POCKETFUL OF mint

CHRIS FAWCETT

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Chris Fawcett

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Contents

MAPS

MANUSCRIPT

MIDDLE EAST

802840AI (R02107) 10-01

★ National capital

⊙ District capital

Expressway

Road

Urban area

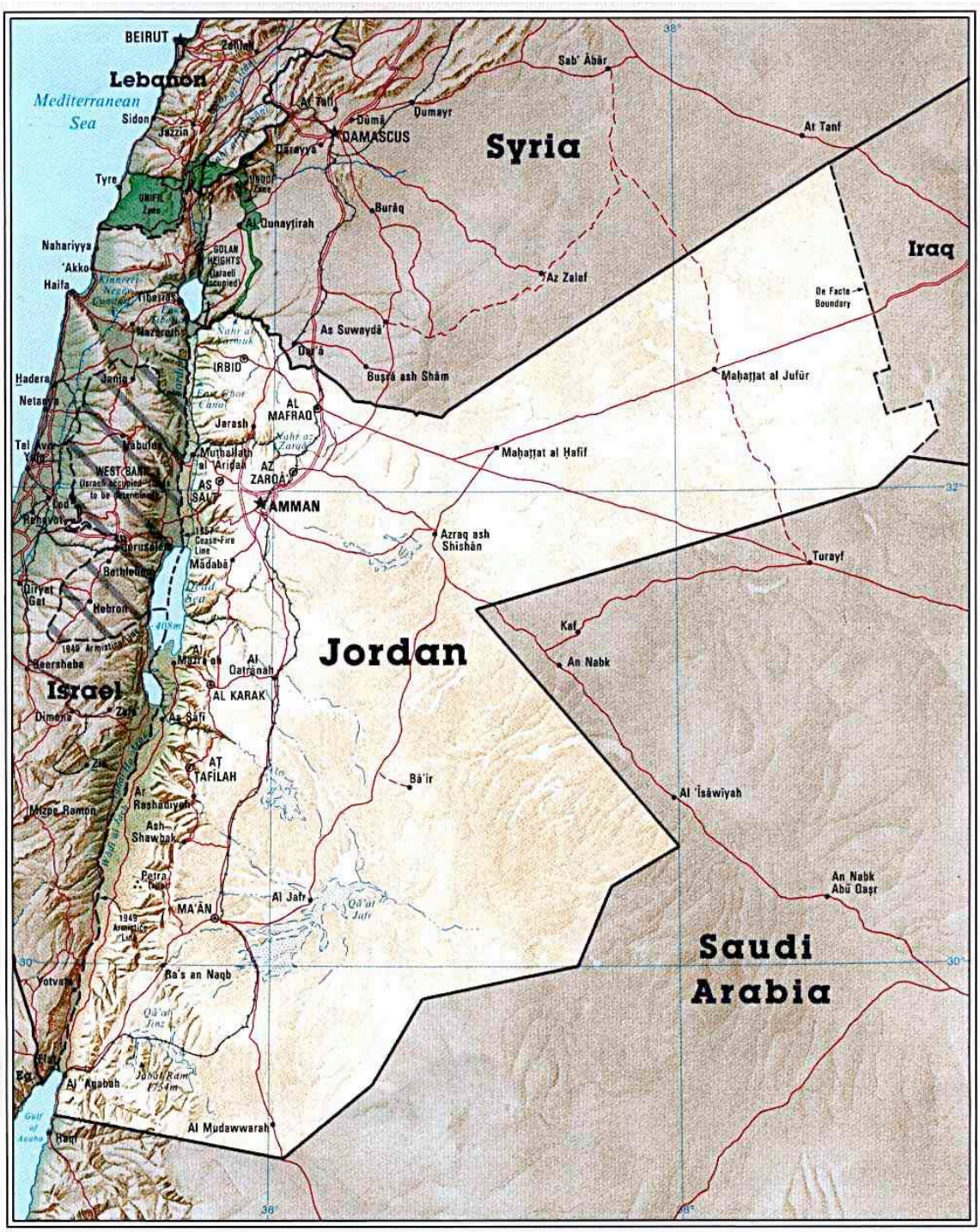
SCALE 1:1,100,000

0 10 20 30 Kilometers

0 10 20 300 Miles

Lambert Conformal Conic Projection, standard parallels 12°N and 38°N


Mediterranean Sea
Red Sea
Egypt
Libya
Sudan
Saudi Arabia
Israel
Jordan
CAIRO
ALEXANDRIA
MARSÁ MAṬRŪḤ
Tobruk
Bardīyah
As Sallūm
Al Jaghbūb
Siwah
Al 'Alamayn
DAMIETTA
PORT SAID
KAFR ASH SHAYKH
Al Maḥallah al Kubrá
AL MANṢŪRAH
ṬANṬA
SHIBĪN AL KAWM
BANHA
ZAQAZĪQ
ISMAILIA
Suez Canal
AL JĪZAH
Ḥulwān
SUEZ
AL FAYYŪM
BANĪ SUWAYF
Maghāghah
Al Bawīṭī
AL MINYĀ
Mallawī
Dayrūṭ
ASYŪṬ
Ṭimā
Ṭahṭā
SŪHĀJ
Jirjā
QINĀ
Nag' Hammādi
Luxor
Armant
AL KHĀRIJAH
Mūṭ
Bāris
Al Jawf
Al 'Uwaynāt
ASWAN
Aswan High Dam
Abū Sunbul
Lake Nasser
Lake Nubia
Wādī Ḥalfā'
Tropic of Cancer
Qattara Depression
Sinai Peninsula
Gulf of Suez
Gulf of Aqaba
AL'ARĪSH
GAZA STRIP
Gaza
Tel Aviv-Yafo
Jerusalem
WEST BANK
AMMAN
Beersheba
1949 Armistice Line
1967 Cease-Fire Line
Ṭurayf
An Nabk
Al Qaṭrānah
Ma'ān
An Nakhl
Eilat
Al 'Aqabah
Ḥaql
Al Bi'r
Tabūk
Al Qalībah
AT ṬUR
Ra's Ghārib
Sharm ash Shaykh
AL GHARDAQAH
Dubā
Būr Safājah
Al Quṣayr
Al Wajh
Yanbu' al Baḥr
Ra's Banās
Baranīs
Ḥala'ib
Ra's al Ḥadāribah
Administrative Boundary
SCALE 1:7,260,000
0 50 100 150 200 Kilometers
0 50 100 150 200 Miles
Lambert Conformal Conic Projection, standard parallels 12°N and 38°N
International boundary
National capital
Governorate capital
Railroad
Expressway
Road
Track



International boundary
National capital
Governorate capital
Railroad
Expressway
Road
Track

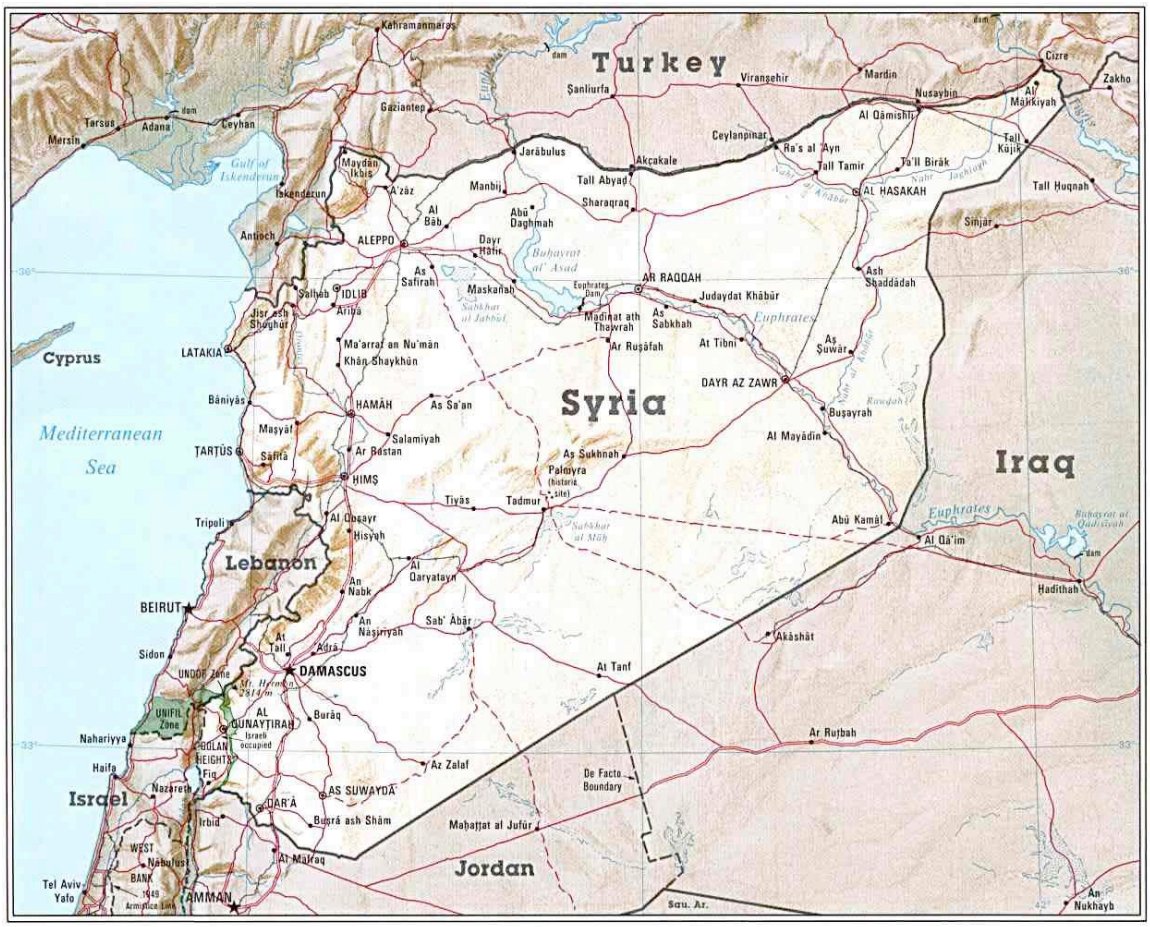
SCALE 1:2,720,000

0 25 50 75 Kilometers

0 25 50 75 Miles

Lambert Conformal Conic Projection, standard parallels 30°N and 36°N

The 1950 Israeli proclamation that Jerusalem be the national capital is not recognized by the United States Government.
Mediterranean Sea
Israel
Lebanon
Syria
Jordan
Egypt
Saudi Arabia
Sinai Peninsula
Galilee
Samaria
Judaea
Negev
GOLAN HEIGHTS (Israeli occupied)
WEST BANK (Israeli occupied-status to be determined)
GAZA STRIP (Israeli occupied-status to be determined)
UNDOF Zone
UNIFIL Zone
Dead Sea
-408m
Lake Tiberias
Gulf of Aqaba
Har Meron 1208m
1949 Armistice Line
1950 Armistice Line
Sidon
Jazzin
DAMASCUS
Darayya
Tyre
Qiryat Shemona
Al Qunaytirah
Aş Şanamayn
Nahariyya
'Akko
HAIFA
Qiryat Bialik
Tiberias
NAZARETH
'Afula
Irbid
Dar'a
Ar Ramtha
Hadera
Jenin
Netanya
Al Mafraq
Jarash
Ra'anana
Herzliyya
Az Zarqa'
TEL AVIV-YAFO
Bat Yam
Rishon LeZiyyon
Rehovot
Lod
RAMLA
As Salt
AMMAN
Ar Ruşayfah
Ashdod
JERUSALEM
Madaba
Ashqelon
Qiryat Gat
Bethlehem
Hebron
Khan Yunus
Gaza
BEERSHEBA
Al Mazra'ah
Al Qatranah
'Arad
Kinneret-Negev Conduit
Al 'Arish
Dimona
Al Karak
Yeroham
Oron
Abu 'Ujaylah
Nizzana
Zin
Aţ Ţafilah
Al Quşaymah
Mizpe Ramon
Bi'r Hasanah
Ma'an
Al Jafr
Al Kuntillah
Ra's an Naqb
An Nakhl
Yotvata
Ath Thamad
Elat
Taba
Al 'Aqabah
Al Mudawwarah
Haql
International boundary
National capital
District center
Railroad
Expressway
Road
Track
SCALE 1:2,075,000
0 20 40 60 Kilometers
0 20 40 60 Miles
Lambert Conformal Conic Projection, standard parallels 30°N and 36°N



International boundary
National capital
Province capital
Railroad
Expressway
Road
Track

SCALE 1:3,810,000

0 25 50 75 100 Kilometers

0 25 50 75 100 Miles

Lambert Conformal Conic Projection, standard parallels 12°N and 38°N


Syrian occupied
UNIFIL Zone
Israeli occupied
Mediterranean Sea
Lebanon
Syria
Israel
Buhayrat Qattinah
Sadd al Burj (dam)
Nahr al Kabir
Al Birah
Al Qubayyat
Halba
Al 'Abdah
Al Minyah
Al Mina'
TRIPOLI
Al Qusayr
Funaydiq
Nahr al Musa
Al Hirmil
Zgharta
Sir ad Dinniyah
Al Qa'
Shikka
Kusba
Sib'il
Ihdin
Jabal al Makmal 3087 m
Amyun
Orontes
Al Batrun
Al 'Ayn
Duma
Al 'Aqurah
Qartaba
Jubayl
Nahr Ibrahim
Ba'labakk
An Nabk
Juniyah
BEIRUT
Bikfayya
Brummana
BA'ABDA
ZAHLAH
Riyaq
Hammana
Shtawrah
'Alayh
Beka'a Valley
Al Biqa'
Ad Damur
Bayt ad Din
Anjar
Barja
Jubb Jannin
Dumayr
Nahr Barada
SIDON
Al Qir'awn
Sadd al Qir'awn (dam)
Ad Dimas
At Tall
'Adra
Duma
Jazzin
Az Zahrani
Hasbayya
DAMASCUS
Nahr Hasbani
Qatana
Darayya
An Nabatiyah at Tahta
Ansar
Marj'yun
Nahr al Litani
Tyre
UNIFIL Zone
Baniyas
Sa'sa'
UNDOF Zone
Tibnin
Hula
Qiryat Shemona
1949 Armistice Line
GOLAN HEIGHTS (Israeli occupied)
Buraq
An Naqurah
Bint Jubayl
Al Qunaytirah
Remaysh
As Sanamayn
Nahariyya
Zefat
Jordan
35°30'
36°00'
36°30'
34°30'
34°00'
33°30'
33°00'

International boundary
★ National capital
⊙ Governorate capital
Railroad
Expressway
Road
Urban area

SCALE 1:970,000

0 10 20 30 Kilometers

0 10 20 30 Miles

Lambert Conformal Conic Projection, standard parallels 30°N and 36°N

Letter to Sinai

I didn't learn much at school, though I really wanted to. Interesting things were not taught for fear they might be enjoyed, and subjects were ruined by devotion to their specifics. I didn't do much in this part of my life, other than dream about what I would do once it had ended. The dreams are mostly lost to me now, but the ones I remember came in geography class. The old school was well equipped in one department—maps. Those glossy, laminated maps that hung from ceiling to floor drew all of my attention at the precious times they were unfurled. Even as the stupendous litany was recited, I knew that the shapes and colours behind the man in the elbow-patched corduroy jacket represented fantastic lands full of things other than gross national products. The viridian pools of our jungles, the burnt-sienna stains of our deserts, the aquamarine wildernesses of our great oceans called out to me. I had to see them. I would see them.

And then, one dark day, my dog-eared atlas fell open on a page full of alluring place names and wrought with mountain ridges. 'Alexandria to Istanbul,' it called. It is often bad to have a plan, and especially so on holiday, but this one stuck. The thought of starting anywhere but Alexandria and ending anywhere but Istanbul became anathema. As with the best of plans, it went quickly awry: there are no flights to Alexandria from my side of the world; but from just across the aquamarine patch….

part 1

Journey

Valentine's Day

The carved prow lurches as I leap the last gulp of Mediterranean between me and Alexandria. In front and back, heads touch in glad thanks to the gained earth. The dank smell of the port hammer-blows into me—coriander and mint, tallow and sweat—wafting and weaving through close air, faces and colours pressing, pushing, pulling me into a swirl of disembarking masses. From above—towering minaret, black shade on too-blue sky—the call to prayer washes down… "Get up will ye, yer breakfast is half ruined."

I awake in blackened Belfast to the rancid waft of an Ulster fry. I hurry, but the dream hurries ahead of me. In the shower, I watch the deserts of Egypt gallop past; as I dress, the great cities of Cairo and Damascus fall before me; as I leap the stairs, the Orient Express pulls in to Belfast Central. Before this first, magical day is even begun, I am home to greet my friend with wild stories.

"What's yer big hurry?" says Wally. We eat heart-attack-on-a-plate, stiffened by mugs of thick tea, in silence, as morning greys the fogged-up windows of his little kitchen. There is much I shall miss, I realise almost too late. When the last of the lard is sopped from the plate, and our futures lie unheeded on mug bottoms, he looks at me, and I sense the word of advice forming.

"Wally, please."

"Just one thing," he says. "Just *one* thing. He pauses. I nod consent. "You are a gentleman and a scholar and a fine judge of whiskey…"

"Thank you."

"I'm not done. You are also an awful ejit, and I know these words will fall on deaf ears.

"But."

"Stay away from women with big feet."

I reproach him with a widened eye; but sitting here in now-blue dawn, I remember their long feet, the lanky feet of the women I liked more than they me, and leaving doubt to this frigid Valentine's morning, I consent again.

Fly against the sun, and a little south.
Sit high and spin the day quicker beneath.
Race through the noon and slip below evening.
Journey—a once-meaning of voyage between dawn and dusk—dislocates now.
No blending foot-tramped days in a flat world.
Come night, new stars shine, old ones wheel beyond the pole.
Too fast.

"Too many people in Cyprus!" says Lazarus the taxi driver, as we pull out of Larnica airport. There are too many Turks for his liking, perhaps. He used to live in the north, now the Turkish half of this divided island. "Too many hotels in Cyprus!" he continues, and there probably are. As memories of the civil war recede a generation, development advances, biting chunks from his beautiful island. "Too many tourists in Cyprus!" he continues, and I twinge with guilt. Of course, I am part of the problem, and must take some responsibility. "You stay Cyprus too many time?" And understanding comes at last. My English-as-a-second-language facility is engaged.

"No, Lazarus, I'm on my way to Alexandria. But I want to look around for a few days."

"Where go now?"

"I'm not sure, Lazarus." Stubbornness brought me this way. I might have flown directly to Cairo—but no, said the atlas. I must drift a little now to compensate.

"I go Nicosia. Want come?"

"Yes, Lazarus," I tell him, mouthing his name at every opportunity, "Nicosia is perfect."

"Turkish coffee, please," I ask the friendly waiter of a Nicosian street café not quite European, not quite anything else.

“Greek coffee?” he suggests, his broad smile flagging only briefly. The coffee is strong and delicate with a hint of nutmeg and cinnamon, and a powdery aftertaste that puts socks on your teeth. It tangs also of Asia: stone cisterns and no chlorine, just some bacteria I’d rather greet in a healthy now than in a weary later.

I hang my wee bag of summer clothes clear of the only-slightly-roachy floor of the Questhouse Gardenia as the air crispens and tee-shirts are swapped for down vests and sheepskin flying jackets. I am unprepared as usual; but Venus hangs over the island of Aphrodite this Valentine’s Evening, and I am happy. Searching out a place to dine, I see a modern city—not too strange to my eyes, not strange enough perhaps for my liking. The young prowl and stalk the night, the old watch café TVs and suck coffee through heroic moustaches.

I find a restaurant decorated in red plastic hearts, and already full—but for a last-minute cancellation mirroring my own. A table for two is stripped of a chair and place setting, and I am seated in a sea of happy couples, alone but for a vase of red carnations and a bottle of red wine. The band plays *Danny Boy*, and for a moment I waver. My Valentine sits a world away, but tonight of all nights, I refuse nostalgia. I fill a glass and chink the vase of flowers. “To you, my sweet.” She stares politely back through the candle flame, demurely flourishing her beauty. I am flattered to have such company. I quaff the wine posily, eyeing her over the rim. I should put up a little resistance.

“Sorry to interrupt you,” comes a voice very close to my ear, and I turn to find a beautiful woman in white lace crouching beside me. “Hi, I’m Daisy. Are you and your friend ready to order?” Her dark skin plunges into her neckline, where I cannot resist seeking it through layers of lace that confound my depth perception.

“Surprise us Daisy, if you would, we’re in no mood to choose.” The band shifts mood. A bouzouki clamours with a keen sense of discord or a fat finger—it is hard to tell. Folk music is faith. Every note is a resonance of the moment, not the scale; every beat is marksmanship on a synaptic level. Whatever, I am assaulted by the *Greekness* of it. Swapping Belfast for Nicosia in some few hours has not percolated to hypothalamus level.

