

Hajar BALI  
A story and a play

## LOST PUPPIES

Remember that they met on a dance floor at the Sheraton, and how different they were, who could imagine that they would take the high road together for any length of time. It was by chance—like most of the significant events in our lives—that Malika went to a nightclub for the first time in her life, at the age of twenty, yes twenty. She knew how to dance. Every morning she did a few steps in front of the mirror, only to be teased by her little brother: look at the little puppy raising her paw to pee was how he put it, just as she was feeling her most graceful repeating the famous arabesque that her math teacher had taught her. When they finished their math lessons—to her relief and probably to the math teacher's as well—they poured themselves cups of café au lait prepared by her mother who was fond of saying that a coffee and a snack are good for you (her high school exams were coming up, the finals, and you have to pass them, Maly, we've sacrificed enough for you). Her math teacher would take off her shoes, lift her skirt and dance, to encourage Malika. It's therapy, she would say. Relax, you'll grow wings, dancing is like love, it opens the eyes and the mind.

She has never been to a nightclub. Mehdi insisted that she come with him to the Sheraton. For once, her parents said nothing. Although silence does not mean consent, Mehdi took theirs as signifying the affirmative. After all, they're cousins, like brother and sister since the beginning of time. And the high school diploma, even at twenty, calls for celebration. He takes Malika along and confides that they have a date with a very handsome guy. Malika is Mehdi's cover, her heart is throbbing, she'll be with people who are used to dancing in public. How will I shape up, me? Don't worry, Mehdi says, I'll show you. Sometimes all you have to do is say 'I know that number.' You know all the latest hits, don't you? Of course, and they break into song as they walk along the street. You're beautiful, and furthermore, a size 8. The girls will be jealous. And the guys? Malika has no idea. At school they pay no attention to her. She still isn't allowed to wear stockings or a bra, her mother, duty-bound, is determined to instill the puritan principles she herself had been subjected to. Malika is but a girl despite her twenty years of existence. She attracts no special attention and in class speaks to few.

She knows instinctively that in this curiously impersonal place, anything can happen, she who has never believed in fairy tales.

A crazy world. Normal, it's a Thursday night. Mehdi leads her onto the dance floor. She's embarrassed by the way he shakes his body and by the Hawaiian shirt he's wearing. Then he disappears with his buddies, leaving her by herself, the bastard.

Seif is there, of course. We had known he would be. It was even written that they would meet there. On the dance floor. He seems to know his way around even though he doesn't speak to anyone. In any event, no one talks, they all have a superior air. Seif dances beautifully. She watches him, that strange individual with the slicked-down hair, not really her style but handsome, so very handsome!

How is it possible? Seif feels her gaze, the way she looks at him, so concentrated, and he smiles, his eyes lowered in the conventional way, strict, with respect. The girl is staring at

him! Not bad but a little childish. She has the look of a classical dancer, her steps resemble a puppy's, but she knows all the music. They connect throughout the evening without, at any moment, seeming to see each other. Or without having met. Like puppies, they feel each other's presence.

When Malika and Mehdi arrive back in the neighborhood late that night, they find it in turmoil: the police are taking away the body of the auto mechanic, his wife is screaming in their ground-floor apartment, poor woman Malika thinks, she never leaves the house, no one knows her. Everyone always imagined her there, behind the curtain, because of the yelling all week long and the jerry-cans thrown from the balcony, not really a balcony but rather a large rectangular window at ground level where she can be seen washing the floors with bleach, hysterically, ritually, in the smallest apartment of the building, formerly the super's but now the property of this sad closeted couple, obviously no longer speaking to each other since the death of their only son at the age of eighteen. Malika's mother signals her to come inside quickly, dissimulating with difficulty her uneasiness at the sight of her neighbors so delighted to see the girl coming home late and already enjoying tomorrow's gossiping. The police say they'll be back. There's probably something suspicious about the death, it will require an autopsy, even an investigation, the body was found lying in front of their door, though no one saw what happened.

