he was tired, couldn't do any more, was even a little fed up, and Mordukh, who'd been perturbed and was in a bad mood, glanced at him bitterly and replied derisively.

Albert swept the floor with measured movements. They'll never get rid of the dust. It penetrates the cracks and openings. He'd realized it was the be-all and the end-all and everything in-between, the sum of his existence, devoted to stubbornly repelling the unconquerable dust, thrusting it back.

For a number of weeks his uncle has been receiving too much damaged merchandise from his suppliers – from two in particular – and he's had to discard it immediately or to place some of the crates at the entrance to return to them and then spend time arguing with them loudly, endlessly. He no longer has the strength to argue with them. Instead he wonders whether it might not be worth waking up even earlier in the morning to arrive before the suppliers, and continues to invent new ways to sell the damaged produce for the price of fresh merchandise. For example, he places the older produce in the top left-hand corner of the crate. He taught Albert to sell it first to casual shoppers who aren't

likely to return the next day to complain, to fill up their bags. But for regular customers he's to mix produce from the left-hand corner with that from the right. *Madame*, for example, who always shops for vegetables dressed in ostentatious elegance, as if on her way to the opera, at least, and mutters under her breath converting the price from euros to francs, or Madame Cohen, white-haired, who also knows his aunt Alice, and many more customers like them who've been shopping there for years. Mordukh's manipulations don't always succeed. Some of his customers aren't embarrassed to return to the store with a bag whose bottom has been purpled by rotting blueberries which look like infected wounds, even though his uncle rolls his eyes righteously each time as if to himself, ignores the insult and denies vigorously, ingratiatingly, waving his hands in disbelief to emphasize his words, the possibility the fruit could have been in such terrible condition when it was purchased from him. Sometimes he's right. Sometimes his uncle would tell him funny stories about his customers, but regarding Madame Bersailles, who was, in Albert's opinion, the haughtiest and most malicious of the customers, he hadn't much to say. Madame Bersailles visits the store once a week, and when she arrives wafting a trail of exquisite perfume behind her she lingers for a long time near the white peaches, or near the Belgian pears, as if she'd expressly put time aside to carefully examine Levy's produce, sniff it, feel the items one by one with thin, pale fingers even though she's well aware he doesn't like shoppers touching his merchandise. His uncle watches his produce longingly but doesn't reproach her: not only because doing so would violate the local norms of courtesy he'd grasped after living here for many years and because he's learned how to behave, but also because she buys mounds of produce, as he said after she'd paid and left. Once a week Madame Bersailles buys about as much fruit and vegetables as will fit into her huge straw market basket.

That's good money, Albert thought.

When Madame Bersailles finishes shopping and pays, his uncle mutters inaudibly beneath his luxurious mustache, wipes his hands attentively on the apron tied around his waist, removes it, hangs it on a peg, picks up the basket in his two, work-hardened hands

and, passing Albert, looks at him as if to say, What can I do? Keep an eye on the register until I return.

His uncle left, his face reddening with effort. Albert placed a stack of new paper bags by the cash register and set a small metal weight on it. Last time the wind had blown them away.