“Here’s some meze to get along with,” says Daisy, laying out a row of delicacies; but too late the food, the wine has me; it glides down my throat in fragrant lumps, and demands company.

“May I have another of these?” I wave the bottle a little too much.

“Of course!” and she smiles to melt a heart. There is something in her form that locks my eye in its orbit. Is she flirting with me, I wonder, as she retreats? Never do I encounter romance on a trip, but I haul the expectation around and project it uselessly into every corner. Here she comes, smiling at me again, and I find myself lusting for the angles of her non-Euclidean geometry. She adds up to more than one-hundred-and-eighty degrees. She occupies four-dimensional space. Her perpendiculars curve to an unattainable infinity. “Dessert?” she enquires, filling my glass.

The wine roars red between my ears, as all around, the party swings on. Tables are pushed back. A cabaret singer takes the stage, and the room fills with fat, frilly sound, the floor with dancing couples. Daisy returns with honey pastries and coffee, then hand feeds me a banana. I stare at her shamelessly now as she plies the floor. Her Hellenic lips, when not forming rhetoric in the language of Sappho and Aristotle, seem to pout alarmingly at me. It’s the first day, and I want more. It’s unreasonable, but I want to bite and choke. I want to gag myself on a first, beautiful day; bark and howl at its closing; sink my dog-teeth into the moon and hold her fast in the false dawn. But I am hallucinating, possessed by Bacchus and Aphrodite. I must quit and get back to the hotel while I can still walk.

“What are you doing tomorrow night?” asks Daisy as she helps me into my coat.

“Nothing!”

“Would you like to meet?”

“Why not?” I say, trying to mask hysterical enthusiasm.

“Good. I would like to introduce you to my fiancé.”

Outside, the night air steadies me, and with blissful leaden limbs, I slip through the quiet streets and into my darkened hotel where even the roaches are asleep. This is still the first day. Travel, no drug so cheap nor so wonderful. Such a heady mix of expectation and nostalgia—and this is still the first day.

Roach Motel

"Excuse me," I ask a policeman with a topiary moustache. "Where is the Egyptian Embassy?"

"Walk this way for five hundred years," he replies, but the Egyptian embassy is close by, and a little Moroccan Arabic goes a long way.

"You are welcome to Egypt!" says the clerk, presiding with the air of a Grand Vizier over a fly-blown office. He stamps a visa into my passport.

"Al Hamdulilah," [Thanks be to God,] we tell each other.

That hurdle over, I breakfast outdoors in a warm but overcast midday. Lured by sizzling kebab smoke that whets hunger before fusing with the roaring pollution of the street, I take a seat on the quietist terrace I can find. The food is wonderful, but there is little peace to enjoy it. The town is poisoned by traffic: endlessly polite otherwise, Cypriots will run you down in their cars. When you step off the pavement because it's full of Land Cruisers, air horns jolt you back.

Out of the fuss of the main streets, I spend an afternoon walking the Green Line that divides Nicosia—similar in ways to the wall that divided Berlin, and those that still divide parts of Belfast. A fossilised front line, with sandbagged sniping points, barbed-wired berms, and bunker after derelict bunker, runs through the heart of the city. It remains, a high-water mark of intolerance and resentment, seemingly untouched since the last shots of the civil war were fired decades ago. I sit awhile inside one position commanding the view of a now-blocked main street—a short stretch of abandonment sprouting as green as its name, before resuming, Turkish, a hundred metres farther up. I chat to a squaddie, also fresh from Belfast, and doing a turn now for the UN. "Bored out of me fuckin' skull, mate," he volunteers at RSM volume.

I run my finger down a row of notches carved into a doorframe. "Lucky you," I tell him. Only now do I notice the wrongness inside—there is no smell of piss in this forgotten place. Abandonment is total.

Chris and Chris of Chris's Taverna tell this Chris about 1974, when Turkey invaded.

"I was young man," says first Chris. A mature moustache is lovingly twisted. "Fought the Turk. Have many stories. Now am old."

"Had friends like brothers!" says other Chris, who toys with his phone in lieu of a twistable growth. "Over there." He points across the taverna garden to where it grows wild and untrodden. "Not Turk. Not Greek. Cypriot like me. Now on other side. We are refugees in our own country."

I am reminded of another taverna owner, Andreas, also Greek Cypriot, but back in my home town of Portrush. "The Turks had to come. We made them come." The unspoken reasons seemed clear then from a look of regret in his eyes. Close up, real reasons are harder—as always—to spot.

"You from occupied part of Ireland or free part?" throws me.

"I am not a refugee in my own country," I begin, but the conversation is over. Old disputes run deep and this one runs right through their garden. Three Chrisses and a mobile phone pose for a snapshot, and I'm off. There is no charge for the coffee that, given a few more metres or a few more notches, might well have been Turkish.

I sit, settled into the evening, in an old man's café. Fluorescent lights in a mud-brown ceiling stain the walls with a turbid glare that spills out to the street. The old men play cards, smoke fat cigarettes, and watch *The High Chaparral*—which looks rather epic with Greek subtitles. In the corner, an ageing gaming machine, cornered by its addict, blows the *Reveille* once a minute. I'm waiting to meet Daisy after her shift, and her fiancé too, of course.

Daisy, her fiancé George, and I sit in a loud-music bar that could be anywhere in the world. "Do you find Greek women beautiful?" says George.

I glance at Daisy. “Daisy not Greek, Daisy Bulgarian.”
“Really?” I ask.
“Yes,” he says impatiently.
I point to another nearby woman. “She is very beautiful.”
“She is English.”
“Her then.”
“She is Russian. Perhaps you do not find Greek women beautiful, after all.”
“I’m sure Greek women are every bit as beautiful….” I trail off, not sure where this conversation is leading.
“Don’t worry,” says George, “I am teasing you. I am not Greek myself. I am Lebanese. I was born in Lebanon. I lived my life in Lebanon. I would love to return. Lebanon is the most beautiful country in the world.”
“Why don’t you?”
“I was in Christian Shock-Force Militia. Trained in Israel,” he says with no emphasis, no feeling, nor emotion. His clear-blue eyes shine like clear-blue sky glimpsed through a skull. “I am no longer welcome in my country.”
I remember Sabra and Shatilla, the refugee-camp massacres, and shudder—but how dare I judge him by my own prejudice. I once overheard a journalist reassure a colleague that was being transferred from Belfast to Jerusalem. The first had admitted he knew nothing of the situation in the Middle East. *Listen,* replied the other, *You know over here, there’s two sides, and they’ve been at it for hundreds of years. Well over there, there’s five or six, and they’ve been at it for thousands.*
“You want to hear what I think of Palestinians?” he spits.
“George,” I tell him, “I will defend to the death your right to say it, but that doesn’t mean I want to hear it.”
“OK. You will find out yourself.”
I begin to realise, sitting here, that I am on a long road. Intending to escape the wilful confusion of post post-ceasefire Belfast, I have made a perverse choice in coming here.

Outside the Questhouse, I see—for the first time illuminated—a garish *Nite Club* sign with a down-pointing flashing arrow. Dull red-carpeted steps, like an inviting sewer, promise an underground taste of Nicosia. The darkness at bottom puts me at disadvantage. When *they* come to me and stick, I don’t know what *they* are, but as my wits race, their questions give them away.
“You from UN?”
“You want drink champagne?”
“You nice boy, come sit with me.”
“No, like me better.”
“Not like any you—like me best!” In the tussle, I shake free and pound back up the steps. If I ever fall through ice, get buried alive, or break the neck’s first knuckle—heaven forbid—I shall remember this place. Later, I dream myself into a *Roach Motel* full of grasping hands and the voice-over: *You can check in—but you can’t check out.*

Olympus

So, Mount Olympus is in Cyprus—just outside Trodos. I should have known that. A happy accident—happier anyway than arriving in Seville, a few years back, to see the Alhambra; at least I know where that is now, I think. Since I’m here, I want to see the Home of the Gods. Why do they live up mountains? Is it the negative ions? I could use a spiritual charge, and there’s all the time in the world for a detour.

Strong, heartening sun shines into the bus as we rear up the twistiest of roads to Trodos. Hillside villages, clinging to the valley walls, mix old with new—timeless whitewash sprouting reinforcing rods. We deliver the post without bothering to stop, as sackfuls are tossed in

offering to roadside dust spirits. All around, jagged hills and valleys are parched dry and cracked, colours muted and bleached. Now a splattery rainfall blushes the land, and casts a rainbow across our path. Descending from the bus, I notice, above the door, a sign in just-decipherable Greek: *ΕΞΟΔΟΣ.* I take these omens well.

"Where go Trodos?" says wizened Adonis the taxi driver.

"Youth Hostel please, Adonis."

"Youth Hostel *closed,"* he says with such incisiveness that I cannot think; but Adonis has done my thinking for me. "Hotels Trodos expensive. *Not* stay." My brain empties further. "Trodos snow. Olympus snow. *Not* walk." So we drive up Mount Olympus. This is not as I had imagined—the scramble with the cut stick, the sharp smell of thyme, the goat bells' echo in a lower, distant valley. We step from his Mercedes into a foot of slush, and peer into the mist. "Look Nicosia. Look Limasol. Look Baths of Aphrodite. *Not* today."

The Home of the Gods is home to a car park, a television aerial, and a Middle-East listening post. I am shocked. "The Home of the Gods, Adonis. What happened?"

"Wrong Mount Olympus. Have many. Come. Nice hotel Platras, *not* expensive. I bring."

More than one Mount Olympus? But why not? There's even one on Mars. I taste the anticipation, the cut stick, the tinkling…. And suddenly there is the view—breathtaking. The mists part for a full frustrating second.

I end the day bored in the awful, but cheap, Petit Palais Hotel, a kids' party going full tilt around the booming resonance of an over-loud TV, a stale moussaka in my gut. I am done with detours.

Andreau Sings

The Peugeot 504 hurtles down through the sleepy morning to Limassol. On arrival, the driver pleasantly pulls me into a café and breakfasts me on coffee and rice pudding. A young policeman opposite is having his shoes shined. One shoe down, he is interrupted by a man with a bag of dirty shoes. He defers without seeming to understand why, and has the opportunity to ponder the nature of authority for six shoes worth, practising grim looks of determination for future occasions.

It's eight in the morning and I rush at the day like a bull at a gate. Limassol tourist office says "No boats to Egypt," so I go to the port to check cargo ships, but security will not let me through. I try the Marina—security again. I service taxi to Larnica. Here, the tourist office says "Yes, many boats to Egypt," and calls the shipping company. "Sorry, no boats to Egypt." I try the port—security. I try the marina—security. Such a regimented place the world has become! Some years ago—in my imagination, at least—this would have been possible. Cyprus is the hub of the Eastern Mediterranean. It supplied, and gave its name to, the copper that fuelled the Bronze Age. Phoenicians, Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Franks, Venetians, and Ottomans traded from these shores. For the last six millennia I could probably have jumped a boat going *anywhere* in the ancient world—but not today. I say goodbye to the guards at the gate and climb over the fence right behind their hut, figuring that I might as well be blatant about it. I talk to a few friendly yachties who are not optimistic. "It's the wrong season for Egypt," says one. "You should've been…"

Of course it's the wrong season when I want to jump a boat. Of course there's always a boat going just about everywhere else in the fucking world except where I want to go, I mutter through a clenched smile, while he prattles on with his list of should've-beens. "Thanks for your help!" I tell him.

"Any time, mate! Say, how did you get in here anyway? The guards've been pretty jumpy since those Israelis got shot in their boat."

I walk to the end of the pier and stare south. Five hundred kilometres of open sea at a scale of one to five thousand is less daunting. I've done this before. I once flew to the Canaries,

thinking to boat across the aquamarine sliver to the Spanish Sahara, but the package-tour paradise had no interest in the black continent. There was a boat—to Cadiz. The atlas misleads. At wine-dark-sea level, things look different.

Horns embedded, I reserve an air ticket, a one-way flight to Cairo in the morning. I could have done this from Belfast. I should be philosophical, but no: this was both an expensive diversion and a dumb idea. Next stop somewhere else, and never has *somewhere* seemed so *else.*

But I savour this last night in Europe. I share a table in a glass-box, sea-front taverna with old Andreau—not old by my standards, but in this culture, youth and age are divided by a neat, premature line that we're both over. His friends sit around one table, and he sits with me. I wonder why. His meal arrives: a plate of feta cheese, tomato, and cucumber. He washes it down with half a pint of brandy. "Bottoms up!" he roars to the room, and tucks into a second plate of feta cheese, tomato, and cucumber. When his third plate is taken and washed well down, Andreau rips into song, tuneless and wonderful. His yawning mouth is garnished with as much food as seems to have come off the plates It bungee jumps on elastic saliva. I have time to move my glass.

"Write *this* down," comes a voice in my ear, "Andreau sings!"

Africa

Eight o' clock sees me back again at Larnica airport, back on course. I collect my ticket and ask how I should pay.

"Pay? Surely your ticket is already paid?"

A younger me slides the free ticket into his pocket, and slinks off to check in. I watch him go with a little regret. I shake my head. "Cash OK?"

The contrast to my imagined arrival could hardly be greater. I barely catch the lurching-prow dream as it boils out of my brain. Cairo airport is insane. The huddled masses, we surge through halls and gates with a collective will, to disgorge like an unwanted meal into the forecourt. I get the right bus: the cheap one, the slow one, the unbelievably overcrowded one. "Why you not take taxi?" speaks one voice for all.

"I wouldn't have met you, my friends!"

"Friend! Friend!" It's a good feeling to be friends with everyone on a bus.

Crossing the road from the bus stop to the train station is a seemingly endless experience. Signal lights are coloured baubles. Amongst them, traffic policemen joust with the traffic. For safety, I stick close by one policeman, but we end up splayed over the front of a taxi, horn and whistle blowing. Buying a ticket for Alexandria is almost as much fun. "Not this office," is as informative as it gets; but eventually I run out of alternatives and into the right office. It is still Ramadan. We are in the penultimate day of the month-long Muslim daylight fast, and everyone is touchy. Carriage number nine is so clean that I gag on the smell of detergent, but hunger eats through. Out of respect, I wait till all are quickly asleep to steal bites from a sandwich hidden in my coat. Ramadan comes from the Arabic *ramada,* meaning *hot.* It once fell at the hottest time of the year; but being lunar based, the Islamic calendar delivers Ramadan eleven days earlier each year. This makes for a thirty-three year cycle in which the last years have seen the coming of pleasant winter Ramadans, with short, cool days, so I don't feel too guilty. Beside me, the nose of a hungry man stirs him awake. I know what woke him. He doesn't. I freeze my chew in a gormless slack-jaw pose, lips pursed, and stare fixedly out of the window. He looks at me strangely for a moment, then falls back to sleep. Through his reflection, I am seeing my first glimpses of Egypt. As the train ploughs a straight furrow through dry country alongside one of the Nile Delta canals, I see none of the lushness I had expected from the fertile strip. Only earth-brick cottages with reed roofs piled like compost heaps break the monotony.

I jolt awake with the train, finally in Alexandria—Al Iskunderia in Arabic, where *Al* is *The,* rendering Alexander *The Iskunder*—and set off with a memorised map in my head. Things don't work out: the streets are in the wrong place, and the sun won't go where I want him to. Squeezing my memory a little further, I remember the dead-end track on the map, and another jolt of the starting train as I stepped off—one station too early. Eventually, I reach the centre by bus; a disturbing ride, in that the driver considers nothing between full acceleration and full deceleration. This operates the sliding door, which flies open when the brakes are applied brutally, and slams shut when the clutch is dropped.

I can just see the bay from my side room in the Hotel Normandie, and it is a jewel. The building itself is pure decaying colonial, and houses an unguessable number of people. A family lives in a small room off the lobby, and a lone man has cardboard-boxed the space below the staircase. Five flights of steps spiral up from his dwelling, around an empty elevator shaft, to a cluster of rooms at the top. Opposite mine, a rusting spiral staircase suspends over and leads up a light well to the roof. I expect to see some wicker sun beds and a shimmering view. Instead, I find a hamlet full of chickens and children, washing waving in brazier smoke, the sound of people all around.

Twenty three hundred years ago—shortly after Alexander founded the city as a centre of learning—Eratosthenes, a scholar of the Great Library of Alexandria, calculated the size of the earth. He got someone to walk due south to Aswan, counting every step of the way, and look down a well at noon on the summer solstice. As Eratosthenes had known, the sun's rays went straight down the well and lit the circle of water at bottom. At the same time in Alexandria, he measured the length of a shadow thrown by a column. With this information, he estimated the circumference of our planet with an error of just over 1%. For more than seven hundred years, the library collected information from every source it could. Any ship entering the busy port could be boarded by librarians, who copied whatever documents they pleased. When Christian mobs burned the library down in AD 391, seven centuries of priceless knowledge went up in holy smoke. More than a thousand years later, Christians were still sailing off the edge of the world and calling everywhere India. Of what knowledge survived these times, most survived in the Arab world, and Europe's Renaissance could not have taken place without it.

More smoke attracts me later, dense clouds of it billowing from a side street. Tables sit about the road; the kitchen is on one corner, the toilet, on the other. A fully functioning restaurant turned inside out. When the waiter arrives, I point, hoping to get the same as everyone else. Surprisingly, I do: a delicious meal of apricot juice, vegetable soup, salad, pickle, hommous, pita, and stew.

"On same train!" says a small man with a big smile. He has politely waited for me to finish. "Number nine! Remember?"

"Carriage number nine? Of course I remember!" Not quite a lie.

"I make sacks for ladies," he tells me. "Business is not going well."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I cannot compete with the latest sacks from Paris."

Back in the Normandie, travellers talk visas, boats, and hotels. Adventures are shared, stories swapped about felucca rides down the Nile (another myth shattered—the boat I knew as a dhow is called a felucca), and I warm to the company. I have stumbled unawares onto a tourist trail, but don't care. This day was too long, too fractured; it seems to have begun way back in Belfast, and dragged me around unexpected places before conveying me here. I shall sleep dead tonight, but postpone that pleasure one more minute. The night is black. The moon is new—a bad omen with which to begin a journey, but away with omens. I am here. A long, snoring breath on the back, a last flinch before giving up. One thought. Africa.

Ramadan

Today is the last day of Ramadan, lunar month of denial and fourth pillar of Islam, and I would like to state the palpable tension, but there is none. I moved room this morning and have my view of the Alexandria Corniche—half-moon bay and ancient gateway to Egypt. Up here in the Normandie, the day is so laid back it's asleep. There are four different hotels on these top two floors, and I'm the only ambulant soul. Everyone is supposed to make the great fast, unless too young, too old, too sick, too pregnant, or working too hard. These categories are open to some interpretation: in the Mediterranean climate of Northern Algeria, almost no one falls into any of them; in the blistering deserts of Southern Algeria, almost everyone does. With a trans-Saharan religion, it's good to build in a little flexibility. It seems that in Egypt, fasting is best done asleep—pious snores ooze from every sedan chair.

The shower is nominal, even the water is too idle to come up today. The inclusive breakfast is a do-it-yourself affair of shaking the last tea leaves out of a box and boiling them up, once the added intricacies of a once-simple burner are mastered. In the kitchen, I take stock of my surroundings. Associating freely on a potent gunpowder-green tea–sugar concoction, déjà vu floods in. I have seen the like of this room before, but where—Mali, Morocco? Items of uselessness abound. An old deal cupboard, splintered and saggy, barely contains its wares: an old tin, jagged lid wrenched back; some empty cardboard packets, never bright, now greyfaded; and underneath, a carpet of dust. Quentin Crisp proposed that after seven years dust doesn't get any higher. As usual in the East, Western laws do not apply. This dust is an living history, spanning generations. Recollection comes with a surprise: a farmhouse up bleak Slimag Hill in Ireland, abandoned and empty for thirty years—yet this kitchen is in constant use. I am culture shocked.

The other guests are awake and away long ago, seeing the sights. I could catch up with them and stand, grind my brain, and attempt to stimulate its pathways of appreciation and awe. I'd go through the motions, fail, and feel quiet shame. I'm glad I have the resolve instead to sit one hundred metres down the road in the Place Ramla, ignore five thousand years of history, and drink Turkish (now that it's kosher to say it) coffee. People throng, and soot drifts as miniature black snow through the pavement Café Imperial. A seeming short circuit in every car ensures that when brakes, throttle, clutch, or steering wheel are touched, the horn sounds. Though prone to it, I do not exaggerate.

In five thousand years, what record of this wonderful culture will remain? Some of the cars, I'm sure, will be here. The foundations of this, *Aha! A coffee shop,* some future Egyptologist may surmise, should survive to the year 7,000. But how long might he sit, stimulating awe, bidding imagination to animate the ruins, before he feels the coffee gurgle in his guts, tastes the soot, hears the horns, and sees the smiles on the children's faces. And what of five thousand years? Lost in the auto-da-fé of the Great Library was a trilogy of history books in which volume three dealt with the period from the flood up to the *then* present day. This is life, and life is for the living.