The next day she goes to the market. She leaves home practically in her pajamas (they're the pants that she wears around the house covered with spots of bleach, the dirty clogs for taking out the garbage, in addition to her father's out-sized shirt). She thinks of the poor auto mechanic, not as poor as that say the neighbors this morning. He would have been in his garage, like every other morning, a vulgar man, may God look upon him with kindness nonetheless. He would survey all the comings and goings, look up and down at the bodies of the women passing by. For the Meissonier market, you have to cross rue Didouche. She speeds up, sticks close to the walls of the buildings and suddenly sees him. He's wearing his Friday gandoura, his hair is soft, not shiny, he's hardly recognizable but it's him. He's heading for the mosque. Is it by chance?

That's how it happened, like that. Who spoke first? Neither of us remember, nor how we've managed to stay together. It's been two years, almost three.

Briefly, this is how it went: we would meet at the tea salon, detestable place where we would sit in huge chairs in front of large tables, all lined up like upright porcelain dolls so that everyone can watch everyone else. The waiter, suspicious and disdainful, invariably imposes two pastries that everyone feels obliged to finish, even if it makes them sick. Finally, we abandon the morbid tea salons for smelly movie houses. We hold hands not daring to kiss, fearful to be seen there with couples more experienced in the art of a quick pass, raw, trivializing the fragile act. We likened it to replacing a crystal vase with a plastic recipient, perhaps more resistant, more useful but so unworthy.

She admitted, even then, what she considered Seif's little foibles, actually vices when looked at from the point of view of any honest, well brought-up citizen. She accepted them with secret pleasure, with Seif she was discovering what real life is about, she was exalted by so much courage and the sharp feeling of freedom she'd known only in books, like Portus defying the cavalry...

*One day, Seif suggests they go for a ride with his best friend Ali, known as Marco because he had spent three months in England before being deported. Marco was short for Maricani. His*

buddies gave him the nickname because he managed a few words of English and always wore dark glasses with stems decorated with the American flag. That England and the United States are two very distinct countries, it isn't sure that Marco whose crass ignorance equals only that of his gall, was informed of the fact or that, if he were, would be bothered by it. No one in his entourage seemed troubled by this small detail.

Since that ride in Marco's Maruti, Seif has relaxed, has let himself go one might say. He talks non-stop about his taste for petty larceny, his modest background, his time in prison, his little sister carried away by the waters during the floods in Bab-el-Oued, his inconsolable mother, his father guilty of involvement in the human kidney trade.

It is tempting to say that even in love, wildly in love, these two people had nothing in common. Young as she was, but twenty nevertheless, she had read much of what should be read. She had met interesting people, had discovered good books and films in this city with its chance culture that allows one to come into contact with a remarkable number of philosophers, poets, musicians, people Malika was proud to know and hoped to have Seif meet so that he might realize the pleasure of that sort of awareness, of knowledge, comforting and fragile at the same time it has to be said. Seif's knowledge of people was both sketchy and exact. He was aware of the fact that Malika was very different from himself and from everyone he had encountered up until then, but he was also convinced that for each of them their couple was the right answer to their indiscriminate groping.

She never admits to her parents, or rather to her mother, especially to her mother whom she has always known to be the only person capable of forcing her father, a man particularly weak and withdrawn, to make decisions, this strange love that devours her, even today when it's over, her astonishment that she was capable of loving everything about Seif. Her mother, no fool and worried, covered for her daughter's outings, in the hope that she would marry and satisfy that purely maternal reasoning that decrees shame on you if any of your girls remain single. She had three girls. This exemplary woman in her determination to see Malika wed, accepted that her daughter come home later and later and that she spend more and more nights at a classmate's who has suddenly become her very close friend. It was even preferable, she would say, that after a certain hour she not come home at all. Her mother did not particularly appreciate her neighbors' sarcasm, like the famous night the auto mechanic died, his wife screaming and the police promising to come back. Poor woman, after losing her son so young, had closed herself in, refusing to speak, cloistered in the dark little apartment, annihilating herself in continual genuflection on her prayer rug, or so everyone imagined (no one actually knew much about her). There lay one of the explanations for the fact that the dead man was so...how to put it?...so insistent with every woman whose path he crossed, was openly a womanizer, bringing around his various girlfriends for all to see, each one younger than the last. It was certain, according to the confidential report established by the agent in charge of the inquiry, that one of his "girls" had killed him, money being the motive. The agent had rounded up a number of prostitutes and regularly visited the poor widow who was losing patience with the investigation and kept informed one of her neighbors who had managed to become her confidant, establishing a kind of headquarters in her apartment from which flowed all the news about the affair that would then be dragged over in the various coffee klatches. A man shunned doesn't complain openly. A man shunned looks elsewhere and in today's world young uneducated girls are willing to take him on. That's what was being said in the building. The screams of the widow lasted several days, then gave way to a form of resignation, followed by a kind of euphoria that fostered the speculation (and malicious gossip) that she had

become a merry widow, too merry, and was seen as shameful, taking into account the memory of the deceased, certainly not someone exemplary however unlucky he had been. She had in fact begun to sit out on the balcony and stop passersby in the strangest manner, rather vulgar it must be said. She was actually soliciting! Contacted by her neighbors, the police came around one night. In the end she was no longer spied upon, people got used to her continual presence at the window, the doctor told everyone to ignore her, these are things that will not endure for long for a woman her age (it is presumed that he had a precise idea of the 'things' in question involving the demented woman).

Marco is driving fast along the highway, windows wide open, telling us stories of his gang life. Malika, whipped by the wind, sullen, is sitting in the back seat as is expected of her. She still doesn't understand how she can be so deeply in love with Seif, a tramp her mother would say: he quit school young and only survives thanks to odd jobs. Worse, the only thing that interests him is that detestable 'chaabi' music, so ridiculously moralizing, which doesn't stop him, however, from committing petty robberies with Marco. A follow-up to his bragging would come about a few minutes later, on their return to town.

For the amusement of Malika, whom they observe furtively, somewhat anxiously, waiting for her to smile, to relax finally, Marco slows down, draws up close to a man selling tobacco. Seif extends his arm and grabs two packs of cigarettes as the car revs up and takes off chased for a few feet by the furious vendor. They break out laughing, Seif and Malika look at each other, it's a happy camper she sees in front of her, surprised once again that she can be so much in love.

The time has come to be open, so hand in hand they confront people on the street, fellow students, the little brother, but not her parents. For two years now they have been wandering around the city in a narrowly delimited area from the café to the movie theatre (they still go there when the apartment is not available) to the dusty pad of a pal whom she has never met but where they discover each other with fear and desire, committing the irremediable original sin. That night they are both exactly twenty-two years old, insatiable and delirious. Much later, as they sleep, she acknowledges her happiness contemplating his strong back as well as her dependence on him, promising herself, with already creeping nostalgia, that she will never forget they have belonged to each other, totally. She even has a thought for the auto mechanic's wife, wondering if that woman has ever known a love of such force?

*At a bar in the center of town, Le Trou, they meet a man, or rather remark the presence of a man.* Seif introduces Malika to Le Trou, a small bar, dark, smoke-filled and windowless, beer for only 150 dinars, pleasant, good atmosphere, canned music and where Marco, having become their best buddy, is an habitué. She who has never tasted an alcoholic beverage, who has never entered this kind of place (of eternal damnation her mother would have said) lets herself be conducted there with the feeling that she has broken a nonsensical law, her attitude evolving from the unbelievable daring that the man alongside her engenders. She feels she's grown wings and is ready to confront life, finally. It has been so easy!

At Le Trou, they meet lots of people, make discoveries: some are more lost than they are, from the cop in civilian clothes to the morning TV host, the ruined bookseller, the flighty journalist and others, they experience a kind of forced conviviality, people exhibiting their late night personalities, sublimated, like the schizophrenic's, during the long, harassing day or, on the other hand, their ordinariness.