Walking the early evening around the old town and the mosque of Abu al Abbas Mursi, I find the end of Ramadan celebrations subdued. I wonder if alcohol might help; it is a shame to give us the word but deny themselves the pleasure. Still, there will be no bottle fights in Alexandria tonight. As for car crashes, they might have them anyway. A dark and mysterious fairground is claiming the night behind the mosque; dangerous machines entice the brave and the daft to risk their necks and test their skills. Children ride high into the air on contraptions I would hardy trust to hang my washing, while men sledgehammer lumps of metal up after them. Before a lurid backdrop of an old-testament prophet sawing a woman bloodily in half, a magician performs magic tricks without end; that is, nothing happens at the end of each trick, nothing is produced, nothing is disappeared. There is not even an abracadabra.

Back in the hotel, I fall into the company of Megan, Marcus, and Yassar—the owner's son—fresh from feeding. Yassar asks me about the Open University in England—a series of televised lectures on various subjects—but the advert he read in the London Times assumed

prior knowledge. Yassar pictures a welcoming neo-classical building. “I wish to travel to England to study soccer warfare.”

“Best place for it,” says Marcus in his broad Australian accent.

“Excuse me,” I ask, “you want to study what?”

“Soccer warfare.”

“Social welfare, you idiots,” chips in Megan.

By ten o’ clock, Yassar is ready for town. “Let us go to the Bar Spitfire,” he announces.

“The what?” asks Marcus. “Does it sell beer?”

He gives Marcus a withering look. “It is a bar.”

Just why the Bar Spitfire is closed on the best night of the year, we cannot guess; but Yassar, undeterred, hails a taxi. “We buy beer shop. Drink hotel.”

As the other three scrabble for the back doors, I see I have won the booby prize. I reach up for the seat belt, but it dangles broken and bundled, reminding me unpleasantly of a saline drip. Paranoia is confirmed. The driver navigates the Corniche at speed. He veers from lane to lane using pedestrians as homing beacons. He never brakes. Sitting on what for me is the driver’s side, I stamp uselessly instead. “Not problem!” he says agreeably.

Shawwal

The Café Imperial is too intriguing. I can sit the morning away, drink coffee, eat biscuits, and watch this corner of the world turn. Place Ramla is as wild as yesterday, but easier. People stuff their happy faces with food as they charge about today. The tension was there—I see that only now with its release. A newcomer to the hotel, Winifred the Austrian, takes me to the Greco-Roman museum for my education. Hours it takes us in the noon-day sun to realise we have been chasing the wrong dot on his map; but when we finally arrive, I’m in for half price, driving licence masquerading as student card. I do it—stand around and mill and grind my brain to pulp; but in the end I give up, leave him to it, and step back into the lovely throng, tension unwinding furiously now.

There is jubilation at the Corniche. Food is for sale everywhere. Small boats crammed to the gunwales with ecstatic, clapping people turn circles in the sparkling water. Drums thunder from all directions, and the crowd speaks with a thousand voices:

“Hello!”

“Where you from?”

“What’s your name?”

“You are welcome to Egypt!”

The pleasure boats unload and reload their busting cargo on a tumble-down sea wall. A light swell surges moans of delight through the crowds as bodies stumble on and off to be caught and lifted safe by a dozen arms with never a slip. I am overwhelmed. I watch from the refuge of a boulder set more than a child’s leap into the bay as the sun prickles my pink skin and sails across the sky.

I sit a long time. Being used to a northern ecliptic, I fully expect the sun to curve around to my balcony—my cue to leave—but he sinks straight down, drawing after him a perfect slip of a crescent moon, horizontal in the Islamic style. Such a wise moon she is, cupping and holding wisdom, not spilling carelessly like our northern one, but hanging poised, declaring the start of her new phase and Shawwal, the new Muslim month. Now, seen from the roof in the brief, twinkling dusk, she cradles Venus in her arms as Marcus and I watch the last of the pleasure boats straggle back to shore.

Around the corner now to Mohammed Ahmed’s restaurant, and Megan and Winifred join us for dinner. Winifred is in expansive form, and he continues to expand throughout the evening. After a lengthy search for a bar, we end up being led—by a young reveller with *Tyson* stencilled across his back—to a licensed restaurant just around the corner from the hotel. The room is being prepared for a party. The first night of the Eid al Fetr, the three-day feast to

celebrate the end of Ramadan, is about to begin, and tables are set with a bottle of Johnnie Walker for every two people. Winifred gulps his beer, and is quickly drunk. He howls stray words from songs, and attempts to play on the band's instruments. He vanishes into the kitchen, turns the background music up to deafening, and charges out dancing an epileptic jig. Tonight's clients are about to arrive, and the manager's face is twitching, but he waits until the last minute before politely asking us to leave.

On the busy street, Winifred waltzes along loudly welcoming everyone to Egypt, and by the time we reach Ramla, he has attracted a crowd unused to such exuberance. Flailing about, screaming "Winnifredo! Magnifico! Ai-ai-ai-caramba!" he doesn't notice the secret police breaking it up, until he stands alone, a breach cleared around him.

Tyson goes to him and tugs his sleeve. "Come. Quickly."

"Do you know the meaning of the word boring?" he asks. Tyson nods in reply. "Well, you are boring. How *dare* you be boring in my company!" Tyson encourages him up a dark side street, and they disappear from our lives into the rich oriental night.

Marcus, Megan, and I, wander on to sit peaceably behind the mosque of Abu al Abbas Mursi in a tranquil terrazzo square next to the fairground of the night, whence excited squeals rise from the perilous amusements. Though well past midnight, the terrace is full of families, and we are saddened by the sight of bright young girls in party dress beside sisters who, but a year older, are subdued and headscarved. Puffing away on a hubble-bubble shisha pipe, I have a rare moment of fulfilment. As my head spins with an unaccustomed tobacco buzz, I know that I would choose at this moment to be nowhere else, with no one else—just here and now, passing this pipe through the strangeness of a new world. It is for these moments, I should say *this moment*, that I come. The now—this seamless, never-ending now—is the prize sought on every road.

I've had a perfect moment and could retire happily to bed, but Megan and Marcus want more, so rather sheepishly, we return to the restaurant. The manager's eyes dart about, seeking the tall, boisterous figure of Winifred; but when they fail, they settle and join the smile that is already on his mouth. The band is playing Beatles' songs, and Alexandria's underground is dancing gaily, empty whisky bottles on every table. The musicians are happy to play some Egyptian music for us, but the Egyptians sit down and insist that we dance for them. Intemperate and feckless, we rise to the bait and soon have a table clapping along. A man jumps up, tugs off my shirt, ties it around my hips, stuffs money into the improvised waistband, then stands on a chair and wolf-whistles; Megan twirls like a gypsy, clapping finger cymbals, flamenco style, above her head; but Marcus, with the best hips of all, corners the show. After half an hour, the Beatles' music begins again, and as the Egyptians waltz the tension away, we cool off with another drink.

From now on, everything we want is paid for by Mr Kabir, a sharp dresser entranced by beautiful, blonde Megan. As her chaperones, Marcus and I—though walking a knife edge of maximum intoxication—are afforded every courtesy, and we are all invited to a party. The Hotel Cecil on the Place Ramla is the venue. Slightly faded now, the old colonial pile has probably the same grandeur as when, during the Second World War, it was requisitioned as headquarters for British Military Intelligence. The only sinister reminder of those years is a sign over reception stating: *Breakfast is Compulsory*. The belly dancer is competent—I have seen better in Belfast—but the band is outrageously good. The—as it turns out—Australian belly dancer struts in front of a totally male audience that behaves like it is watching its team win the World Cup. One by one they throw themselves at the stage, dashing hope against unattainable fantasy. One distraught Saudi man, tears rolling down his face, pulls money from his pocket to throw at her feet. There is something heroic about his struggle to reach out and touch her bikini costume—top and bottom joined by an anchovy-net body stocking: twin seams, running like twin caesarean scars, from twin babies, delivered by twin surgeons. Now the singer takes the stage; her voice is weak but the band gets better and better, and Mr Kabir wants Marcus and I to dance again for him. It is surely a ploy to corner Megan, but we're so high, we take it as a compliment and rush the stage, scattering the poor singer. The festivities accelerate frenetically. More and more of Mr Kabir's friends arrive, and the staff is desperate to please him. This is costing a fortune, and it's all going on his credit card. Trays of food arrive

to be torn apart by the guests, some of whom are burying their faces into one of the platters. I have never witnessed such hunger; but when I take a closer look, I see lines of cocaine whooshing up flared nostrils. I can barely believe my eyes. This is Arabia. I thought I was going to be lucky to get a wine gum.

When all has subsided, and we are taking the air in front of the Cecil, Mr Kabir invites us for coffee. We pile into a big car, with some big friends and drive and drive. For half an hour, we speed east along the Corniche, but do not seem to leave the city centre—the character of the streets and the buildings changes not at all. It sinks in. Alexandria could house the entire population of Ireland; almost five million people live here. Just as I sit stunned, as usual, Megan slips into the back seat beside me, strokes my arm, takes my cheek in her hand, and pulls my face into hers. Her eyes are halflidded and her lips just parting. I taste her warm breath in my mouth. By the time I realise that she just wants to tell me something, it is too late to abort the wet kiss, and my tongue ends up inside her nose.

Coffee, by comparison, is a tawdry affair in the pre-dawn Alexandria Sheraton. The dead watch is setting up for an imminent breakfast, and Mr Kabir's silencing of the vacuum cleaner leaves them milling distractedly as he lovingly anagrams Megan's name. "Negma means star in Arabic!"

"Smegma means pearly-white essence in Australian," ventures Marcus.

"Indeed?" replies Mr Kabir, as he turns to Megan. "My lovely *Smegma,"* he whispers. Philo, another ancient Greek, once remarked: *Alexandrians are adepts at flattery and imposture and hypocrisy, ready enough with fawning words, but causing universal disaster with their loose and unbridled lips.* History may mill a civilisation to sand, but leave its citizens unaltered.

We are glad to be back in the Normandie. Megan had Mr Kabir drop us at a flashier hotel up the street. "Never let a man like that know where you live," she asserts.

"Especially if it's the Normandie. Eh, lovely Smegma?" says Marcus.

"Shut up you fat cunt," says Megin, authoritatively.

Later, Marcus walks in through my open door to join me on the balcony, where a furious dawn is building. I had adopted this pose for someone else, but am glad of his company. As if a pencil sketch with lines drawn too hard, the clouds are outlined starkly, then slowly water-coloured rose. I look at Marcus and reflect that you only ever achieve an approximation of what you desire.

Shisha

I awake at two in the afternoon with a dream in my mind. I was back in Belfast, defeated, had gotten only as far as Alexandria, then caught the wrong train and come home by mistake. Today, with my fat head, the continued exuberance on the Corniche is hard to take, the questions, changeless:

"Hello!"

"Where you from?"

"What's your name?"

"You are welcome to Egypt!"

I retreat to Mohammed Ahmed's for a late breakfast of cheese omelette, perfect in every respect, both crisp and runny, the haloumi cheese holding its texture against the heat. My befuddled brain tries to make English spring from spoken Arabic. "I despise this megalopolis," the waiter seems to say sadly to his colleague.

Three coffees later and a bit more alive, I run into Marcus, who had sat up smoking joints with Megan and Yassar until the big fat hours, and looks like death. "Jezus fuck!" is all he can say. We are soon back at Mohammed's. What a restaurant. Even with twenty people standing outside, we are seated in five minutes. There are more waiters than it is possible to count; the kitchens turn out seven different delicious dishes in industrial quantities; and best of all, tourists pay the same pittance as locals. A lovely young woman in a scarlet dress flirts at me

from the next table. Marcus says she is flirting with him, but I know—so does he, but he is wrong—that she has eyes only for me. Her two headscarved companions restrain her, and lead her out giggling, their hands clenched tight on her wrists. We wonder if we shall ever understand this culture.

The Bar Spitfire, a genuine red-vinyl disinfectant dive, is open to all comers tonight. A solitary Dutchman, propping up the counter, joins us for a cure, but we can't get out fast enough. Shisha, shisha, we smell it on every corner. Tobacco, undoubtedly the most addictive of drugs—we sit outside a tea-shop, backs to the wall in a long line of back-to-the-wall addicts, and fill our lungs with it. This is not smoking in the sense of puffing on sawdust-stuffed, plastic-tipped, rice-paper sticks. This is smoking in the sense of drawing, through chill water, the charcoaled aroma of well-cured, rough-chopped, honey-soaked Latakia tobacco. The smooth and foggy fix clouds my mind, occludes my thoughts, and fills me with a labyrinthine feeling of peace. I am skirting the edges of another nicotine addiction, and as with any flirtation with death, it is both frightening and fun. As the old hookah bubbles, and glazed rabbit eyes stare out through streaming smoke, I understand the last cigarette before the firing squad: no last reckless gesture of self-destruction, but narcotic short-cut to acceptance.

And so we puff on into the night, sampling quiet tea-shops in our shuffle through rubbish-strewn back streets prowled by grimy cats. These neglected beasts were once so sacred to the Egyptians that an army of Persians tied cats to their breasts, thus forcing a surrender on the Pharaoh's troops. Psychological warfare is at least as old as the Pyramids. Back at the square behind the mosque, cups of hot, sweet tea stimulate, and the shisha dulls—a swordplay familiar anywhere in the world. My hangover rolls in its tentacles, and I feel that I have many things to say to my companion, but little need to say them. "Been to Aswan?" he asks.

"No."

"Want to go?"

"Yes.'

"Felucca ride down the Nile?"

"Sure."

We have puffed up a big cloud of trust between us this evening, and the world outside looks friendlier. As we are about to leave, a man walks up and chalks the correct prices for tea and shisha on our table. "You must pay no more," he insists. "You are guests in my country." When you accept it, the world is a friendlier place.

After sailing paper aeroplanes from my balcony into the dancing crowds below for *a good hour,* as Marcus calls it, we go for an early night. But at a quarter past twelve, we are both independently up, drinking loathsome vodka and delicious orange with Megan and Yassar, while the sounds of singing and drumming roll around every street in Alexandria.

Sometime before dawn, Megan stands up, stretches, and says, "OK you guys, see you around."

"G'night Megan," yawn Marcus and I.

"Good night? I'm off. Bus to catch."

"Now?" asks Marcus, incredulous.

"Yea, now. Lightweight!"

Chivalry

I wake up groggy and useless, wash some clothes and hang them up in the roof village. Out in the heat my head swims and I feel frightful. Shisha, tea, coffee, beer, and vodka. I have to straighten out or the trip *will* end in Alexandria. I have been in Egypt five days and I must register with the Tourist Police before the week is out. I find the Tourist Information Office finally open, but of course, this is the wrong place to register. The women behind the counter are less than helpful.

"Hello!'

"Where you from?'

"What's your name?"

"You are welcome to Egypt!"

And a little variety now, "Are you see Pyramidies, Spinkies, or what have you?" I manage to register, but Marcus was right: *Jezus fuck.* The day is a dog, but I bear his canine demand and walk him well, feed his slavering chops, and lick his balls clean of guilt. Tomorrow, he shall rise fresh from his litter, scatter his fleas and nose the world with replenished vigour. I am in no small way anticipating that. For the now, I must rattle the old head to assist it in the firing of synapses. Neurotransmission is limited to the lower levels of cognition such as regulate bodily functions, base humour, and self-administered anaesthesia.

Later, at the train station, Marcus and I are bewildered by the shifting sands of Egyptian reality, as we try to check out tomorrow's train to Aswan. The train leaves at eleven; it leaves at twelve; no, it leaves at twelve fifteen. It goes to Luxor; it goes to Aswan; it goes only as far as Cairo. Ahah! we must change at Cairo; we must change at Luxor; we must not, on any account, change trains at all.

I stop a transport policeman. "Excuse me, do you speak English?"

"Yes, yes!"

I carefully ask, "How do we get to Aswan?"

"Fifty two!" he snaps with a grin.

We thank him, "Shukran," and leave.

The Station Master professes to know nothing of trains, but is happy to take us to someone who does. Hope, the old demon, stirs. He leads us along the platform, where he stops to have a word with a peanut vendor, who turns to us, and in elegant English, enquires, "Gentlemen, may I be of assistance?"

With more coffee, we ease our meddlesome hangovers into the swift-following night, and a walk back through the souk is magical. Alexandria seems to be open all night during the Eid, and despite the lateness of the hour, whole families in party clothes roam brightly-lit shopping streets carrying bags of goodies. Two pretty young girls, fourteen or fifteen years old, accost us in a dim alley and don't want us to leave, but with no language in common, we have no idea what else they want. They entertain us with smiles and convoluted questions, and we leave surprised that no one stepped in to stop our fun. Walking on, we arrive at the souk of the Christian butchers. Pictures of Jesus and the Madonna hang between pigs' heads and pigs' carcasses. Who eats all this pork? Why are they doing late-night business on a Muslim festival? Why am I continually surprised?

In the sanctuary of the Normandie, life is reassuringly familiar. As we sit in the foyer, Yassar says forlornly, "Beautiful woman in Room Five—but she is sick."

I want to knock on her door, ask if she's all right, does she need anything. Just then, the door to Room Five swings open and the beautiful woman walks out towards the cold shower. I am up, quick as a shot, to tell her that the hot shower is in the other direction. Marcus is slower on his feet, but his mind is keener. With his lighter, that proud symbol of misplaced male chivalry flicking gallantly, he leads on to check the pilot.

Room Five

Hovering around the lobby this morning, I can't help but stare at the door to Room Five. I want to burst in. *Hello! Where you from? What's your name? You are welcome—welcome to me!* I'm a dog. I know it. Instead, I go to Café Imperial, one last time, for tea and scribbling, to find that I am already nostalgic for Place Ramla. I barely hear the horns; new details jump out. A woman walks by with a week's washing on her head; it appears to be hanging out to dry around a bird's nest structure as she goes about her day. Beside me, a businessman puffs life into a shisha, Above his Ray-Ban Aviators, he bears the callous that comes from touching his forehead repeatedly to a prayer mat five times every day; it sits incongruously above gold rims and sports jacket, but only to me—this detail too will fade. All things close, and I know I shall

never sit here again. I had no idea I could become so attached to Alexandria. One last glimpse at the square overcome by dust and neglect, one last look over the smooth bay, one last dive into my wallet, and I'm off.

So, she is gone. The door to Room Five stands open, and I only just resist the temptation to go in and bury my nose in the ruffled sheets. Smell never sleeps. I miss waking with the smell of a sleeping woman beside me, and lying a while in warm waiting as the other, slower senses come to life. "Do you think she really was sick?" I ask Marcus.

"Yea, she was sick all right, sick of guys like us."

Our imagined exit from Alexandria is as different from the reality as was my imagined arrival. Abdul, the owner of the Normandie, has cooked up a little scheme that is to delay us for five hours. "Can you please buy a little duty-free alcohol for me? There is a wedding coming up in the family and you could really help us to keep down the costs. I ask only a simple task." We have warmed to Abdul during our stay, and to a degree, he takes advantage of this. The *simple* task is hanging around in a shop full of jumbo-sized refrigerators and whisky for half the day, while bundles of Arabic paperwork are pushed back and forth over the counter. Finally, we are alarmed to see our passports stamped and written up with who-knows-what.

Too late to withdraw, I have a vision of trying to leave the country at the Gulf of Aquaba with an armed bureaucrat whispering in my neck: *But where is your refrigerator, Mr Fawcett? It is impossible that you depart without it.*

Leaving a little wiser, we finally reach the station. "Train full!" says the ticket seller with some glee; but undaunted, we jump into a service taxi headed for Cairo and wait for it to fill up. At first, I tie our bags securely to the roof, but each time another fare arrives, the whole lot is untied and retied with the same short, and increasingly pathetic, piece of string. Marcus reckons that the weight of the other bags will at least pin ours down for a while, and when the car is well and truly full, we set off.

Travelling by road in Egypt may be one of the riskiest forms of transport in the world, and I wonder that it is not mentioned in the *Dangerous Sports* exclusion of my insurance policy. We listen with dismay to the story of a bus-load of children that were left in the middle of a carriageway, in complete darkness, while the driver walked off into the desert to take a piss. A bulldozer travelling at speed, lights also off and scoop up, beheaded them all. I'm not surprised: the driving is so atrocious that I stop looking out of the front window. Along the side of the road to the west, stand lonely gates, some simple, some grand, all unfinished in some way. Joining them, run long, useless walls. One consists of well-built, carefully-spaced columns, two metres apart and three metres high; between each, is dumped a pile of bricks to bridge the gap. From each gate, stretches a blind dust track that drops out of sight into the Nile basin. All else is desert—not the elegant, sand-duned desert of our Western imaginings, but a gritty, featureless one.