We meet this man and are struck by how strange he is without being able to say what exactly is so strange about him. Alone, silent, potbellied, without any class the math teacher would have said, constantly making notes on a pad. Was he a writer? a journalist? a poet? No one knew. What is certain is that he's imposing! That's for sure! Even Marco, usually so voluble and talkative (he doesn't hesitate to address newcomers engaging them in conversation and who in turn need no prodding to talk about themselves with stories probably uplifted from others, before offering the next round, then vomiting in the toilets that Boualem the owner of Le Trou maintains in putrid condition, admitting he does so in order to discourage those who spend too much time in a bathroom that only accepts liquid commissions or a few cigarette butts or bits of food, limited, of course, by the vomiting) so even Marco lowers his voice and looks at this man in the well-tailored suit with deference and admiration. My God! He whispers to his friends gesturing with his eyes in the man's direction.

With the drinking, however, the old habits return and the noise level increases. The silent imposing presence of the man is forgotten or, rather, relegated to the back of people's minds as something disquieting that shouldn't be ignored, that should be taken seriously, a remarkable presence, admirable even: like the Lord's eye whose judgment has no immediate effect, that allows humanity's arrogance to survive, letting deplorable lies make the rounds, but always there! Present nonetheless, like longing or the memory of old treachery that can raise its head at any moment of one's existence, with which you have to count. It's never completely forgotten. That's it, yes, never.

The man has also become a habitu  of the place, pleasant, smiling but always silent, until one night when he sits down next to Marco and two of his cohorts, changing the usual order of events in which the promiscuity of the cocktail hour takes place. He leans towards Marco and begins a long monologue, his first spoken words. Strange words, mysterious, is what they say after he leaves. But in fact, were they? Or was it the effect of the contrast that this unexpected outpouring produced following the silence they had become accustomed to? Finally, going back over it, silence is perhaps more noble (even for idiots) than the spoken word, however brilliant. It's as though the silent ones show proof of resistance to the social-climbing vanity of blabbers ever more numerous and insistent. In truth, you might say, Marco was happy to have been the chosen one, the person destined to receive the man's precious discourse.

Marco, delighted with the circumstances, makes the introductions and offers the first round of drinks. The man introduces himself, in a straightforward way: Si Beddar, food wholesaler. Not very convincing, even disappointing but no one reacts, and he's clever or intelligent enough to go on from there, explaining how he had fought the colonialists alongside the great Ben M'hidi in the Casbah, the arms hideouts, etc. Malika calculates his age mentally and figures he's in his sixties though he doesn't look it, for her he's an outright liar. Suddenly he asks if "the girl" knows how to drive. He quickly explains that he's looking for recruits for some easy though risky work that could be highly profitable for all three of them. In a way, it was highly profitable, she recalls bitterly today.

*You know, it doesn't mean that much to me,* Marco comments in English, signifying that he isn't interested, all the while measuring the effect of his words, extracted from a song he's heard on the radio, even though he's disappointed that having sacrificed his curiosity for the desire to display his linguistic prowess, his clever remark is taken as a refusal of the man's offer. The man gets up and without acknowledging them leaves.

After that, we never saw the man again and our would-be thugs whose curiosity remained unsatisfied began speculating, discussing, hoping. Seif held against Marco his abrupt refusal of a proposition that no one knew the content of. In his defense, Marco described 'Si' Beddar as fishy, hadn't they seen with what diffidence Smain the cop greeted him and then hurried out? He didn't want this gentleman who took upon himself to use the venerable 'Si' to think that he could do anything he wanted and that we had to put our availability on display! They came back to the subject every time they got together but in fact had only one desire: to meet him again and this time to find out what his project was about. Malika hadn't liked the man with the darting eyes who refused to address her by name. He's just playing the macho, you're used to that, no? Seif's rough remark startled her, even though she more or less agreed with him. Even so...

*Days pass, Malika and Seif go less to Le Trou which seems duller, less inviting, the clientele's good humor having somehow been stricken. A wave of disquietude comes over them--the entire country is susceptible to it-- with the summer heat waves, an inexplicable sadness, a form of weighty impotency bears down upon them, as though it were impossible to be carefree again, as if nothing in the future would be cause for laughter or derision, qualities the inhabitants of the city are known for. Bars were tolerated less and less, becoming places of dispute where men are attacked in their pride and are subjected to a form of castration inflicted by a ruling class tied to an outmoded wartime discourse as if a planetary threat had to be warded off by the champions of terrorist decoding.*

One evening, tired of wandering around and downing cups of coffee, they return to Boualem's where they find Marco at his post, quiet, taciturn. *Sorry boy, I've had it with this miserable life, I have to get out of here. I don't even have enough to keep my old man in cigarettes, I'm in debt here and don't know what to do. We are all obviously in a bad way.* They bring up 'Si' somebody again, yes Beddar, that's it. Malika repeats her lack of confidence in him, Seif maladroitly, a little annoyed with having to drag the girl around all day long, lets the idea slowly germinate of getting rid of her, not because he doesn't love her anymore but simply because it's becoming too difficult, too heavy a burden, a burden of love but a burden nevertheless, and there was nothing to be done, nowhere to go, no possibility of getting married. How? With what? To go live with his parents? Don't even think of it! All these thoughts which he keeps to himself shove his bad humor to the surface; roughly, he withdraws his hand from the more fragile one that falls, rejected, onto the table.

At that moment the man appears at the door, the only opening of Le Trou, Malika's slightly clouded eyes feel they're seeing a ghost, possibly the materialization of her thoughts. Marco, suddenly jovial, signals to the man to join them: I swear he heard me! Si Beddar sits down and takes up the conversation begun several weeks earlier as if there had been no hiatus. It was time to go forward with their business, it was obvious that our three friends were at wit's end and Beddar was aware of it. It's very simple, he explains, I will set up a fake company. Don't worry, you'll only have to come by... Malika, deep in her own thoughts, was no longer listening. Seif had been cold, nasty, her eyes were beginning to open, observing that he had shown no desire to protect her, to keep her at a distance from this man and his dirty business, a dangerous affair, clearly illegal. It was not that illegality troubled her, she felt, like Seif and Marco, that she too was an outlaw; maybe that was what she actually appreciated, convinced that it had nothing to do with lack of courage like the faint-hearted who are said to be honest people or others, the well-off, who are not affected by the laws. This man was conning them, she was sure of it. And since they needed a driver, they decided it would be her and Seif hadn't reacted, didn't even hesitate. He accepted to engage Malika

in an affair she disapproved of as if suddenly he had nothing to offer, placing their destiny in the hands of someone unknown, as if this Si Beddar had suddenly developed an indisputable ascendancy over Seif (in truth, Seif and Marco accepted instinctively to come under his orders, something they were incapable of explaining to a woman for it was men's business). She was alarmed. Her thoughts forced her to be apprehensive, she was afraid for her only treasure, Seif, and tried to think back to that first sight at the Sheraton, two years ago and their famous first night in the tattered apartment on rue Burdeau. She began to recoil. She was now discovering, not yet very clearly, becoming lucid with new insight that nothing in her life would ever attain the perfection of those moments, the Sheraton moment, the absence of calculation, their justifiable pride in being two against the world.

The man left quickly. He gave them an address where to meet. For the rest, the details of the operation, they would have to go elsewhere and visit the locale. He winked at Seif who winked back laughing, mafia-like she thought not with stupor but with a suggestion of mockery, that's what hurt most since it was clear to everyone that mockery is the first stop on the road to all-powerful and glacial indifference. That, in reality, was what stupefied her, the inexorable sentimental reversal that she persisted in believing was only transitory.