But the descent into Cairo from the broad plain is breathtaking, and as we fall ever faster into its basin, the Pyramids rise up against mackerel clouds to tower above one of the world's megacities—home to twenty million people. The sky reddens in an instant, and as the quick North-African twilight falls, we fall deeper into thick air, until at street level and darkness, our eyes smart and our throats catch on its foulness. Ramses Square is black as pitch, and the world is full of people.

"Train full!" says the ticket seller.

"When next train to Aswan?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Just one train a day?"

"Yes! One train every day." I ask Marcus to double check on this. "Next train to Aswan, tomorrow morning." For badness, I buy the tickets, but this man has no problem selling me a ticket for a train he has just said doesn't exist.

Heavily tired, we cross Ramses Square through the many circles of people hovering around piles of goods glowing in the light of tilley lamps. The darkness is such that lamplight seems

too sticky to flow, voices too timid to carry, and smell too lazy to ooze through its mesh. Each circle is a new and strangely unsettling world to be traversed.

The Hotel Sultan does not live up to its name with six beds to our room, extra mattresses in between, and a mosque's loudspeaker a metre from the window, but is fine. We dine quickly on kebabs, stock up on food for the long train voyage, and settle into a calm alley outside the New Sun tea-shop, for our evening tea and shisha. I ask another tourist to take our photograph against one of the colourful murals decorating the front; he fondles my Leica a long moment, then says, "My name is Jay and I'll be taking your picture this evening." I take a liking to him, but somewhere in the dreamy darkness of our room, his face appears in front of me, his hand groping under my covers, as he reaches up from that mattress next to my cot. Whether he is dreaming, I am dreaming, or Jay is a thief, I shall never know.

Later, I dream myself back into Room Five. "Take me!' cries the beautiful woman." And in an instant—for in a lucid dream there is no time to lose—we tumble to the bed. All around, I am aware of the half-world where ten bodies sleep, but we take our pleasure in ours, as the deafening roar of *Allah u Akbar* fills every space of both worlds, uniting them. The faithful are going to prayer, and I am going back to sleep, my sacrament completed.

Shi

At the end of a hot, sticky-plastic moment that serves for a night, we are awakened by a boreal voice. "Ireland, Australia," whispers Anu the Finnish night porter, as she pinches our big toes. This shower gushes hot and full, but won't drain away, and there is only a moment to enjoy before it backs up and out the door in its quest for the Nile.

A quick omelette on the street, and a long, dreamless sleep in comfortable first class, washes away our fatigue as the commitment of the sixteen-hour train voyage sinks in. To each side of the track, the landscape livens; a canal still runs to the west, but out east, a long line of sandy bluffs gives the eye something to pore over. The villages turn more colourful, more African, and the contrast between scorched earth and tended verdure more intense, as the sun shines in ever stronger, warming the Irish winter from my bones. At home, February is the worst month. The word itself comes from the Sabine for purification, but only a Christian Brother could find an Irish February purifying. The long lead up to the New Year with slow-fading nights is tolerable, January, with its extended hangover, endurable, but February is the rabbit punch. The sky is low enough to part your hair. One more day, I say to myself each morning, and the sun shall fall like a fat brick from his place in the clouds to split the ground at my feet. But the winter wheels slowly around the solstice, and the sun labours up but a little earlier each morning to twilight our curt winter days. I begin to crave—too early—the spring. I cheat that now and welcome summer.

"Shi?" says the waiter.

"Aiwa menfadlik!" [Yes please!] and two glasses of tea arrive. As a special treat, he has laid on two tea bags for us. Now, I think that tea, as a infusion of uncurling leaves spinning in a sugared glass of scalding water, has a civilising effect on the world. You take tea, you take time to take tea—it takes time, that's the point, you don't just chuck in a bag and slosh on the water as the kettle goes *click.* Well let's face it, everyone uses the wee bastards nowadays, but they are not to my liking. The gracious woman sitting behind me explains this to the poor waiter, and within minutes, I am grinning from ear to ear, watching those broad leaves unfurl. Tea has a civilising effect on me.

The train wanders on up the Nile Valley, crossing it now at Luxor, and the desert landscape blossoms against stark aridity; hungry palms sucking hard on dryness flex tall against the sky. Villages cluster around cool, lush gardens, and small far-flung mosques fleck green fields with kingfisher blue. The bluffs roll along, to one side, then the other, retreating into distance and dust as the Sahara unrolls in every direction. Sahara, an Arabic word for desert. Just as we have many words to describe our landscapes—fields, meadows, pastures—Arabs have many ways to describe theirs, and this is but one. My world is a Garden of Eden to desert dwellers, always

green, clear water running freely. Their religion promises Paradise, and to them I live there—even in February.

And on it rolls, darkness now, and the Aswan train dawdles and stops for ages, jerks along again, then stops for longer ages. Hurtling in a train is fun, but this pace is numbing. Even the waiter has given up—though not before making me one last glass. I gulp it with pleasure, but something is missing—taste. Examining the glass, I see he has run out of leaves and has split open a bag for me. Bless him.

We prepare to outrun a gauntlet of hustlers, but Aswan is relaxed, and a solitary jallabiya'd gentleman slips the Hotel Noorhan card into Marcus's hand. It is a friendly place, rooms airy and bright, and costs no more than the Sultan. When we ask the best way to walk in Aswan tonight, the receptionist pulls up his chin and does a smart military step around the room.

We smoke the evening away with aromatic shishas, and drink strong, desert-style tea served by a sweet Nubian boy. Aswan at two o' clock in the morning is alive; shops piled with ripe fruit trade on, and dark figures walk in and out of flooding light, bargaining and chatting easily. This is the end of the line. The railway track picks up again in the Sudan, three hundred kilometres away across Lake Nassar—under which Nubian land lies flooded—and only a few Sudanese bound for Wadi Haifa and Khartoum continue farther. Aswan is the only reference, and the hot night brings a perfect sense of arrival as we sit in the welcoming company of our street urchin. Mohammed's stall is a few bits of wood nailed roughly together, and what he lacks, he borrows from the café across the road. He is profoundly content, totally immersed in his present. His big eyes follow our conversation with interest unburdened by understanding, and glint like shisha embers glowing in an inner breeze.

Mona

We are late for breakfast—two hours late—but tea, bread, butter, and jam is happily served up. As the wall clock plays *You Are My Sunshine* in absurd flat-battery portamento, we are joined by Captain Salaam of the *Bill Clinton* felucca; he has his captain's papers, but looks too young to be trusted for three days under sail. "What are you doing in Egypt?" he inquires of Marcus.

"Gathering intelligence."

He gives an uncomprehending nod. "How long will you stay?"

"That depends if *your* government is prepared to deal with *my* government. Maybe two days. Maybe two years."

"I see," he says, and he moves to a more promising table. This Australian's breakfast is best not interrupted.

A walk to the ubiquitous Corniche reveals the tourist side of Aswan; a row of expensive hotel boats steals the view of the river, but here the Nile is beautiful. More young captains pitch their sales, but the sight of shallow-drafted feluccas darting about, their broad lateen rigs stiff with wind, makes us wince: the long swim ashore; the precious baggage floating downstream. There is no hassle. As each captain gives up, he wishes us an enjoyable stay.

At the southern end of town, we take a felucca ferry across to the Elephantine Island—so named for the mammoth black boulders that choke the Nile at its first cataract and line its banks majestically, thrusting from the swift water. The day is hot, and we sun ourselves like cormorants on a boulder, watching small black heads bob about in the water. One paddles closer. A tiny boy is sitting in a boat, no bigger than himself, fashioned from tin cans and tar, and sunk to the gills in the vastness of the river. Perhaps I would trust a young captain after all. Nubians can probably sail before they can walk, and they walk proudly enough. Other tourists pay the baksheesh we cannot bring ourselves to spend to get a closer look at the Nileometer. From here it looks well—ancient cut steps leading into the swirl, marking flood warning levels for an older, undammed river. Close up it appears to gain nothing, judging by the ripped-off

looks on exploring faces. Unseen upstream, lie technocracy's pyramids, the massive twin barriers of Aswan's dams, and on both sides, the mother of Egypt pulls around us.

Backs toasted, we set off to walk the island. The southern tip is an archaeological site, and the northern one a ghastly tourist complex. In between, bounded by barbed-wired walls, lies the Nubian village. As with many indigenous peoples living in lovely or useful places, the Nubians are being squeezed out of their land, and as tourists, we share in the blame. The winding dirt path along the shore leads quickly to a maze of earth-brick houses and palm groves. Amidst, we are lost in the Middle Ages, and by the Muslim calendar, this is where we are—the sixth day of the tenth month of the year 1414. Each pastel-painted window hides secret lives that move behind shutters and centuries. Outside, in close, airless squares, sit old women black-clad in mourning—some for their husbands, all for their sunken homelands—while around them, their glowing children kick up the topsoil of their lost inheritance. This gift once ran on to enrich the fields of all Egypt; now fertiliser companies push chemical alternatives on the farmers downstream as it silts up uselessly behind the Aswan High Dam. In forty years, they say, the lake will be silted and the dam useless, but to contain the wall of alluvial intent, which would otherwise wash Egypt into the sea. If it fails, we need no felucca to gain Luxor. The children shout, "Hello, money," and perhaps the comma is redundant. If they watch television, then we live on the sets of Dallas and Dynasty, and no argument will dissuade them.

Marcus is gone. I look no farther than the nearest door and hear, "Come in! Come in! You are welcome!" He is sitting already on Mona's bed. Her mother serves us tea and tasty home-made biscuits as Mona shows us her treasure—coins and notes from countries she can only dream of visiting. The walls of her room are papered with photographs of strong, determined women, but race and poverty are twin barriers damming her ambitions to become one of them. She looks around the pictures, smiles a perfect smile, and allows us a moment to gauge her resolute Nubian eyes before accepting the money we offer her. Outside the house, she waves us farewell and gives up a resigned laugh as her mother picks her pocket. A few dead ends later, once-streets sliced by the wall that separates her world from ours, and we reach the ferry as it is just landing. The rudder is turned, and the lateen sail fluffs and takes flight, tugging the little boat and us with it back to the Corniche, where the last sails are reefed for the coming evening.

It seems that an exciting felucca ride is leaving tomorrow: three boats full of travellers, three days under sail to Edfu—just short of Luxor. Decision. The dams are as yet unexplored, and the possible trip south to Abu Simbal not even considered—and I love Aswan. I am in no mood to leave a place where a cup of tea and a chat are haveable so late into the night and so early in the morning that it makes scant sense to distinguish between them. Dream cruise or desperate voyage, we cannot guess, but entreaties come thick and fast from a Canadian woman sharing our hotel. Marcus and I are washed along in a mood of raw enthusiasm. Before we know it, we are paid up and registered with the Tourist and Antiquities Police. If indecision is the decision not to choose, we are decisive.

Two-Lane Blacktop

Gasping on fiery shisha smoke, Marcus and I sit on the Corniche. Completely hookah-hooked, we cannot get enough of it into our lungs. A cloud engulfs us, blocking out the morning sun, and we sit in its midst and inhale. Below on the jetty, Captain Jamaica musters the crew of the Bob Marley felucca; up here, great doubt is setting in. But it is done—in two minutes we sail.

Three hours out, Aswan recedes as we plaster on sunblock and settle into the trip. On each bank, pylons bear the hydroelectricity down to the power-hungry cities of lower Egypt, and noisy little pumps chuff away, lifting the Nile into broad fields. Up and down the river, floating hotels charge along as our armada tacks from bank to bank among them into a southerly wind. I am naïve. I thought to 'get away from it all' on the Nile, but of course it's like this. Egypt is for the most part the Nile, and my poor imagination, distracted by the modern world around me, cannot conjure up the feeling that this voyage is real. It is a thrill to travel the back roads of the

world; to taste real lives along the way—but we are a bunch of dumb tourists paying for an show. This is as much a canned adventure as a camel trip into the desert or a medieval banquet: it exists only for our pleasure.

We stop for lunch on the west bank, and I climb a rocky outcrop behind the dunes. Beneath, beyond a row of fresh footprints in soft sand, the sound of three sails cracks amidst the mutter of many voices, and stretching to north and south horizons before me, lies a desert two-lane blacktop. I am gripped with the urge to sling my pack and a few bottles of water, and walk free along it. I don't, but that desert road and the adventures burning unseen in its heat haze smoulder on in my mind.

We tack and drift the long lazy day, and come to rest on a serene beach cove backed by steep dunes with the shades of overhanging palm trees black against the sky, then spend the last minutes before darkness hauling dry palm trunks to a charred hearth. The exertion sweats out most of our angst. Marcus and I adopt the roles of fire tender and shisha loader, while our Nubian hosts drum and sing the evening away. Come night, the promised blankets are missing, and we spend a cold time drawn up to the dying fire under a hard, half moon, getting up every hour to toss ever-smaller twigs into the flames as better-equipped travellers slumber in their sleeping bags.

Salah

We feel increasingly like pieces of baggage borne for the price of passage. We sail past tombs and monuments, then stop in donkey fields for lunch. Everywhere, the litter of previous expeditions fouls the shore: piles of water bottles, toilet paper, film cartons, tampons, and patent medicines left behind by felucca voyagers and dumped by cruise ships. We resolve to sort and bag our garbage, but have trouble convincing Captain Jamaica to let us stow it on board; only when a mutiny threatens does he desist and shuffle off to join the single women in the lead felucca. Eventually, only Salah, our cook, is left to steer and prepare meals at the same time. Salah was sick during Ramadan, and unable then to make the fast, he makes it now. He steers with one foot, and prepares trays of tea that even in this heat he will not drink. We help as much as we can, and in the absence of Jamaica, life becomes better. I almost warm to the voyage.

We are a good mix of people. Tim and Lisa, an Australian couple, who are six months into an eighteen-month world tour, are generous with 'tubes' of beer and company. Gonzague the Frenchman plays *Georges Brassens* tapes.

> *Quand je pense à Fernande, je bande, je bande.*
> *Quand je pense à Félicie, je bande aussi.*
> *Quand je pense à Leonore, mon dieu, je bande encore.*
> *Mais quand je pense à Lulu, je ne bande plus.*

Marcus is delighted that, whereas we have the noun *erection,* the French have a whole verb—*bander.* As Jacques sings of his lovers, Marcus recites, "Je bande, tu bandes, il bande, elle bande? nous bandons, vous bandez," and with joy, "ils bandent! Fuck me," he declares, "French lessons were never like this."

A couple of Canadian boys, Knuks, they call themselves, talk about their adventures. They made the long, sweaty, bus trip south to Abu Simbal on the Sudanese border, and were impressed by the colossal statues. "Antiquities man. Yeaaa! Fuckin'A! So cool. Those big dudes and things? Wooow!" I sense awe and am shamed. Later, when the *Brassens* tape runs out and we glide quietly along, sail flapping gently, they sit uncomfortably, as if the silence were a wave rising to engulf them. They fidget. They sweat. Till, like junkies, they slip their fix into the machine, press play, and lie back in reverie as it pumps full volume into the calm.

Tonight's resting place is a shit-strewn beach. As far as you care to look, rest piles of toilet paper and shit, but we spend a pleasant night around the fire—Salah even finds Marcus and I a blanket to sleep in. We share it now on the gently-rocking felucca, and as sleep comes, I watch Salah, just visible on the prow, bending eastwards in devotion to his god. It is both impressive and disorientating to watch such humility and belief; someone I admire, prostrating himself to something I cannot see. No idols. No altar. No priest. Just the long night stretching over the desert, and a few sparkling constellations to hint at the divine. Just God—and Salah.

Abdul the Disco Nubian

We have two revelations this morning. First, the rubbish we have been collecting is gone—dumped overboard. Second, although our drinking water comes from bottles, our cooking water—including that used to wash the salads—is collected from the banks of the toilet beaches in the early morning before we wake. We snarl at Jamaica and discuss bilharzia and cholera over breakfast, until he abandons ship completely and talks Abdul out of one of the other feluccas and onto our helm. Abdul is friendly and dignified compared to the pseudo-Rastas who race each other in the lead feluccas as we slip deliberately behind.

The sun is relentless, and we hide under the sail to escape his gaze. To one side and then the other, we roll ourselves as we zigzag into the light wind, to one bank and then the other, the Nile running serenely with us. Marcus slinks about the boat like an Alexandrine pussycat, dirtier than he would care to be, unsure of where to perch, but dignified as always with his black leather hat stuck sweaty to his head. The routine stiffens, it is numbing, but almost likeably so. Three people on our felucca were on the previous trip and liked it so much that they turned around and came right back—same boat, same crew. Legend has it that one Australian woman liked it so much that she sailed up and down for two and a half months. Marcus's brain boggles visibly at the thought; he loosens his brim a moment, then slicks it down to his nose.

Guide books state: *Do not swim in the Nile!* but three days out, with the cool temptation beckoning, we make a collective decision to throw caution to the wind and ourselves into the flow. After all, we have unwittingly ingested it with every bite. Atop the mast, the view is perfect: rough-hewn notches running down to the so-small boat full of upturned faces, a speck in the great river, itself a lonely track in the wilds. Both feet for a split, delicious second on the masthead, remember to jump out and then down, down—*whoom*—into the fatness of a long moment hanging in pea-green coolth. I am inside the mighty Nile as she is inside me. Down here, the murk feels a little too eternal; I squirm and kick for the surface, where splashing bodies sparkle diamond reflections like fireflies in a summer dance.

Our last evening looms with the promise of a party on an island just short of Edfu. Seven felucca loads of us will be there, and we look forward with some apprehension. Again, we pass the most beautiful scenery to stop at the favoured spot. Within a two hundred metre radius of the shore, lie lumps of sun-baked shit and wads of paper. Marcus, Gonzague, his Taiwanese friend Sonya, and I busy ourselves collecting and sorting piles of firewood for a whole night's burning, but Jamaica pushes it together and torches it in one go. We retreat to the most distant felucca, and smoke and joke the night away while the crew dons its Friday best and entertains a party of Japanese women by drumming, dancing, and singing around the hearth. In my picture of the evening, sound and vision do not match. I seem to file the senses separately. Looking out over the bank to the gyrating white-robed figures, silhouetted against tall flames cleaving the blackness, will not fit with *She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain When She Comes. What Shall We Do With a Drunken Sailor* seems to belong to a universe other than the oriental one we sit in this night. As we tumble towards deep sleep, the sound of Abdul belting out his hour-long finale: *Abdul, Abdul. He is a Disco Nubian, Yes—Again Again. Abdul, Abdul. He is a Disco Nubian* would, in a better world, be best forgotten.

Luxor

The early-morning mist is boiling off the windless river, and our three feluccas, lashed together, stand calmed in the mid stream. The captains pole the steaming water, and writhing sleeping bags chrysalize into tousle-haired tourists fluttering around the tea tray. The perfect stillness of dawn is rounded by the plop–drip of dunked oars and slurps of hot, sweet tea. Ah it was sweet, in its way—the conversations, the swim in the Nile, watching Salah pray to his invisible god from the prow of the ship. And it sucked. Ask one half of our company, and you would not consider making such a voyage. The other? They had *a like totally awesome time.* So take your pick. I'm glad that it is done, and as the sun cannons overhead, and the last Stygian swirls wisp away, Edfu rises before us, its Western-style high rises poking holes through my romantic interpretation of a beautiful name.

As we disembark, Jamaica asks Marcus why I am always writing, and when he replies that I am compiling the next *Lonely Planet* guide to Egypt, his face pales, and he rushes to find us a service taxi. As I slowly roll up the window, he rotates his face to the slit and chatters about the problem of pollution on the Nile and how he is determined to put a stop to it.

I am settled into Luxor, and sit with my back pressed against one of the sun-warmed columns of the great temple. I have sat in the same spot for three hours, and as tour after tour passes, I hear each guide give a different interpretation of the same hieroglyph to my left. In spite of the majesty of the site, I long to see the passage of time—a building ravaged by nature, stones lying where they fall, plants growing where they will. I want to see the work of centuries, but all is tidied and sorted and patched. The great leveller has been levelled. As substitute for awe, I shall sit as long as I must to have a bit of the place inside of me. After a stroll out for a cup of tea, I return just as night is falling to find the lights coming on. Huge floodlights flickering into life give me a moment of disquiet. I had wanted to see the Colossus of Ramses looming out of the black night, the wan light of a gibbous moon probing feebly into shadow. But now, in the equally colossal glow of a thousand lamps, the great temple throbs with power and glory manifest on a desert earth. Looking back to the enormous portal, I see glyphs standing out freshly chiselled in an uplight, and imagine myself a peasant viewing this splendour for the first time. Awe stirs.