They agreed to meet in Sidi Yahia at a popular café that the man said was chic, a neighborhood inundated with boutiques displaying luxury goods at every level, ugly buildings like scars in the middle of the face during the first stages of a face-lift. They followed Si Beddar's plan. They headed for the fortified villas in Hydra. To a bourgeois café belonging, it was said, to someone from Lebanon. Everyone spoke French. Our three cohorts, intimidated, waited patiently. Marco made a display of his new cell phone, stolen the evening before from a woman driving with her windows down, unthinking woman in the middle of rue Tanger. He had run to the Tantonville to buy a new memory chip at Madani's who at the same time tried to sell him dollars. Seif nodded to him to shut up, Beddar was coming. So what? We can talk, can't we? Malika protested, although she knew without a doubt—how to say it—that this was another person. Seif was no longer the same man.

In point of fact, neither Seif nor Malika had changed, in the real sense of the term. They were simply waking up to reality, the hell that has become clear, that everyone gets to see one day, like when you wake up horrified and don't want to get out of bed, when you realize that you won't become the hero of any transcendent adventure story, when you acknowledge that the life you dreamed of was something else and will never be, no never. Beddar, deadly serious, exposes his plan, anxious to impress on them the solemnity of the moment but annoyed by the very frank attitude of the girl whom he had already decided does not fit the role cut out for her, like when an unfortunate alliance disturbs the calculations of familiar clans. Everything had been envisaged, arranged, minutely. 'The girl' does she know how to drive? She answers "no" offering to be their fictive secretary if they want, offer that leaves them cold. No one is listening to her.

That night, Malika decides to go home. She feels an irresistible need to be with her family, like doing her ablutions, to purify herself before and after a reprehensible act. She entertains a desire for suicide or murder, imagines throwing herself into a ravine, remembering that she had always dreamed of that kind of suicide, a dream, thinking back, with something delectable about it.

The crazy woman was on her balcony, smiling at her.

It was then that Malika read the woman's thoughts, discovering that it was definitely not, as everyone imagined, some ordinary false blond and mistress of the auto mechanic who had bewitched him and somehow managed something with drugs in his coffee or in his whisky, but this frail innocent woman who had decided, like one decides to kill oneself, to put an end to the most concrete of her nightmares. No one had suspected that crazy woman because no one wanted to see or read clearly inside themselves.

*There was no air despite the late hour. Malika drove in silence.* She was thinking about that decidedly detestable man who avoided looking her in the eye, who was the cause of their first argument, earlier, with Seif. A very serious argument, to her mind, which put in question their couple, not a conjugal dispute that may be irritating or that forces you to look for the motivation behind your anger and then melts away slowly like life, moved along by the force of habit or what is called love. Marco implored them to go argue elsewhere and even lent them his car.

It was as though he had read their thoughts, he pressed her shoulder gently and asked her to drive out to the left, Maly. They stopped the car, turned off the lights in front of a high wall, at an equal distance from two police barrages, in total darkness, it was a moonless night. The high plastered wall protected a house but they were able to perceive the tops of two tall palm trees thanks to some faint lighting. The wind came up, the branches of the trees were moving back and forth, they could feel the depth of the garden behind the wall. An olive tree had injured the wall, had broken through it, planting itself in the street with the help of its many roots. It was almost an idyllic moment, she remembered.

Their goodbyes were miserable, almost silent, brief, too brief. He dared reproach her for her lack of femininity, her detachment. He didn't even find it out of place to defend Si Beddar and held it against her to have lied pretending that she didn't know how to drive, before becoming abruptly silent on registering the hard indifference Malika's face bared, or was it hate he saw? The sweat on his back stiffened. They drove off finally. There was nothing else to do.

At the barrage, there was no one. She drove the car home, got out without a word. Seif took the wheel of the Maruti, he was numb but told himself that he had to return the car to Marco, that he would just stop for a couple of beers and go home.

She turned, he did too, looking backward with his very soul but neither could see the other in the darkness of the moonless night, the only streetlight that normally lit up the entrance to the building and the path having decided at that precise moment to close down. The widow and Malika exchanged a look that on the surface appeared meaningless, the tires of the car screeched on turning the corner.