After smoking the obligatory shisha, I fall into bed, closing my eyes to the illuminated green minaret outside my window, to wake in a seeming eyeblink to the same scene—tall, majestic symbol of Islam against a predawn silver-primed sky. Today the call comes clear and sweet, not a guttural bark declaring God's Greatness, but love and tenderness: *Allah the Compassionate…the Merciful.* Perfect pitch in an untempered scale; exquisite portamento concealing, then revealing the attended note; the long, lazy passage of the line cutting unexpectedly at the last syllable in a little, rising stop—gently waking the faithful, and calmly praising the desert god. In another blink, the spire is washed in morning red and Luxor is humming.

Karnak

Today is coming hot. A little boy with limpid eyes and asbestos fingers is preparing our first shisha. Puffing dreamily, he warms the coals and breathes fiery life into the tobacco. The tobacco, in turn, breathes fiery life into us, which hot draughts of sweet tea mellow and balance. Marcus and I sit in the Sharia al Souk—Market Street—and just want to watch the morning go by a little longer. Beside us sit old men settling into the elevenses of their day, which started way back at five o' clock with the call to prayer. In front of our café, the busy little street is a jumble of commerce. To and fro, people walk with purpose unknown, carrying objects of oriental interest: an ornate, gimballed pot maintains its stance against an unsteady gait; a cart passes loaded with Red-Sea sponges; an old woman, swathed in black, clutches a hen by her heels—the hen looks calmly around, there is no fear, she seems to understand and

comply with her fate. Opposite, an old man sits displaying his wares—a few lemons spread about a rough sack. He looks as though he will sit all day and all night if necessary, till the last is sold and he may walk home to his farm. He eats and drinks with his eyes. He appears amused by city life, and unlike the regular stall holders with their jaded stares, he takes in everything with a twinkle. Below us, a man walks proudly by in a light, two-piece cotton suit, broad stripes running up and down. "I used to have nightmares about coming to school dressed like that," says Marcus.

Now comes a line of horse-drawn carriages filled with tourists and bristling with lenses, incongruously bulky in the narrow street, and constricting it such that the occupants see the market only in stasis. Cameras constrict further the flow, freezing to lifeless instants the organic interplay of colour and movement, as the street halts to allow the pink flesh passage.

In the Temple of Karnak, I imagine a historical position more recent than that of yesterday—one hundred years ago. This is the average date of the graffiti etched into the walls and columns, about five metres above ground, before the site was excavated. Bumping into one of our companions from the felucca trip—in fact, I quickly remember, the one that talked Marcus and I into the misadventure in the first place—I articulate, as best I can, my wanton notion to see the ruins half buried in the sands of the Nile, blocks lying tumbled around; my wish to clamber all over the stones, to spread out a blanket, to sleep in a crevice and dream of ancient Egypt.

She replies sharply, "Well, I think you are very selfish. I like it just the way it is."

"Would you care to dignify that statement with an argument?" I say before I manage to zip my mouth. She smiles. I have not provided her with the necessary information to know if she has been insulted. "Well, lovely to see you again," I tell her.

"Lovely to see *you* again," she replies without irony.

Karnak is a building site with cement mixers, cranes, and scaffolding—it is being rebuilt. Wind and time—skies and ages of it—have sculpted these blocks and scooped the mortar out from among them; gravity has pulled and slid them into challenging positions; and penultimately, the desert has hidden them. Modern archaeology is undoing this, and the hulking blocks lie numbered now in rows. The builders of this temple were building for eternity. Thousands of years later, we are pretending too that eternity should be forever; but remove the protecting, supporting sand, and pollution and earthquake will make short work of it. I look now at a fanciful rebuild of the Ninth Gate Tower of Karnak, the patchy stonework infilled with cement recalls a fake stone façade on a cheap house. The truth is hidden.

Still, there is a wild beauty here. Sitting on stone #DB3s6141, my view of the Hypostyle and the Fourth and Fifth Gate Towers is stunning. The sky has gone moody, and the stones appear timeless in a flat, all-enveloping light. The Temple of Amun—where the god's ejaculation of the world into existence was emulated each sunrise by a priestly order no like of which exists in the world today—seems to radiate crepuscular gloom. Seen from the south east, the walls retain their random purpose; enormous blocks balanced precariously, and walls listing alarmingly, still hold and speak millennia. Shocks of palm fronds sprout a lush surprise over dust brown, pushing against the pull that slowly tumbles the temple walls. #DB3s6141 once featured in this tableau, perhaps supporting a column for a few thousand years and then lying buried another few. Now he sits emasculated on a wooden pallet, his number buried in a ledger.

The heat of the day is passed. The visitors are thick as flies, and the guides, smaller flies upon their backs. At every portal one awaits—a great mystery will be revealed to you and only you for a little baksheesh. Even the Tourist and Antiquities Police are on the prowl, roaming the perimeter like pariah dogs. I have been here long enough for one to become used to me, and although he won't let me climb, he opens a few hidden doors. "Mafi baksheesh!" [No baksheesh!] he says as he unlocks the Temple of Osiris, and danders off to let me explore alone, his sandals trailing dust through the unexcavated terrain of the outer ruins. Come evening, he lets me jump a gate and climb to the top of the Ninth Gate Tower to get a free look at the Son et Lumière. But the peaceful hour I spend waiting for it to start is so much more magical than the two or three minutes I can bring myself to watch, that I am happy to leave and

stroll back into town along the decaying avenue of Sphinxes—a happy playground to local kids. I am stalked by some real pariah dogs, and then mobbed by children who invite me to take tea. One tiny Scheherazade, pretty enough to break my heart, holds my hand tight and reveals the true mysteries of the East in machine-gun Arabic as her friends dance rings around us.

I return to the Sharia al Souk, white with the dust of millennia. Music rushes from every corner, festive lamps twine across the street, and Luxor is at play—mostly. The little boy with the limpid eyes clears my glass and lifts my shisha pipe, giving it a hopeful suck as he lugs it away.

Thebes

Faffing about for an hour or two is what it takes to get breakfast, bicycles, bread and cheese, and some bottles of water. Marcus, Sonya, Gonzague, and I ferry across the Nile to the west bank and Thebes, the ancient capital of Upper Egypt. We cycle past the Colossi of Memnon—seven hundred and twenty tonne quartzite statues marooned in bare fields by the side of the road—and arrive at the temple of Queen Hatshepsut, the Deir al Bahri. Rather than pedal seven kilometres around the hot-tar coach road to the Valley of the Kings, we hike over the mountain by the cliff path. Despite the heat, the steep goat track scaling the barren mountain is invigorating. As we gain height, the Deir al Bahri, terracing up and back into the sheer cliff below, falls small in the shifting air, and only ant-swarming visitors betray its scale. Gained, the saddle swarms with hustlers, who tempt the exhausted with coke and relics. We press on, they fall back, and down into the necropolis by the best possible route with a pinch of conquest to flavour the day.

Our first tomb, of Ramses I, is a rich wash of colour leaching through the three thousand years since it was sealed, but we find it small and curiously unimpressive. On our way to the next tomb, Marcus hails a taxi and returns to the hotel clutching his stomach. “I feel a bit crook,” he croaks.

The tomb of Thutmosis III, with an entrance set ten metres up a cliff and reached by a steep metal staircase, seems a better attempt to foil grave robbers: its final chamber is reached only after many twists, turns, and dead ends. Inside its cartouche-shaped sarcophagus room, the heat and humidity are sauna-like and only just bearable, and though the glyphs seem cartoon-like compared to those of Ramses I, the complexity and enclosure of the rooms and passages makes for more excitement. The tomb of Ramses IX is marred by a guide with a large loud hailer leading a small group. Of Ramses III, I have no impression at all of glazing in and out, except of staring over a barrier at a little bulb burning hard in the darkness twenty metres away in an unrestored chamber. The temptation to explore is tempered by the sight of piles of shit and toilet paper fighting for space amongst discarded plastic bottles.

With the daylight slanting obliquely now, the valley is magical. The air, laden with dust, is brilliant; and shadows begin to crevasse even the smallest cracks, hinting of greater discoveries ahead. Charged a little, I set off for one last tomb, that of Merneptah, which proves to be my favourite. Ignored a little, perhaps because of the almost complete destruction of its ornamentation, it captivates me. A long descending passage pierces the valley’s gut, past an anti-room holding a complete rose-red granite sarcophagus, and down again, into a twelve by eight by six-metre high chamber borne by six fat columns. At its centre, lies a massive sarcophagus lid perched—I assume, in its original position—on a few skittery piles of bricks. The tomb guard is sleeping heavily upstairs, so I slip in where Merneptah should be, and gaze up at the inside of the lid to carvings that were intended for the eternal gaze of someone only one hundred and fifty generations dead. I hum and the room hums too. I sing a bathtub imagining of a Pharaonic death chant, and the room harmonises. I roar, and the room roars back. I consider three tonnes of ancient Egyptian granite resting on six piles of modern Egyptian bricks, and slip out.

A quick snack of bread and *La Vache Qui Rire,* [The Cow That Smiles,] a phlegmy processed cheese that Marcus calls *La Vache Qui Crache,* [The Cow That Spits,] and we are off, up to the saddle again by a different route. The hustlers shout danger warnings, but mostly because our improvised path will take us well clear of them. We find the Noble tombs, despite my dreadful map reading, roulette-wheel internal compass, and mule stubbornness that turns my chosen direction into the right one. Tombs for humans, they are small, but a telling reference to the tombs of their god contemporaries, the Pharaohs. Nakht, astronomer of Amun, has a simple, well-decorated tomb enlivened by murals of boomerang hunting and a cat eating fish under a chair; but the most ennobling experience of the afternoon is watching the Memna tomb guide light up his tomb. He sets one silver paper and cardboard mirror outside, then carries another about the interior—illuminating the decoration in floods of reflected daylight, and earning well-deserved baksheesh.

Outside, I outrage a crowd of children by giving money to just one, and as the sun drops, we collect our bikes and free-wheel down to the Rameseum. I have dragged the reluctant others along because of a poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley. He was inspired here to write the poem *Ozymandias,* and I by it to come.

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear—
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

We are not disappointed. One thousand tonnes of granite personage—that of the great Ramses II, instigator of the Biblical Exodus—is fallen so far from grace as to lie splintered at our feet. At the Rameseum, the guards are easygoing, and we're soon scrambling up the seventeen metre high gate tower. Tumbled and broken at the top, it is organic and precarious. I can leap from block to block, eliciting only a feeble, "Please Monsieur! Be careful!" from a kindly guard. I am in antiquity heaven. I am tasting awe. I can bite off lumps of it with my teeth. I have the feeling, that—for just a little baksheesh—the kindly guard would climb up and help me to carve my name at the top. "Closing time," he shouts, and the spell is broken. The sun is heading home and I have two bikes to cycle back to Luxor.

In a cute restaurant, the owner shouts "Habibi! Habibi! Habibi!" [Darling! Darling! Darling!] as the three of us walk in. We feast on kebabs, shisha, and tea—tonight with mint—and walk back to the Hotel Venus for beers and sleep-delaying thoughts to savour the exhaustion. The hotel's restaurant has a tasteful devastation that rounds off a day's Egyptology. The walls are gouged and flaking and everything is coated in dust. Though on the first floor, it has no walls or railings of any kind. The bare concrete floor simply ends in a four-metre drop. We pull chairs up a little too close and watch Luxor slumber. A child in a night-shirt canters a white mare through the streets at midnight. I like this town.

Time

Gonzague wakes me at seven, and cursing him, I draw shaky breath on the balcony and stare at the tall minaret to steady me. And what of the call to prayer this morning? Was it just too tender to penetrate my fug, or was it washed away in a sick Australian's snore? Below, the night rider gallops his mare now through a scattering crowd of tourists, and I am steadied.

The builders are in. Outside our room, with an unreasonable efficiency for the hour, a plumber is mending a leaky cistern in the bathroom. Downstairs, the devastated dining room, which I had taken for granted, is—I now realise—undergoing a facelift. It is not supposed to look like an open-plan tomb. While eating my breakfast of omelette, bread, and tea a thick cloud of sweet-smelling smoke rises up from the street and into the room through where the walls should be. Being careful not to fall out, I go to where the windows should be, and am aghast to see two men in the back of a pickup truck spraying DDT into the fresh morning air. As they pass, a party of young children on their way to school wades through the smoke while out of a side street rolls a donkey cart laden with twenty tanks of ozone-annihilating freon. I have no ghast left.

Bikes, bread, cheese, and water are scarce today. The rules of one day do not apply to another—shops close, faces change, prices go up, and it is all too early in the morning. Back on the Mountain, the day is already baking hot. I curse at myself, staggering from foot to foot in the slippery dust of the goat path, weighed down by the night's beers; but the second wind comes, and with it the saddle.

Today's destination is not the valley, but Al Qurn—The Horn—the blistering limestone hill that dominates the Theban landscape. It's not so high, but a stiff climb along trails walked just enough to be visible, and not so much as to scar. Striking off and up before the band of hustlers, Gonzague and I are close enough to sight disappointment in their eyes, but today their reproaches are half-hearted—we are already lost to them. After a scramble over some ridges, we are at the top. The view is precipitous. At haze level, visibility is poor, but up here above it, the sky cracks open. Way beneath us, the old ruins lie as on a map. Below in the Rameseum, we can make out the discarded doll of the toppled Colossus, and beyond it, the crisp edge of the fertile strip, rolling delicate and unlikely over just-discernible curvature at the horizons. The twenty metre high Colossi of Memnon regain some purpose from this vantage; guarding, like black scarab beetles, the frontier between old and new. The ancient Egyptians rarely built on the strip—most temples sit marooned above its high-water mark—but today, modern buildings are scattered throughout the lushness. Across the Nile, Luxor lies fuzzy and indistinct, but beyond it to the north, the Temple of Karnak stands bold.

At the top of Al Qurn survives, from prehistoric times, a natural rock shelter. A deep cut under a shallow overhang provides a commanding view of the valley, warming morning sunlight, and shade for the rest of the day. It is hard to believe that this fragile cave is older than the Pyramids, but by the time they were built, it was already more ancient than history. By the time the tombs were built in the valleys below, the Pyramids themselves were ancient history—more than a thousand years old. Yet this denser-than-average layer of rock jutting over my head was once a sea bed built of a death rain of tiny creatures streaming from a warm ocean. Unthinkable geological time saw this graveyard laid, drained, raised to continental height, and then eroded into mountains and valleys. By this measure, the fine-tuning of features such as a rock shelter our forgotten ancestors once used, takes an instant. By this measure, everything since has barely happened.

Gonzague and I, fired with a boyish spirit of adventure, spot a faint trail leading south along the shoulder of Al Qurn towards the Valley of the Queens, and guessing that in this arid landscape all paths must have some immediate purpose, we follow it. At the end of the ridge, the path is clear enough, leading west and away from our destination; but out of dogged stupidity, we decide to blaze our own trail down a loose scree slope. Of course the path would lead to the same destination by an easier route, but our Western preoccupation with geometry insists on a straight line—so down we go, struggling not to be outrun by the rocks that join us.

Picking our way through the broken ground at bottom, we find tombs everywhere. Every natural crack has been walled off, that wall subsequently breached, and whoever was inside, removed by whatever was outside. Along the course of a wadi—a dry river bed—we spot a dozen tombs within a hundred metres. The Valley of the Kings is not so unlikely in this context, the famous tombs being but better versions of peasants' graves. Perhaps the Kings' tombs started off as bigger cracks within natural fissures—sink holes, and dry chambers in the limestone—that were exploited to create many different shapes of tomb with no evidence of design evolution. No end of peons were likely shifted out of their 'eternal' resting places to make way.

At the Valley of the Queens, where we had hoped to sneak in by virtue of our innovative route, we are awaited by a guard who has followed our hour-long descent with interest.

"I watch you from top. All way!" he says, more appalled than impressed. "Ticket!" After the adrenaline-rich, scree-surfing experience, the tombs are flat. Had the guard in Khaemoust's tomb not insisted—so rudely—that we stay only five minutes, we would probably not spend twenty, really admiring the decoration, with him storming around screaming dog's abuse at us. Lunch is a mistake. With all my blood in my stomach, the awe lobe shrivels, and Titi's tomb is just a hole in the ground. The tomb of Amen Khopshef is just hot. Its guard hands out cardboard fans in exchange for the usual baksheesh, but when I find the on switch for the electric fans that stand idle around the room, and flick them into life, he shares in my surprise.

Not fifty metres off the road on our 'shortcut' back to the bikes, we find a cluster of tombs cut into a low hill. They stand in splendid desolation, touched by every second of their endurance, smashed and hacked at by hopeful robbers, scoured and blasted by desert winds. Old hieroglyphs are overwritten by newer generations of graffiti, carved sometime between then and now. Any surviving decoration shows all the more brazenly for its perseverance. There are no guards, signs, loud hailers, cement paths, lights, nor visitors—just Gonzague and I, and millennia of history.

We pass to the west of the mud-wall lattice of the workers' city (not in the socialist sense) and find tombs everywhere; it is difficult to walk without falling into someone's quest for immortality. We have walked for five hours now, and arrive back to the foot of Al Qurn on the far side of the Deir al Bahri. We try again to sneak in, but the guards are alert and soon their colourful shouts ripple around the bottom of the steep cliffs. "It is said to look better from the outside," offers Gonzague as we tramp back to our bikes.

Squeezing a little more out of the long day, we pedal the hot tar south to the temple of Ramses III. I squeeze my brain, too, like a sun-dried sponge, it is *nice,* I think. My visual memory is a house of cards: when I turn my head, it collapses. Just as we make to leave for home, we catch a glimpse of what must be a real Egyptologist. Perhaps it is the heat, the exhaustion, but I swear he is wearing a bush-jacket, jodhpurs and pith helmet.

Marcus is much better and guzzling Stella beer in the bombed-out dining room, which seems more distraught from the builders' attentions. *We had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun* rambles out of the hotel jukebox. A middle-aged English woman sits beside me and through her best smile says, "Brilliant music!" I am unaccountably melancholic and feel like weeping into my beer. I cannot place the origin of the sentiment. I am lonely perhaps, I miss her, and tired—I must sleep. Upstairs, the state of the bathroom, which was pristine only this morning, comes as a shock to my muddled brain. The leak is fixed—in fact the cistern is drier than anything ever gets in Ireland, its lid lies broken and scattered across the floor. The smell from the overflowing toilet is wretched. Though torn now from the wall, it is still enthusiastically used, and the open soil pipe has been engaged for faecal target practice. I am stunned by the work of a few hours. How can I imagine Egyptian time when it runs at this pace? As I stagger to bed, an unlogged memory from one of the Queens' tombs washes in. In one of those dark little holes, sits a glass cube containing—like a papyrus origami—the bones of a tiny foetus. A skull crushed in upon a brain that never laughed nor cried. Two and a half thousand years later, I cannot stop crying.

Mafeesh

"Al Youm? Mafeesh!" [Today? Nothing!] I tell the washer-woman as she brings my clean clothes, a couple of words of Arabic making me feel the seasoned traveller. She stares at me in my bed, her eyes glinting.

"How long you stay?" she sings. "Another day? Another year? Good. A whole year. I like!" I am naked under the sheets, and feeling it. She swings her pass key around a finger and really stares. "So do nothing today? Come up on roof with me. Sit in sun. Very nice!"

Marcus and I have decided to move on tomorrow, and while he visits the tombs, I am resting up: a day of money changing, phone calls, and postcards. The postcards are fun. The postal workers have run out of all but the cheapest stamps, and I have to buy sheets of them for my postcards. As just one stamp would be enough to blot out the address, I buy some tiny envelopes—the only ones available—fold my postcards into them, and write the addresses in the remaining postage-stamp sized corners. Outside the office, the post box is full to overflowing; back inside the office, they shrug their shoulders and raise their eyes to heaven as if only divine intervention can empty it. They eventually take my mail, tell me that letters require one more stamp than postcards, accept some extra cash, and then stick the new stamps over the addresses.

I miss my roof rendezvous, and shall never know what awaited me. The sun is slanting when I finally climb up to what appears to be the washer-woman's open-air boudoir—tie-died cotton hangings fluttering in the breeze around her divan. In the dining room, while I smoke a shisha in compensation—as if I might forgo the excuse at my peril—Eric the German donkey guide tries to talk me into a tour of the tombs. He clutches, as if a holy text, his book of references, then thrusts it open in front of me. I half-heartedly read the half-hearted references, which seem to have been extracted at the end of a saddle-sore day, and politely decline. He is affronted, and now refuses to acknowledge my presence—which I assert with ever-increasing charm in the intention of winding him up. It's working well. The middle-aged English woman explains her plan to convert the dining room into a glee club for expats. The organist is already in residence, and is playing the theme tune from *MASH* as we speak. Suicide *is* painless, I think as I listen to her. "We're going to call it the *Mars Bar!"*

The marble curtain wall has arrived and is being cantilevered out over the street, each one hundred kilo section supported by a single spot weld into a reinforcing rod chiselled from out of the ceiling. "I wish you every success," I say, making a mental note to use the hotel's rear entrance in future.

Night falls, and a hip-hop rhythm fills the street. From the minaret, the muezzin calls, once more, the faithful to prayer. His beautiful voice interprets the beat he cannot hear, as he hangs his old, devotional melody onto a bare, 20th century frame. I feel poised between two worlds. I experience a second sense of arrival—as if the sights, sounds, and smells of Egypt have taken sixteen days to wend their way to my core. I am here and nowhere else. I leave my old love behind, and my heart joins me on my journey. Where is she, my perfect woman—ahead of me now? I lie in a bed still warm from her sleep, suck on a shisha still wet from her mouth. She is around the next corner—my Tantalus—she draws me. The full moon rises to shine confirmation and to bring me back to the night. I can fantasise all I will about this and other futures; but I must reference nothing to them, for reality will differ from the fantasy in all meaningful ways. I may be here, but if I am to grasp the never-ending now, I must know the future for the fantasy it is.

Lost in thought, I recognise the sound too late, but see the perfumed cloud of pesticides engulfing the building. I race upstairs to the bedroom to close the French windows. But there is Marcus, draped in a bath towel, bathing in the aroma, breathing it in through flared nostrils—as a crazed dictator breathes, from his balcony, the adoration of the crowd. He tolerates my fussiness with aplomb. He is high on antiquity. He has scaled boiling mountains and plumb dusty tombs, and he sings as he showers. The water running down his body and across the floor is brown with this dust, dust that sprang from the Nile and lay millennia in a Pharaoh's grave

till Marcus helped it hitch a ride back home via a plug hole. If I am not now experiencing awe, I never shall.

Sweat

"The washer-woman, she want to marry a tourist, any tourist. Maybe you?" laughs the hotel receptionist as we settle our bill. I sit on the train reflecting on this as I almost retch on the smell of sweat from my freshly-washed clothes. I wasn't aware of it while going about our morning business of buying tickets from the conjuring ticket salesman—who is so good at swapping banknotes that he is known for it throughout the length of the land. He swaps them while you watch and then swaps them back sadly when you shake your head in dissaproval at him. Anyway, my prospective fiancée neglected to use soap when she washed my clothes. I don't really mind smelling of sweat, but this is not just my sweat. Sitting in the stifling, mostly empty train, I spend the time trying to decide just how many people I smell of, but keep losing count. If I close my eyes, I have the impression that the carriage has magically filled. Marcus is delighted with my predicament. He sits some distance away and howls with laughter each time someone sits momentarily beside me.

The voyage is slow. As we pass through Asyut—a fundamentalist stronghold and a likely place for the train to get shot up—a spotty-faced adolescent in street-casual clothes, whom I mistook for a hustler, stands up and delivers a mahogany smile. From under his leather jacket he draws an oily machine gun, two magazines taped back to back curling out of the breach, and leans out the window. He is from the Mukhabarat, the Egyptian Secret Police, the ones that so expertly dispersed Winnifred's manifestation. He is here to protect us. I smile back at him, but feel like a sheep staring down a collie's throat.

Now the sun is gone and the danger passed as we roll down the Nile basin. This is the grinding part—our bodies numbed by lack of exercise, our brains craving sleep, but aware that there is much to be done before they may be pillowed. Too tired to haggle with taxi drivers, and too stingy not to, we walk through the night to the Nefertiti Hotel—a big improvement on the Sultan. Just opposite is the New Sun tea-shop, and here we sit puffing and sipping another lazy night away. I am happy to note that, in the pungence of the capital, I am unable to detect even the slightest whiff rising from my person.

Hamseen

Cairo, Al Quhira, The Conqueror—and I am conquered by whatever Marcus had. Food is not staying inside long enough to be digested, and what is worse, I must quit shi and shisha. It would be fine just to hang out, but I have business to attend to. I walk clear across Cairo to the Jordanian Embassy. On the way, I stop at a roadside barrow for a plate of foul (beans—spelt foul, pronounced fool), and am gifted a cup of tea in a nearby café by an Egyptian who works in Saudi Arabia, and returns home only for holidays. "What's it like?" I ask, unimaginatively.

"Like everywhere—good people, bad people."

I get visa number two, with one month to arrive at the border—no problem. Impressed by this speed, I call at the Syrian Embassy; but whereas Jordan encourages tourists, Syria demoralises them. Obtaining a visa is a two-day bun fight in a crowded office. I stand outside the door and stare in at a crowd of people that is behaving like a rat-king, a pack of rats with its tails tied together. Among them, a man sweeps up dust in the most haphazard way. Just as I am tempted to snatch the broom from his hands, I decide that I am in no mood for diplomacy, and leave.

Out in the street, the hamseen, the fifty-day wind, pauses on his long flight north from the Sahara to grit my eye and rush about the street in three different directions. An irritating wind in more ways than one, the hamseen is credited with inflaming passions, and—as with the Mistral—crimes committed under his spell are treated with lenience. As I walk around for a couple of hours looking for a misplaced Post Office, the scene is powerful. A brown genie of

dust obscures the whole city, and dry, wintered trees cast down showers of twigs at every poke of his fingers. Half-blinded, I wait five minutes to cross a main road. I watch the green man beckon repeatedly through four packed lanes of swiftly-moving traffic before I recall that Egyptian traffic signals are advisory. Crossing the Nile by one of its long bridges is an endurance; but at least the wind, in the openness of the waterway, knows which way to blow, and instead of balooning my clothes is content to sandblast just one side of my face. Above the bridge, the genie swirls to hundreds of metres, arching and bucking in mischief; below him, a huddled family in a little boat takes cover; and on the bank, a solitary man watches his tree house takes flight from around him. It's not so much a fast wind as an insistent one—an *I shall do as I please* sort of a wind. On the Beaufort Scale it might peak four or five, but as ever, Western measures do not apply to Africa: this wind is wrath.

Foot-sore and hungry, I smell food and simply go into a café, sit down, and order—not the best approach, the price for food depending on whether or not it is already in your stomach; but today I am in luck and good company. The owner invites me to join his family's table just as the hamseen dumps a wash of straw-coloured rain onto the street. I finish my meal, but may not leave. It is not permitted to leave so long as rain might fall. Just as I am pondering how hospitality of this kind would prove unfeasible in Ireland, he asks, "What religion are you?"

The first time I was asked this, I was eleven years old and on my first day at the old school. I had grown up a few spits down the road in a seaside town where religion seemed as inconsequential as the rain, so I answered, *I don't know, but I'll ask my parents and I'll tell you tomorrow.* In the staunchly-unintelligent political climate of the Northern Ireland of those times, that answer contributed to my being kicked about for the next three years. While outside, the rain falls just as it would at home on a dirty March midday, I remember staring through school windows at the same miserable stuff, and thinking, *There will come a time when this is not happening,* and it did. Perhaps I let loose my present then to run the road ahead of me. Whatever I did, I did right for the time, but just as I must slip the future, I must also slip the past. If future is fantasy, how much more so the past? I can stir the stock-pot of memory, but must not forget to make the soup. The past got me here—that is its central fact. I can remember how in any way I please.

Tea arrives, and it is never so welcome. I gulp it down too hot, but it slakes my thirst like the rain slakes the street, and buys another moment. "Christian," I say, timidly; but surrounded by shiny new friends, I feel a fraud pretending to be anything. It goes down well, and I am invited to a wedding. The owner takes me by the hand and leads me off to meet the groom. Now I am formally invited. As the owner interprets the touchingly earnest Arabic solicitation, the groom takes me by the hand, pulls me down, and recites something that my ear struggles to unconstrue as, "Look out—him plenty big motherfucker!" They laugh, and I join them, shaking my head against the unexpected association until I realise that this is what he has said. His English consists of this potent phrase. What a shame I'll not be here for his wedding.

I sleep away the rest of day in a fug, just managing to get up to eat a meal with the irrepressibly well Australian. On the way to the restaurant, we pass a man with no legs, pushing himself along on a tiny board with four wheels. "Let's see your ollie man!" says Marcus, handing him enough money to feed him for a week.

Marcus storms on into the night as I sink back into bed and into the incessant white-noise traffic ambience that is modern Cairo.

Diplomacy

Totally crook now, my guts gurgle like a shisha. Gathering the strength to go ask for a Syrian visa, I sit again at the café in the embassy district sipping fenugreek tea—which after much debate, I am assured by the entire room, is just the thing for whatever I have. Around me sits a sloth of morning watchers such as myself, and watching us, and greatly outnumbering us, sit shoe-shiners. An old pro stares wistfully at my suede boots, scratching his head as if trying to

concoct a new pitch, but decides against it and swats flies with the cardboard flats he was hoping to slip under my socks.

Back in the Syrian Embassy, things are much the same. A Japanese traveller—legendary in their endurance—is pulling his hair in frustration at a visa that has taken him a week to procure and is "Wrong! All wrong!" Two Canadians insist that they obtain their visas today. They have been here three days in a row. Tomorrow, Friday, the office is closed for the Muslim holy day, and their flight to Syria leaves on Saturday. The official smiles and explains that they must return on Monday: the ambassador is abroad until then, and no visa is valid without his signature. Three Americans consulting a *Lets Go Israel* guide book have their passport numbers noted and are asked never to set foot in a Syrian Embassy again.

It's my turn. I brace myself, take a deep breath, let the panic subside from my eyes, and allow my face to settle into a mask of tranquillity "Yes?" says the official emphatically, anticipating a barrage of questions.

I am not to be goaded. A tiny pause, a tiny smile, and a tiny voice. "Salamalicum." [Peace be upon you.]

"Awalecum salaam." [And upon you.]

"Kef hallik?" [How's things?]

"Kul quiess." [Everything's fine.]

"Al Hamdulilah." [Thanks be to God.]

"Al Hamdulilah." After a decent pause, he brings up the subject of a visa. "Valid for six months? Malesh. [No problem.] Double entry? Malesh. Please collect it at one o'clock"

"Shukran."[Thank you.]

"La shukran ala wajib.' [It is my duty.] A tense calm has fallen over the office. As I walk out the door, buns fly again—with malice.

The hamseen blows both hot and cold, and today, with the sun blotted out, it is freezing. Still looking for the Post Office, I have to bury my hands in my pockets to get feeling to my fingers. I collect my long overdue and much forwarded selection of maps from Stanfords, which turn out to be very poor indeed—except for an excellent relief of the Nile between Aswan and Luxor.

Stagger, stumble, sleep.

Morocco is a Nice Place

Marcus is tired of Egypt. "Do you know any *nice* places?"

"Um—Morocco is a nice place."

He pops out and buys a ticket. He flies in three days. How I envy this free-booting adventure of his! Why don't I just go on a *nice* holiday sometime? Why these daft quests that leave me ready for a holiday, if I ever knew how to take one? "How do you do it, Marcus, just up and go wherever you want without a second thought?"

He looks at me like I am an idiot.

Stagger, stumble, sleep.

World Service

I've been here before: the seedy dive, the pounding temples, the soaked sheets, the sudden excursions to the toilet—essential elements in any good trip. It all fits. It has to. Make it fit or stay at home. The body and the mind acclimatise. Today however, I'm into escapism, and I trawl the airwaves on my pocket world radio. But where is the world today? I have scanned fifteen bands for a little mother tongue from Bush House, but catch only a wisp of Kate Bush

running up a hill on the far side of the galaxy. I'm surfing the light cone, riding earth's story as it disperses into the ether. Now! the BBC World Service. A white-coated engineer closes a relay in the bowels of Bush House. The Middle-East transmitters power up and sweep the frequency clear—a slice of pure British silence amidst a technological teraBabel. Ah, the reassuringly pompous little tune, and a conversational English class for Arabic speakers. Bliss! I get as far as, "Fancy a game of tennis?"

"Can't possibly, just had a row with Angela!" before switching off.

Veetameens

Oh appetite, welcome back. I run across the street to the juice vendor, who greets me with a sugary smile—brown and stumpy—and squeezes me a series of delicious juices. He is a little disappointed when I refuse the cupful of sugar he wants to add to each, and stage-whispers, "Veetameens," as if imparting a secret.

"Veetameens," I nod as I clink down each empty glass on his pristine granite counter. I re-cross the street for a hot chocolate and a three-egg omelette the colour of saffron, and return to bed for the unpredictable and exhausting process of digestion. Marcus is out, but has left me his life-size inflatable Yassar Arafat doll for company. He smiles as I engage him in some conversational English.

Dr. X-Ray

Okay, get better. Buy multivitamins and iron. Eat, eat, eat, and wash it all down with juice. Marcus and Yassar fly off to Casablanca today, but before they leave, they threaten to take me to see *Dr. X-Ray*—of the enormous sign across the road—unless I effect an immediate recovery. You know, I am feeling better.

Paradise

Much better, and I'm off to brave a cup of shi in old Islamic Cairo. On the way I see something that really warms me to Egypt. As I stand at the side of the road wondering if I should hail a taxi just to cross it, two boys ride past on bicycles. By the reckoning of my culture they should be in primary school, but here they are delivering bread in the mad-as-ever traffic. Cycling one handed, they balance flimsy wicker baskets one metre by three quarters of a metre by half a metre high on their heads. Each is filled with steaming loaves with more piled on top—small loads by Cairo standards, but these are small boys. The smaller one, with a growing look of alarm, is losing his balance; his load pulls him in one direction, while the traffic encourages him in another. He tumbles, and gives the bread to the tarmac. At first I am relieved that no one runs over him, then amazed that no one runs over a single loaf of his bread. Before the tears can well in his eyes, cars and buses stop, people get out, collect and dust the loaves, and set them piled and boxed on the pavement. No horn is sounded, no recognition is sought by any of the helpers. As he stands transfixed and sobbing while duty is simply done around him, I am reminded sharply back to my culture where every item of courtesy demands the receipt of thanks. In a perfect post-script, a Ray-Bann'd businessman arrives a little late on the scene, strides three paces off his spoor and, without breaking step, slips a few folded bills into the boy's pocket. A bystander in every respect, I watch their baskets till, bobbing like coracles on the tide, they merge with the ebbing traffic.

This is my first trip off the main routes, and hidden in the twists and turns of ancient streets, I find the city's smouldering inner peace. I sit in a small square—if it may be called such—an accidental shape arisen from the wishes of the surrounding buildings not to touch. One hundred metres from the busy souk, down a narrow alley lined with dealers in precious stones, a path less-travelled darkens and drops to rise again in this crystalline space. One corner abuts on a

mosque and appears to dead-end but for a steady stream of clean boys, who disappear into it bearing tarnished copper pots freshly forged back at the sound of a hundred hammers. Emerging, return filthy boys, clods of soot rolling from them, bearing pots that sparkle lustily in the sunlight. One boy catches a glimpse of himself and delicately pops a blackhead, which in his filth, only he could see. Carved out of my corner sits a tea-shop terrace where four jolly men play dominoes, two watching at any time. The games crash on; ear-cracking deliveries compete with roars of excitement and dismay that crest at the end of each game. The tempo is elastic: the players jerk to their galloping rhythm, the watchers set in glue.

Later, in the Café Excelsior, not two minutes from the Nefertiti, I am engaged in conversation."What religion are you?"

I decide to roll out truth. "I have no religion."

"Mish mumpkin!" [Not possible!] he says." What happens when you die?"

"Turn to dust—finish." He looks bewildered.

"But we are going to Paradise!" It is said with the simplicity of an invitation to a picnic—*why not come along?* is the undertone. "Why be a good man all your life, and not go to heaven?"

"Goodness is its own reward."

"But bad men lead good lives!"

"To live life as a bad man is its own reward."

"And what if the bad man enjoys being bad?"

"Then all the worse for him." Never do I lose an argument so completely as this one, but on it goes. I remember why I developed the habit of proclaiming to be Christian.

"One day, my friend, God will meet you on Al Sirat, the Bridge to Paradise. What will you say to Him?"

What indeed? I certainly wouldn't be on first name terms, not that God would have one—a *given* name, that is, and a Christian name seems out of the question. "I suppose *sorry* would be a start."

Thankfully, he ignores me. "If you do not believe, why should He let you cross?" You will spend *eternity* in hell with the bad men—is that good?"

"Is it better to be good for goodness' sake, or to be good because of the threat of hell?" His nervous smile answers that well enough, and I catch a glimpse of the great desert God greeting me this side of eternity, the keen edge of his scimitar confounding me to the fall. Belief, in the Western sense, as an alternative to disbelief is not an issue here. One Christian tried to beat belief into me as a tenet of Christianity—*who believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life*—an achievable improbable in a lifetime's struggle to deny the reality of death. You trade in your common sense each morning for the reassurance that your dead loved ones are not really dead, but living somewhere wonderful, awaiting you. You turn your nose up at the one thing your god has surely given you—life—and smugly await another one, a *better* one. That is the prize for choosing belief; but here, the option of choice is a nothing, a shadow that cowers in the desert sun.

A Very Good Day

I stare down at a perfect turd-shaped turd spiralling into the calcified abyss, bid it safe passage through the Straits of Gibraltar, and know in my heart that today will be a very good day. And in the Irish Embassy, the letter of recommendation for my Lebanese visa is delivered with such grace, courtesy, and efficiency that I stand a moment growing homesick, scenting salt-breeze in the air-conditioning, feeling moss sprout between my toes. "Sorry to keep you waiting!" say the aid cheerily, her freckles dancing in an Irish smile. I have waited perhaps five minutes.

Emboldened with health and the all-consuming well-being that feeds the reference mania that transforms the most ambiguous of omens into a cosmic signpost, I tackle the Lebanese Embassy, reputedly the most intractable of all. After the perfectly performed perfunctory

period of politeness, the official sighs, “The nearest Lebanese Embassy to your country is in London. Why did you not obtain your visa in London?”

“The nearest Irish Embassy to your country is in Tel Aviv. Does that answer your question?” A moment of silence is violated first by a wave of translation, and then by one of laughter. *Damn,* I’m on form today. I collect my visa in two days.

One lunar month into the trip, about half an inch into a good foot’s journey, and I’m still in Cairo—Um Dunya, mother of the world. It is said that this city of twenty millions, which grows by five thousand people every day, where just to breathe a day’s air tars your lungs like a pack and a half of cigarettes, grows on you. After four days you start to like it. I have been here over a week, and I am in love.

I have enthusiasm today, if little awe. Anxious to shake off the guides at the portal to the Great Pyramid of Cheops, I completely miss the moment when it swallows me up. And the back-wrenching two hundred metre genuflection to gain the Queen’s Chamber is poorly repaid by the eye-watering stench of piss in a quiet little room that should resonate from the unthinkable mass of rock suspended above it. Climbing up the Great Gallery—the long, once-blocked staircase to the King’s Chamber—my imagination kicks in and measures, in sweat and grunts, the scale that is otherwise impossible to gauge. One of Napoleon’s engineers calculated that with the stone from this Pyramid he could build a wall three metres high around France, though I have never found this kind of fact helpful.

Sitting inside the King’s Chamber—no bigger than a living room—for an hour is like watching a time-lapse nature documentary. A Japanese man comes in, wheels around and fires his flash five times in twenty seconds then is gone, the camera having barely left his face. A coach-load of Scandinavian tourists ducks in through the low entrance, knuckle-scraping protohumans evolving instantly into photogenic bipeds. Being seen in the King’s Chamber seems more important than seeing the King’s Chamber, and photos are fair proof, so why stop to look around? Except to check if anyone else is looking at you, of course, and the less you have to do of that the better. I sit and try to feel the bulk of the building around me—the motor-drives dulling my ears, the flash-guns draining my eyes, and the surge of momentary visitors dampening my imagination—and to some extent I succeed. I celebrate by sliding down the banister of the Great Gallery into the arms of a sleepy guard who enjoys the transgression enough to shake my hand.

Though I arrived late to the Pyramids, I have quenched my antiquity thirst and am working on the other kind with a hot, sweet tea. My first shisha for a week leaves me unmoved—perhaps I am just too healthy today. After Cheops, I move on to Chephren, every bit as magnificent but more peaceful. Its inner chambers are closed, so not many bother to visit. The steps to the high entrance are unpatrolled and I am able to sit by the closed gate and gaze back at Cheops a long while. But Chephren, with its smooth white-limestone crest, wins me. The remains of its original casing, the rest having been hauled or worn away, sit like a skull-cap overhanging the crumbling blocks. I spy a route up the corner to the top, dangerous but possible, fun but an unpermissible erosive attack on a world monument. I want to fetch my rock boots and come back a hundred years ago when such things were considered ‘good form’.