*She no longer went out of the house, didn't turn up for classes, which wasn't new but was now deliberate, to be seen openly and understood by her mother and the rest of the family.* Indifferent to the demanding looks of those close to her who would finally understand that something terrible had happened, something incomprehensible like an immense tragedy. She stopped answering Seif's calls which gradually became less frequent, a little too soon to her taste, but she wasn't overly saddened by it. On occasion she thought about Marco, his desire to return to England, his feeling of imprisonment in this horrendous country. And then, one night, she decided to go out. Her feet led her to Le Trou, despite herself or maybe because of herself.



The place had been completely transformed. Clean, soft lights, a wall television set playing a movie, clients quiet, their eyes on the screen. The toilets had been repaired. Was it so different or had she changed? You see, whispered Seif coming up softly behind her, everything is clean now, shiny. Her heart jumped unexpectedly, she looked at him frankly and greeted him cordially, all the while preparing to retreat. He held her back, just to talk he said.

He told her about his meanderings, always the same, the ghastly foul play on the part of the man called Si Beddar, he reproached her for her silence, they laughed over some of their memories. Then she left to return to her own world, not so exciting as that, not so joyful, not so different finally.

AWAKENING AND BIRDFLIGHT  
(Extracts)

**Play in one act, four scenes**

*Cast of characters: an unemotional man, blasé, his scatter-brained wife and his bitter, senile father. Their life seems joyless: ritual of meals, omnipresence of television, all of them enclosed in their individual monologues, repetitious daily gestures, boredom...*

*In the middle of the night, intruders, looking for a safe, interrupt the life of this humdrum family.*

*The action takes place in the living room of the apartment.*

Cast of characters:

M: the mother

F: the father

G: the grandfather

F, F2, F3: three men named Farid

**SCENE 2**

*F, the father arrives, out-of-breath. He gives M a quick hug, glances at G.*

F, He's asleep?

M, *(continues listening to a speech broadcast on TV)* Yes, I think so.

*F pours himself some coffee.*

F, What a nightmare! I wasn't able to make the signal light work. It was beyond me... So, of course, horns started honking all around. It was awful! *(pointing to the TV)* All those people telling us what to do! Can't you put something else on?

M, *(paying no attention)* Hmm?

F, Switch to another channel! Isn't there a film?

*No reply. He sighs.*

F, Near the palm tree, there was an asshole who ran into me. He didn't want to report it. And I didn't insist. I was sick of it all by then.

*Silence.*

VIDEO 4: *cat eating lunch.*

M, I didn't make anything for dinner, there was nothing in the frig.

F, You don't find that cruel? Even violent? That continual ticktock of the signal light! Listen, I don't know how I got through the day. And the others, behind me, they never stopped!

M, There's some soup left but there's no bread.

*M gets up and goes out.*

*In the meantime, G picks up the remote control. He zaps, keeps coming back to the same speech, ends up turning the TV off.*

*M returns with a tray in her hands. She lays out dishes and a table cloth. G doesn't budge.*

*He turns the TV back on.*

VIDEO 5: *a boring scene in a movie like the one on the lake that's frozen-over in J. Jarmusch's film Stranger Than Paradise.*

*They eat in silence. M doesn't take her eyes off the TV.*

M, Wake him up. He has to eat something.

*F goes to wake his father, says there's soup on the table. G comes to slowly.*

G, It's you, my son? What time is it?

F, 9 o'clock. We're having dinner. Put your napkin on.

*He places the napkin around his neck.*

G, What did you do all day?

F, I worked, Dad. Eat.

G, And the little one? Any news?

*No reply. F has gone to sit down and is watching television.*

G, So that's it, you're working? All the better! It's about time!

F, Eat, Dad! Eat! It'll be cold. *(to himself)* I'm working for God's sake. Of course, I'm working!