On my way over to the third and smallest of the Giza Pyramids, that of Mycenius, I unfortunately meet a man that tells me the Tourist and Antiquities Police—the very people charged with the protection of the Pyramids—will lead me to the top for a fee! I go on to have a look at Mycenius, and of course the Sphinx, to which I gain free entry by the unlikely wheeze of walking slowly backwards through the gate, but I can’t get the idea of a climb out of my head.

When the sun has set, and the last-quarter night fallen black, I sneak in to hide under the grandstand and watch a bit of the Son et Lumière, but again, it is dull compared to the spectacle it is meant to enhance. After a few minutes, I notice an armed, plain-clothes policeman watching me through his mirrored Ray-Bans. I am caught, so decide to pre-empt him with a question. I adopt what I imagine to be a gunslinger approach and walk straight up to him. This,

I want him to have no doubt, is going to be a manly conversation. “Marhaba!” [Hi!] I say loudly.

He jumps a foot into the air, takes off his glasses and folds them into his pocket. “Marhaba,” he mutters.

Having the upper hand, I press on. “How much would I have to pay you, to climb that Pyramid?” I point at Chephren.

“Chephren, mish mumpkin,’ [Chephren, not possible,] he replies.

“Okay, that Pyramid,” I point at Cheops. To my surprise this time, he says,

“One hundred and fifty American dollars.” Mmm. I let my conscience dissuade me to the relief of my wallet. It would indeed be irresponsible to contribute to the destruction of the sole remaining World Wonder. Were I richer, or the moon waxier, I’d be up there howling like the dog I am.

I find solace back at the New Sun. The long, high-ceilinged, brightly-painted café, opening three times onto an alley sprawling with tables, chairs, and Cairenes is bathed in music. A man blows breathily into a cane end-flute. His blind companion clutches his walking-cane high like a perch, and sings thinly and sweetly along in unison. Now they are gone, and the song of the street returns. The slap of dominoes, the cries of excitement and dismay, and below all, the steadfast hubble-bubble of shisha pipes. The Pyramids have stamped a big memory. As tobacco tunnels my vision, in the periphery I still sense the overwhelming mass of Chephren cresting above—a tsunami of masonry hiding too much of the sky. I am unable to correct the perspective, it rolls up from every shadow’s edge and pauses an endless moment before crashing around me. How did it look all those thousands of years ago? A thousand years before Luxor, even. I cannot imagine anything more visibly ancient than the Pyramids of Giza, yet Chephren was once new. Through parting shisha clouds, I see a powder blue and pink Pyramid filled with vast combating symbols, sitting all the heavier on this earth for its newness.

With my head buzzing from too much sun, smoke, and thought, I don’t appreciate that the mosquito in my room does not sit long enough for me to reduce it to a satisfying crimson streak. OK. One more bite. Gotcha.

Brainless

“Where from?”asks the waiter.

“Ireland.”

“Where from?”

“Belfast.”

“Ardoyne?”

This catches me; how can he possibly know Ardoyne? Most people have heard of Belfast, but this detailed knowledge of the city is so impressive that I decide that Ardoyne is as good a place as any to be from.

“Yes, Ardoyne.”

“This Doyneland is America hamburger Mc Donalds. Yes?”

“Well….”

“I am English, very good. Speak.”

“Yes, you speak very good English.” Better than my hopeless Arabic, anyway, for which I readily accept compliments. It’s a shisha hangover day and I’m sitting in the awful Egyptian Museum café trying to order tea, at seven times street price from this friendly waiter. Four shishas equals four pints of Guinness equals a hangover for me. I’m a national disgrace in that respect. Lucien, an Arabic scholar from Hamburg is attempting to educate me in Egyptology, and I would be tempted to leave if the hamseen were not blowing visible chunks of dirty air around a watery sky in a fair representation of my own state of mind.

I try to catch some antiquities, but remain immune to them. A long line of granite sarcophagi might be a privet hedge for all my interest. But I feel duty bound to look, smile, and nod. As my ears dodge Lucien's words, I spot a scale model of a Pyramid in black basalt, about one and a half metres on a side. Oh my god! At full size, the hieroglyphics would have been visible from outer space! The hairs on my neck bristle as I reel back remembering last night's vision. Yes, the colours, good grief, I was probably right about them too! "Fuck me Lucien," I articulate, "do you see that?"

"Yes!' He says, pleased at my sudden enthusiasm, "a perfectly preserved Pyramidion. It was probably stolen. If it had slid all the way from the top of the Pyramid, it would be broken."

The vision blows away to be replaced by another, of sitting one leg hooked around the point, taking in the ancient scene with a full charge of negative ions coursing through me. Lucien smiles a scholarly smile, which I of course return, glad that my thoughts are as unreadable as those hieroglyphs really would have been from outer space.

Boyish interest stirs further in the six stages of the mummification process.

Step 1: The brain is broken up, removed through the nose, and dumped.

Step 2: The viscera (except for the heart and kidneys) are removed through the lower abdomen.

Step 3: All this is salted and jarred.

Step 4: Body is salted.

Step 5: Body is stuffed with spices.

Step 6: Body is covered in resin.

Now, Greek philosophers, who could calculate the circumference of the earth with a pair of sandals and a stick of chalk, thought that the brain was an organ for the secretion of mucus, and on a day like today I can sympathise—but step one? The most monumental eternity seekers in history built eternal homes that would never contain their brains. Off to a poor start, surely, for the organ that desired the immortality in the first place. But I suppose all immortality is problematic—literal immortality, that is. Of a bad bunch, vampirism might come out best, and I must admit to fancying the lifestyle—even if you do have to turn to a crisp when the morning sun catches you out on the bog road on your way home after a good night's fanging. As drawbacks go, it's not the elephant's foreskin.

In the Pharaohs' brainless quest for immortality, everything else is done beautifully. All the gloop is packed into four half-metre high replica sarcophagi, which stand facing each other in alabaster Canopic Boxes. The body is wrapped in linen, and entombed in fantastically adorned layers of sarcophagi. Then everything a mummy could need for eternal life is piled around. I suppose, in a few thousand years, a row of heads pickled in anti-freeze and deep frozen in liquid nitrogen will look just as futile—though never so pretty.

Tut-Ankh-Amun's treasure, including all the things he needed for his afterlife (including his sarcophagus)—when not travelling the world—are stuck here in a room. His corpse (excluding his viscera)—in a peculiar spirit of compromise—is back in his tomb. An illustration of the scene greeting Howard Carter as he broke through from the tomb above shows a room packed full. I had expected quarters comfortable and furnished, but these are stacked to the roof. And this treasure that impressed the world is from the tomb of a relatively minor Pharaoh that ruled for only nine years, thirty-three centuries ago. The much grander tomb of Moses' contemporary, Ramses II, was built on top, concealing and protecting it. What filled that tomb defies imagining. Our generations are fortunate that some tombs were not looted until so recently.

We look for the Mummy Room, but are told: "Mummy Room closed," by a guard who ushers us out the door. The museum, which opens a little late, also closes a little early, it seems.

"That is not true about the Mummy Room," insists Lucien. "It *was* closed because of an Islamic objection to the public displaying of the dead. Now it is open again."

"I suppose the clincher was that, being immortal, the Mummies are not actually dead."

"Was ist das?"

"Nothing, Lucien."

"Ach so! British humour! The parrot in the cheese shop. Very amusing!"

Outside, the sky is malevolent, but sandwiched between the museum and a big coach-park is a garden—and rarer, a little Cairene peace. Amidst the blustery weather, I press my face into the cool grass, the traffic roar breaking as waves on an Atlantic beach below me, and feel homesick.

Lucien wants to change money, so we walk over to the Hilton. On the way, I notice that my travelling armour is complete. I can repel a hustler with a glance, discourage a taxi driver with a gesture. But the reason people try to block my path is not because they are assholes, but because they want to do business. I must back down, smile more, behave as a guest, not an arrogant jerk. Just as I complete another 'arrival' in Egypt, we arrive at the hotel, and I am bewildered by the Western-style tackiness. In the middle of the foyer, a fountain splashes to please eye and ear, but not the nose—the smell of over-chlorinated water would gag a lifeguard. I rarely feel out of place, but here I do. There are no culture handles to hold on to. We could be anywhere in the world—well not quite. The signs are here after all—a fashion shop called *Miss Egypt.* I check out a book-shop and find: *The Cheops Pyramid, Your Friendly Guide.* It is full of information fascinating to my troglodyte brain, maps of secret passages and hidden chambers. I am on the point of buying it when I read the blurb: *The Pyramid itself is in fact a map of the future!*

The New Sun bristles tonight—tomorrow is Friday, and dominoes fall with a keener than usual crack amidst a flutter of cards and chatter. A modest single pipeful will take me happily to bed where the nightly mosquito hunt is simplified by my internal map of all the bug stains on the wall, hung as trophies of other nocturnal safaris.

City of the Dead

It's holy day and the hamseen is still. It's morning tea-time and the day is warming under a faultless blue sky. Cairo is lounging, everyone flaky from shisha excesses and dazed from a week's hard work. Each morning, an old man sweeps the street outside this café and, though the road was dug up yesterday, he is here again this morning, sweeping among the clods and half bricks. He hides what he can in the rubble, and flattens the rest with his broom. He earns one eightieth of what he would earn in Ireland. The cost of living is cheap here, but not that cheap. Baksheesh makes up the rest. When he brings me my tea, hot and strong with a stout sprig of mint, I tip him enough for a nod.

As an assertion of multiculturalism, the Lebanese Embassy is open today. I must collect my passport and visa, so hail a taxi. Reaching a destination by taxi in Cairo is problematic. The drivers know the tourist hotels, and nothing else. I shout: "Sheraton!"

"Ah! Sheraton!"

"Manial!"

"Ah! Manial!"

"Hilton!"

"Ah! Hilton!" as I stab the map in an effort to orientate him, but it is an exercise in futility—better just get in and point directions. This has the advantage that, by the end of the ride, you have demonstrated that you probably know the correct price. The best method of payment is to crumple up a ball of notes and toss it into the front seat; this distracts the driver long enough for you to get onto the street.

At the Embassy, I greet the room with a *salamalicum,* and my passport is handed at once over the crowd, the visa perfect. I take time to thank everyone in the hope of speeding the next kindred traveller through these doors.

On the way back, I refine my taxi technique, utilising the slingshot effect. I get in and shout the name of a hotel which is sort of on route and, on approaching it, shout the name of another which is farther along, and so on, until an approximation of the destination is achieved.

I walk a long, dusty stretch in the shade of an aged aqueduct, running along the outskirts of Islamic Cairo, to the Southern Necropolis. I duck under a gap in a wall and fall into another world: the City of the Dead. The dead inhabit tranquil streets, a house for each family, some simple and some grand. In and around and filling every space between the houses, are tombs; yet there is life here too. Cairo's necropolises are home to three million poor that share the homes of the long and the recently dead. On Friday, visitors call on friends and family, both living and dead, and somehow an accord has been reached. I am invited to take tea with a well-dressed businessman, who leads me to a small, freshly-painted house, claps his hands once, and shouts, "Shi!" We sit together in the shade of an eave; there is nothing to be said, and only a pleasure in each other's company passes between us. Tea is served by an old woman and her grandchildren, who file out of the house to pay their respects. When we are done, and the family tucked into the shade of a small tree, he enters the house to pay his respects. When I stand to leave, I offer a little money, but the man takes my hand and says "La," [No,] as the old woman—hands tightly clasped—smiles on.

Everyone I meet greets me and bids me peace except for one man visiting a well-secured family tomb, who demands from his air-conditioned Mercedes: "Do you have permission from the police to be here?"

"The Tourist and Antiquities Police specially recommended that I come here for the wonderful architecture," I lie; but it is wonderful. Ottoman and sometimes older Mameluke buildings gather in peaceful graveyard decay. The larger ones are Mosque-like with domes topped with vine-wrapped cupping crescents and the stillness of eternity about them. In a bisecting road, I come across a street-bazaar that looks so normal it could be anywhere, but for the chained-off and flower-strewn courtyards lining it. I am happy to see that the merchandise is of the same quality as in Western Europe—near uselessness. At the junk end, piles of industrial jetsam are haggled over. At the fancy end, musical lighters play the *Lambada*.

Beyond the market, calmness returns, and through the narrow alleys and gateways, I spy an old ruined fort perched over the necropolis. As I draw nearer, I am gripped with the prospect of a climb. The fortified staircase is in ruins, and only a short length of it clings to the limestone cliff. Ascent looks impossible, but I am determined to be thwarted closer up. After some false turns, I reach the foot of the cliff and find the first six metres sheer and crumbling—a dead end. About to give up, I spot a hint of a path high up, and follow it down to the corner of a roof just above me. In the flatness of noon, it looks unscalable—but it has the polish of a used path. "Monsieur!" comes a shout from behind. I shall have to be quick. Whoever is following is still out of sight, so I skip up, trusting in the tell-tale marks, and find myself level with the fort. Following a clever route, the little trail leads directly to the base of the tower, where steps lead round and up to a high window overlooking the city. In the place I left a few minutes ago, a speck of a man stares at the seeming dead end, touches his heart, and backs off. I sit, drinking in a private view of all Cairo from the Pyramids to the Citadel and—spread out, one hundred metres below me now—the swirling lattice of the city of the dead. The adrenaline washes out with the sunset, and a delicious fatigue settles my limbs. I'm a dog. I know it. I carve my name at the top. I explore the rest of the ruins, which bear my footprints alone, and at length find another faint trail that leads swiftly and safely back to street level. Tail wagging, I slink off.

Identity

I return to the Museum, and find the dark, airless Mummy Room filled with the hush of respect. In each dimly-lit case, lies the preserved remains of someone a few thousand years

dead. How did the ancient Egyptians know what would preserve a body for a few thousand years? As usual, I am measuring time from the artificial endpoint of the present; these ancient Egyptians already had a few thousand years of practice. The problem with looking at mummies is that they do not resemble human beings. It is difficult to animate their wooden poses, and when the six stages of the mummification process are taken into consideration, it becomes unhelpful to enlist the imagination. Tightly wrapped in white cloth, the shrivelled bodies lie stripped of their original temporal navigation equipment of ornate sarcophagal layers, but next to their modern equivalents—thermometers and hygrometers. What is preserved in these glowing time capsules, in glimpses of flaxy hands and leathery faces, displays more the conceit of immortality than the humanity whose arrogance so craved it. The individual is not represented.

On my way out through the main hall, a man is taking a series of holiday photos of his wife standing in front of some of the more remarkable exhibits. She adopts an identical pose in front of each case. She stands straight and dignified, her arms hanging by her sides. She is, but for glimpses of her eyes and fingers, completely covered in black cloth.

Wanting a quiet day after yesterday's exercise, I sit in the tranquil garden of the museum and enjoy the sun. The weather is fine, the air, clear and hot, and I am in no hurry for anything.

In the evening, I take coffee and shisha with Lucien on the terrace of an up-market café on the Tallat Harb. I fall into discussion with the young man sitting beside me; he is from Saudi and is visiting Cairo. "Where are you staying?" he asks.

"The Nefertiti."

"Never heard of it. Is it a nice place? I know the manager of the Marriot. I can get you a *very* good deal there."

"It's fine, really."

"How much do you pay?"

"Ten pounds a night."

"Ten dollars a night?" he asks, surprised.

"Certainly not," I reassure him. "Ten Egyptian pounds."

"I pay one hundred and twenty dollars a night in the Marriot." He pays one hundred times what I pay, and finds it cheap. He eyes me differently now. "We are going clubbing. Would you like to come with us? I will pay for everything, and I don't expect you to have sex with me." I must look surprised. He leans closer and asks: Do you know where you are?"

I get the feeling that I don't. I shake my head.

"This is a gay pick-up bar."

"Really?' I say, surprised.

"Certainly! Just look around you." But look as I might, I see nothing. "You see?" he says, nudging me.

Instead, Lucien takes me to a party next door. It is on the sixth floor, so we push the elevator button. "Not elevator," says a young Egyptian man sitting on guard in the hall. We wince. "This elevator," he says, pushing a different button. He opens the door, closes it after us, and follows our ascent with a sad face.

On the way up Lucien says, "What do you suppose he does sitting there all day?"

"I can't imagine," I reply, and right now I can't imagine—anything. I am baffled by Egypt today.

"It must be terrible for him," he continues, "sitting down there while we go up to a party full of beautiful girls, loud music, and dancing. He will probably never see such a party!"

"No, probably not!" I say, perking up suddenly. We walk into a quiet room where six young men are sitting around a table, drinking beer. They discuss their country of residence with affection and exasperation. A diplomat, himself half-Egyptian, complains that no matter how long he may live here, no matter how well he speaks the language and knows the culture, he is treated like a tourist. A Japanese scholar, succumbing to the alcohol, expresses himself using more and more of his body. He rises from his chair at the end of each persuasive statement, puckering his face as if to kiss his rhetoric goodbye. They are Cairo's Western intelligentsia,

UN workers, diplomats, and students of Arabic. They are all fluent in at least three languages and are as sharp as razors. I stumble around the edges of their conversation—as unaware of their subtleties as I was of the sexuality of the café, the individuality of the swaddled woman, the humanity of the dead Pharaohs—and feel lost.

Anywhere

I am assured that I can obtain a visa for Turkey at its border with Syria, so can leave Cairo—but I don't want to. I have been here twelve days and have seen only a shimmer below its surface. Returning to the Nefertiti, I am accosted at the door, "Mister, five pounds!" comes a woman's voice.

"Five pounds!" I reply in fake horror; never does a beggar ask so much. As I turn, I notice first her polished shoes; but by the time my eyes reach her face, it is covered, and she is melting back into the street. Can there be prostitutes in Cairo? I replay the scene—the solicitation in her voice, the flash of her eyes. Of course there can, my naïveté knows no bounds. Once I had embarrassed her with my clumsiness, she became again nondescript, another person in the street, and of course, that is what she is. She may be a widow with a young family come recently from the country—one of the daily five thousand. She and her fellow travellers could populate Portrush, my home town, in one day. Perhaps she came last week—since then, Coleraine, my borough, would be filled; if last month—County Antrim; if Last year—Northern Ireland. They could fill all of Ireland in three years.

The modernisation of this developing nation is relentless and frightening. With so many jobs replaced by machines that are made elsewhere, society struggles to employ. The population grows as the need for labour shrinks. The people that flock here have no homes to come to, no jobs, and no prospects—yet they come. In the country, if they starve, if five thousand of them starve, they starve alone. In the city, five thousand starving people is a riot. For this reason alone, they will come and come. One hundred years ago, 10 % of us lived in cities. Today 50 % do. In a present most of us will live to see, the world's cities may be home to 75% of us, not really starving, not really living.

As the poor flood in, the Egyptian government struggles to maintain the city's infrastructure. Ugly, elevated roads run through the centre, devouring it, stealing light, and polluting the air with smoke and noise. Yet without them, I cannot imagine the chaos—as it is, the traffic is monstrous. After eating a large meal, it is difficult to cross the road. I have watched the ineffectual, flashing green man; watched cars push traffic policemen out of the way; watched old men and women stare into the gutter while they wait for a hand to help them off the kerb. I have never seen a really old person cross the road: for sixteen hours of the day, I don't think it possible.

Throughout this, Cairenes are perhaps the friendliest city dwellers I have met. For the most part, this friendliness is genuine, but they do need my money. With about one hundred thousand dollars for every large ship passing through Suez, the canal is Egypt's biggest asset, but is too small for modern super-tankers—they pass now around the Cape of Good Hope. As tourists, we offer a much-needed source of income, and are guarded like the family jewels. In the train from Luxor, I saw only the boy with the machine-gun; I remember now the gentleman that greeted every Egyptian, but glared at us: each greeting I realise, an inquisition; and that glare, a watchful eye. When tourists are killed, the economy staggers; so to attack the government, fundamentalist terrorists kill tourists. The less stability and prosperity this government can offer, the better seems the alternative. We cringe at heavy-handed dictatorship masquerading as democracy that arrests hundreds of people in one sweep, but we like the fundamentalist alternative even less. In a society suffering such upheaval as Egypt, fundamentalist politicians have a strong appeal. With a fifty-billion-dollar foreign debt, there is virtually no reinvestment. Almost everything Egypt earns, is spent on feeding a booming population. The promise of returning to a society in harmony ruled by God-given laws is a forceful one. Islam means submission, submission to God, submission to God's laws. Politicians can promise all that they please, but the truth is that no one can predict the future of

this country. In difficult times, there is a big difference between offering the truth and The Truth.

I buy half a kilo of cheese and go to an omelette shop, intending to be generous. Five thousand is beyond my scope, but I hand it over, tell them that I don't want any back, and ask for a cheese omelette. They serve me a two-egg omelette wrapped around half a kilo of cheese, and poke heads out of the kitchen to watch me eat it. Now I sit in a European style café drinking cappuccino and eating a piece of bread cunningly shaped like a croissant, while I watch the strange turmoil of the street. I enjoy being a tourist today, and my little luxuries transport me far. Looking out at the people of Cairo, I see in the old faces a memory of a city that they once owned and understood. In the faces of the young, I see the confusion of the happening future. Perhaps we all feel the same way—me, Lucien, his friends, and the daily five thousands. Cairo is just too much to be part of. I sit in the past and stare at the future. I am anywhere in the world.