*They eat in silence. G hums softly at times. He falls back to sleep. M clears the table and takes the tray away. The tablecloth is still on the safe. She comes back. Picks up her knitting.*

*The TV screen clouds over. M turns it off.*

M, *(sighing)* She'll be able to wear it cold winter nights.

*The two monologues of F and M begin simultaneously. F stops short when M says: "I'm dying for a coke." This must be heard distinctly. From time to time F zaps.*

### M's MONOLOGUE

*I spoke to our pet on the phone. Did I tell you?*

*She seems better. I told her what's happened to me, the tests and everything. She wants to come. I played it down. In any event, it's nothing serious. There's no reason for her to worry. She's so far away, the poor dear!*

....

*She wants to get married again.*

....

*It seems this one is nice, attentive. Who knows... She's never been discerning, the little dear. It's cold there, poor thing.*

....

*Imagine! My little Soussou has a new fiancé!*

....

*He's coming here, he'll be at our place at 8 o'clock on the 20<sup>th</sup>. When's that? (She looks at her watch) It's today! Oh my gosh but it's after 9. So either he'll be here any minute or he's coming tomorrow if it's too late for tonight.*

F's MONOLOGUE

A bunch of sheep!

....

Our pet! Let her come. I won't eat her. But I don't want her living at home anymore.

....

Especially if she has another boyfriend. I hope he's better than the other asshole.

....

What turns me off is that we do the same things over and over! Honk the horn, signal that we're turning, put on the lights in the tunnel! (He sighs.)

....

The car is the epitome of conformity!

....

*Mind you, I prefer he comes tomorrow. I could prepare something special. After all, he's our son too now!*

....

*I have to finish this sweater, she'll be needing it this winter, the little pet. Speaking of the cold, did you hear that the Benazis have all left for Canada? She'd had enough, Fafa, with all the gossip.*

*(in a confidential tone)*

*Can you imagine? She almost killed him! Mind you he deserved it: running around like that the bastard! No class! Even with the cleaning woman! I always thought he was a bad egg, he never looked straight at me when we talked. His eyes were always on my teats.*

....

*(She laughs.) And you, you didn't like it when I stared at his fly to make him feel uncomfortable...*

....

*But I knew what I was doing! You can be sure of that! A good-for-nothing who comes to my house with his wife and stares at my breasts. It's sick!*

....

*Even so, when I think about it, she almost killed him. The hatchet hit him just above his right eye. Oh boy! She marked him for life!*

*It's true though they never left each other.*

All the rest, all the dictators, it's always the same! It's revolting!

....

Just stop! Right there! In the middle of everything! Why not?

....

Why not just revolt!

....

It should happen more often, break with everything.

Become outlaws!

....

And why not? Why not me? Do something crazy? Right there, on the road?

....

And if a life can stop at any moment, why not a car?

....

Tomorrow, or the day after, I'll stop. Yes, I will.

....

If they start honking, I'll... I'll throw the keys into the ravine. (He laughs.) Huh, they'll think I'm crazy...

*Nevertheless, it's unbelievable! I'll never understand couples in this country.*

....

*I'm dying for a coke!*

....

*When all I want is to be able to decide for myself.*

*F goes out. We hear a metal door being opened, then closed and locked.*

M, In Canada anyway, they don't know anyone. They can always say that he fell on the staircase. Mind you, there are the Berouis, the Chafas, a lot of people there now. But it's a big country. An ice-bound desert. My poor little darling!

*She puts the TV on and watches in silence.*

*VIDEO 6: scene from a film of a place that's locked up like the gates in front of a prison, the one is the last scene of Antonioni's The Passenger, for example.*

*Sound of a metal door being opened, then closed and locked.*

*F enters with a bottle of coke in a plastic bag. He gets two glasses and fills them. They drink in silence as the final scene of The Passenger plays out on the screen. Then M gets up and stretches. She lays G down and covers him, murmurs 'Good night' and goes out. F is zapping again.*

*VIDEO 7: filmy curtains, noise suggesting erotic movements*

*Gradual downing of the lights. Total darkness. F turns off the TV and leaves the stage.*

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