Freedom

I breakfast on yoghurt, strawberry juice, banana milkshake, cappuccino, and croissants, and take the metro south to Coptic Cairo. Some of the earliest Christian churches settled in Africa shortly after the crucifixion, and these monophysitic Christians, who believe in the single nature of Jesus—as opposed to our Western three-for-price-of-one—constitute 13 % of modern Egypt. Although Egypt had been Roman since the reign of the Ptolomies ended with the last act of Anthony and Cleopatra in 30 BC, the name Copt is derived from a Greek word for Egyptian. The name Christ or Christos, which was added to Jesus of Nazareth's name by the early churches, is Greek for *anointed*—which in Hebrew translates as mashiah.

As I stand in the circular nave of the church of Saint George, admiring the shafts of coloured light falling from the high stained glass windows, the caretaker shuffles up and asks "What religion are you?"

"I…am an atheist," I say, curious to see what response this will elicit. He pushes me against the wall and tries to French kiss me. I duck under his arm, and move on to the next sight.

A group of churches in the Coptic Quarter is at the end of an underpass guarded by a ticket booth. Suddenly I'm religious again when I try to reason that charging entry to a church is against the will of God, but with no luck. Eventually, I figure out that the fee is being charged just for the use of the underpass, and find another route to the cluster of medieval streets full of mud and people. The first building I reach is a sorry little synagogue—recently restored, having been burnt down in 1967 in retaliation for the Six-Day War, in which Egypt lost Suez, the Sinai peninsula, and most of its air force to Israel. From the eighty thousand Jews that lived in Egypt in 1948, only five hundred remain, and this synagogue once again ministers to them. Next door, in the church of Saint Sergius—where Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are said to have rested on their flight from Herod's persecutions to Egypt—believers make circuits around the icons of their faith. One painting of the Madonna and Child is labelled a *Blooding Relic,* and the faithful shudder in front of what appears to be a smudge of black paint. In the church of Saint Barbara, dedicated to a woman beaten to death by her own father for trying to convert him to Christianity, my mind drifts back to Portrush strand, where the pellucid peace is shattered weekly by the proselytising assault of a loud hailer. The naïve paintings, some a thousand years old, are charming in their crudeness, but resonate timorously in their dark backwater, besieged as they are by the fierce iconoclasm of Islam.

As I approach, with some temerity myself, the other end of the underpass, I notice a doorway leading to the Convent of Saint George. Glad of a respite, I wander across the courtyard, down some steps, along a vaulted corridor, and come face to face with a mosaic of the famous Saint skewering the even-more-famous dragon. Below, are pairs of shoes in such quaint disorder that their occupants seem to have only just left them to ascend to heaven. Through a low doorway, a subterranean chamber flows out endlessly into darkness. As I stand at its void, details creep in, slowly at first out of shadow, edges framing and enclosing with rapidity now, the naked stone

of a small room. In an anti-chamber full of relics, coloured light cascades through a high window, and in its plunge-pool, sits an old nun in whispered discussion with penitents. This small, huddled figure, who speaks like a mouse—so softly that words seem hardly to cleave her breath—listens with the intensity of a beast devouring worlds of suffering and doubt. I sit quietly beside her. As she turns to me and smiles compassion, the touch of bare feet on stone flags, cool and unyielding, shivers up my spine. She beckons me to a smaller room, truly still, and reaches out to a heavy iron chain and shackles that hang on the wall. These chains bound her saint at his martyrdom and are utterly holy to her. She runs her hands over them, and they rattle loudly against the stone. Lifting and briefly embracing them to her slight frame, she wraps them now around me, clasping the manacle about my neck. The sudden weight of her chains fixes me to the moment, and with nowhere to fly, I choke on emotion as she stares me through. She frees me, leads me back to her chamber, seats me down, and puts a small stone cup to my lips. I stare into the light pool at my feet, with the bite of the iron still girding me, and gulp a tiny draught of water. It slides down my gullet to sit like a polished stone inside of me. In her chamber, the taste of religion is not so bitter.

At the far end of the underpass the guards rise together to challenge me. I turn my hands to heaven. "Allah Karem," [God provides,] I say.

"Al Hamdulilah!" [Thanks be to God!] they reply, and sit down. It is too hot to argue. I take in the Coptic museum and the magnificent nave, sitting above an old city gate, of the church of Al Muallaqa, but with glazed eyes. I have had as close an encounter to a religious experience as today's atheism will permit. I dawdle back to the metro and into the one carriage that is not overcrowded, but hissing like full of startled geese. I look up, the women's carriage! and jump out just as the doors close and the train pulls off without me. As it accelerates away, the hissing rises into shrieks of laughter that the Doppler effect does nothing to diminish.

Evening snooze taken, I sit in the Café Horria. Freedom, the name means, and here is some. Men and women sit together in the broad café, windows open onto the street. When I imagined Cairo, I saw the Café Horria just as it is: spacious and smoky, resounding with conversation and the rustle of newspapers read from back to front—an Egyptian version of any European *Grand Café*. "The only Egyptian atheists you will ever meet," says Lucien, "you will meet in the Café Horria." Just as I am settling in, he continues, "How easy it would be for a fundamentalist to toss in a grenade!" and he is right. We sit on the corner of two busy thoroughfares in the centre of Cairo. Beside us, a mature business woman hikes up her skirt, puts her feet on the window sill and puffs shisha, swigging at a bottle of Stella beer as she stares defiantly at the street. Freedom? Worth dying for? Absolutely, I think, and raise my glass in salutation to her.

Saint Patrick's Day was the day before yesterday, and I missed it, so Lucien takes me to the Nile Hilton where belated celebrations are in swing. The band is Irish, but playing Britpop covers. "Please Lucien," I plead.

He leads me out, but our way is barred by one of the staff. "If you don't buy a drink, you'll have to leave." she says aberrantly.

We push past her and onto the street. "Of course!" says Lucien. "We must celebrate Saint Patrick's Day Egyptian style!" He takes my arm, and leans close. "Tonight we shall see some real Belly Dancing!" The club is washed in pink neon, inside and out, and I become very excited as we sit at a table near the front, the Stella barely wetting my bone-dry mouth. The blood-boiling oriental spectacle is but a few shallow breaths away. Saint Patrick will turn in his grave, I ponder with glee. As the band strikes up a rhythm that *would* animate the dead, a fully-dressed woman saunters onto stage and kicks her heels as if waiting for a bus—for an hour. I don't understand. All the while, the other men are enjoying themselves hugely, tossing daily wages at the feet of this bored woman. Just as we are about to give up, she quits, and we glance nervously at each other: *It gets better, right?* the look says. Now a mountain of a woman in powder-blue lace takes centre stage and vibrates with no visible effort. She might be connected to a belt-slimming device hidden behind her bulk. The house erupts.

Back on the street, Lucien touches his head. *"Mein Gott!"* he exclaims, "I am to remain here, of my own free will, for an entire year!" I hail a taxi and pack him in. He rolls down the window and turns his head to me. "What am I doing?" I am unable to console him with a reply.

Progress

Leaving Café Américaine—perhaps the unfriendliest café in town—after morning cappuccino and croissant, I am determined to walk my feet off. I start at midday in Ataba Square, and unravel the knotted paths of Islamic Cairo from the Al Hussein Mosque in the north to the Citadel in the south. I register nothing in separation, but feel everything. The afternoon stretches into a long, single moment of sight, sound, and smell, paced out in matching heartbeats. My eyes repeat with the dusty heights of old balconies jutting into a sharp sky, and churn with swirling shadows at their feet. The ocean-roar of humanity drones low in my ears, and the cry of horns and welcomes darts above. Odours writhe in a tapestry of spent Oriental musk that smarts my nose. *I* am spent. At the end of a tight alley hidden in the Khan Al Khalili market, I find Cairo's most famous tea-shop, Al Fishawi, all the more welcome for stumbling onto. It is somewhat of a destination, compared to the substance of the New Sun; but its deliberate quaintness has charm, and there are not many tourists today. Tea is expensive and served cold—no street vendor would so dare, but such is the world. I have eaten the worst fare in the best of places, and eaten never better than one meal cooked over three stones in an earthen courtyard. The management, smug in its success, has lost its way. The trawl home through the souk, after loosing my stride in the quest for tea, is hot and heavy, and I fall into bed, head throbbing.

I meet Lucien later for an Indian meal in the Shepherd Hotel. On such a trip, luxuries are a relief, but they have the disadvantage of heightening expectation. Here, neither contingency applies. As with the Al Fishawi, this restaurant is show. There is however, quiet, and the echoes of the day fade to a silence ruffled only by the creasing of linen napkins and a distant rattle of cutlery. Egypt can be claustrophobic, and tonight we are escaping it. On our way out, we pass the in-house Chinese restaurant, the in-house Italian restaurant, and so on. From one carpeted pavement to another, we taxi to the Hilton Annex Shopping Centre to meet some of Lucien's friends. Swap the licence plates, and this seven-story spaceship lands anywhere. This is world culture—not in the sense of pinnacle of civilisation, but Petri dish. These ubiquities, isolated from and uninterested in their environment, have but one context: money. Nothing else impinges on their focus. At the top floor, up intertwining escalators, we find the cinema complex and attempt to select a film. Facing a giant action poster emblazoned with *James Bond 007,* I am reminded that our Western interpretation of 'Arabic numerals' is somewhat confused. As two men walk by, one touches the other and says, "Ooh! James Bond hamsa mia, seta o hamseen." [James Bond 556.] In one desperate, collective act of escapism, we elect to watch it.

In the café Horria, we find reality more acceptable if less exciting than the fantasy in which we barely managed to suspend disbelief. Mandy, one of Lucien's Egyptian friends, asks: "How do you like Egypt?"

I reply with my confusion of the past days. "It is all sometimes too much. I get lost. There is so much that I don't understand. I don't know what is real and what isn't."

"I have lived here all my life," she replies, "and I feel the same way." We were both educated in European-style schools, and our conception of reality is not much use to us here. That we even wish to discover an ultimate reality shows that we are prepared to accept the existence of two or more possible streams, some false and one true. In Egypt, such thought is bizarre, abstract, and irrelevant. It sets us apart. "I am a stranger in my own country," she says as the café closes down around us.

The night is dark. Another lunar month is gone. Back at the Nefertiti, I am just in time to rouse the doorkeeper from half-sleep and press a limp Egyptian pound into his hand. As I pass over into sleep, images of that silly movie roll past, wads of Egyptian dust clogging the gate and jamming the film. The African sun blisters the celluloid, loosing the impressions of the morning to wash over me. I am perplexed, and unable even to imagine why. Perhaps I am making progress.

Equinox

Today is the vernal equinox. The sun, who has been gathering up speed since his still point at the winter solstice, crosses the equator and begins to slow. It is time for me to move north with him. I spend the day in hospitals and bus stations. I stop pretending that all is well with my digestion, and visit the Salaam Hospital to consult Dr. Hellmy who, states the sign on his door, is a *Git Specialist.* I have come to the right place. So I have giardia, a protozoic parasite, and must poison him out—eat some nasty drugs for a week, then resume normality, I hope. Ah Cairo, I could stay, but there is so much in front. I must move east, across Sinai to the Gulf of Aquaba, then north into Jordan. I do it. I buy my ticket out of the despised megalopolis of which I have grown so fond.

Outside the Al Khuri Mosque, at the edge of the Khan Al Khalili market, I queue up, pressed against the wall of a fast-flowing alley, and await admittance to the Sufi dancing. A side-shoot of Islam, Sufis seek to achieve fusion with God through impassioned worship, and they seem to be tolerated in their eclectic approach to Islam, only because of their infectious enthusiasm for it. Sufi—Arabic for man of the wool—describes only the attire. Dervish—Persian for mendicant—is more instructive. Inside, to the rhythm of a ten-piece percussion band, swathes of Sufis whirl in an endeavour to harmonise the world, their long robes stiffening out around them. One dancer turns, hoisting a succession of heavy woollen skirts up and over his head without pausing or breaking step for twenty minutes. He spins as the sinuous disks cleave his blurred form, each skirt a buckling wave of cloth that burrs up through the air until, at the height of his two raised arms, he snaps it shut and folds it into the hands of an attendant. Eventually he stops—still—facing the audience and smiling. My head swims in sympathy, but his is composed.

Leaving the mosque, I meet Hazel and her brother—half Scottish, half Asian: two beautiful nut-brown Celts—and invite them to join my final evening at the New Sun. Within the space of a few teas and the haze of shared shishas, I fall in love with Hazel and grow old with her; we raise our children and send them out into the world; we stare into each other's eyes at the end of our long lives and smile at our chance meeting so long ago in another world. I catch her smile and fold it into my bus ticket. I have set my world spinning, and don't know how to make it stop. Tomorrow, I leave.

part 2

Travels with Venus

Promised Land

Nostalgia is a dish best regurgitated. But this morning, I stare past my rat-run balcony into the heart of the beast I have come to love, and digest the thought that I might never be here again. I recall listening, with some scepticism, to a report that the biggest-ever gathering of people, counted in millions, was the funeral of the Egyptian singer, Oum Kaltoum, held here in Cairo; but watching a tide of people flood the dawn-lit streets, it seems plausible. If one in four Cairenes lines a processional route, five millions, the population of my land, stand side by side.

Cairo lies behind now. It fell off the horizon with no complaint, and the bus slips under the Suez Canal with barely a gurgle, though overhead, the desert permits a handshake of oceans and continents. Popping up in Asia, I strain back, my mind full of a scene from *Lawrence of Arabia,* I have carried half a lifetime. Having crossed the Sinai Desert by foot, surviving sandstorms and thirst, Lawrence's salvation comes in the form and blast of a ship's funnel between the dunes. But that image shimmers and vanishes unseen: no ships plough the desert today, and only a line of palm trees, stretching to north and south, marks the canal.

Now the Sinai rolls up behind, ochre mountains jagging from a sea of their ruin. Verdigris candy-stripes race through the earth, bounding gorges and plateaux, to vanishing point. Our route follows ragged wadis cutting this way and that through a labyrinth of dry, dusty rock. I can't imagine how a folk could seek their Promised Land in this god-infested place, and manage to lay the foundations of three world religions along the way. Crossing here by bus in a day is just not as inspiring as chasing pillars of cloud and fire for forty years. Just as I begin to bemoan, again, the indecent haste of modern travel—not that we are bettering fifty kilometres an hour—the celestial blue of the Gulf of Suez bursts through the Biblical wilderness and strikes the thought from my mind. We descend and skirt the tourist coast, touching the Red Sea at Sharm-al-Sheik. Pleasure cruisers and beach elevators slip behind painlessly as we round the tip of Sinai into the Gulf of Aquaba and head north through cheaper and cheaper destinations till, dusk encroaching, we reach our promised land.

Dahab

Tourist heaven or tourist hell? I can't decide. Without us, Dahab is a hamlet of a few tents, some old pick-up trucks and faded camels, perhaps—a small Bedouin oasis. In an older world, these words were contradictory. In Arabic, Bedouin, comes from bedoui—*to travel*—and Oasis means *dwelling place*. But in this new world, even travellers dwell. With us—about five hundred tourists, all penniless by our own standards, all rich by those of our hosts—Dahab is a sprawling beach town. Landwards of the dirt shore road, stand twenty camps of simple huts. Seawards, lie twenty restaurants floored with Bedouin blankets and roofed with palm fronds. I lie in one, two metres from the gulf. Opposite, the brooding coast of Saudi Arabia looks close enough to dive in and bang my head on.

My week is mapped. I have six more days of poison to ingest, so I'll do it in what constitutes luxury. Another swim in the only-just-slightly-too-cold sea, another freshly-squeezed fruit juice, and another breakfast—my third—will round off the morning. Jordan can wait. Adopting this attitude, I understand Dahab better—it is superlative to soporific. Lazy conversations confirm this. Fellow travellers seem unable to explain what they do here—except to recount and exaggerate with fondness the length, breadth, and quality of joints they smoke as the dark hills opposite frown on. The Hejaz mountains and the Holy Haj Highway to the east are still backlit, and cast a shadow over my next stage. Soon, the sun will bound over and wash that uncompromising look into the waters between us. Later still, a desert sunset will gild and burnish them, a Venus-cupping third-day crescent moon will crown them. I shall want them then.

When I return to my little straw hut, I am greeted by the owner. “You are welcome number six,” he says, offering my key. Dahab has the atmosphere of Port Merrion on downers, and I am its happy Prisoner.

Blue Hole

I didn’t notice holy day passing yesterday. If anyone prayed, I missed it. Across the gulf it was observed, no doubt, but not here. No wonder I caught an air of disapproval wafting across. As with yesterday, I spend today languishing at the Blue Hole restaurant. I see how this town has grown. At first, a coast road, some huts serving food to the shade of beach palms. Now the palms are freeform columns bearing a canopy of blankets and matting. Sitting areas are defined by use, and the rough-coral beach stones are walled up and smothered with mats, blankets, and cushions. A half kilometre of beach is snuggled under this quilt but for a metre of tideless shore. The original palm trees look now like potted additions to the cafés; but if you stare hard and imagine, the old Dahab is not long gone.

Today, the town is filling up with newcomers—I think, with the arrogance of a just-comer. Taxis from Eilat, the Israeli gulf port, bring hoards on long weekend breaks. It is Jewish Passover, the counterpart to Easter, and Israelis are very welcome here. Many Bedouin preferred their custodianship of the Sinai—from the Six-Day War in 1967 until the implementation of the Camp David agreement in 1982—to that of the Egyptians. A map pinned up outside one of the camps shows the whole gulf—Egypt and Saudi Arabia included—marked with Hebrew place names; it is titled *The Gulf of Eilat.* But Egypt’s relations too with Israel have warmed since 1967. Israel needs a friendly Arab neighbour like Egypt needs tourist Shekels.

I have time to reflect that a trip can be an adventure, a revelation, and an ordeal—often simultaneously—with the effort of beginning that winds up into momentum, and the difficulty of stopping that unwinds into sloth. I feel a psychological hurdle looming at the border of Jordan. I expect no trouble, bar what I create; but expectation is readiness, and readiness the expectation that it will be required. I am suffering a mild case of travel angst—caused by the lethargy of my position. I had expectations of Egypt that differed from the experience in all tangible ways. My imaginings of Jordan are blurry ones: a future-memory of Petra sits like a sepia photograph on an old shelf; some deckle-edged postcards gather dust in a pile, on their reverse, Lawrence’s copperplate is smudged and indistinct, and only a few phrases remain: *Within the walls of Wadi Rum, a squadron of planes could have wheeled in formation…Amman—a dull city, a way-point only….* As I look forward to wiping that shelf clean and stacking it with new mementoes, I lament consigning the old ones to the dustbin. Just as I cannot imagine the real Jordan, I cannot remember the imagined Egypt; that shelf is stacked now with shiny memories, the old ones gone. I cannot remember what they were, or where I put them.

I take a walk along what is left of the sea front to try to clear my mind, but end up compounding my future-nostalgia. I spot a woman juggling on the sand. There is something disgraceful in the way a man may size up a woman in a heartbeat. Within this space, I have noticed: short blond hair; bright blue eyes; a strong face with pouted lips; a slim neck leading to wide, delicate shoulders; cute breasts; a narrow waist flaring to shoulder-wide hips; smooth, muscular legs rooted to the sand. Her poise says smart and tough. As another heartbeat closes the appraisal, I take in one last detail that coincides with the surge of blood around my body: a glint of sunlight on ocean seen through the triangular space at the top of her legs.

My mind lights up. I imagine that I might return tomorrow—see if I can’t bump into her then. Now my mind flares as I remember that life consists not in what we do tomorrow, but in what we do now. Within the space of a stride, I know that where I set down my foot will make a difference: straight ahead in the path, and this moment is lost—I shall never meet her. How many of these opportunities have I missed, each driving a fat wedge between me and my life?

A hundred times before, my foot comes down square on the path. Today, unaccountably, it turns to her. She looks at me, clear blue eyes flashing a cautious welcome. In three more strides, I must talk. Words shall not tumble out shapeless today. Two, and my smile begins its crease. One, a short-caught breath to fuel the erotic counterpart to fight or flight. "Hi!" I manage.

"Hi!" she replies meeting my smile. Shit, that was easy. I wonder why I never tried it before.

As I head back later to my hut, nauseous from the effects of the parasite killer, I sit a while in wonder. Einat—In Hebrew, her name is *spring of water*—returns with her friend Judith to Tel Aviv in the morning, and I don't know whether chance tricked me or treated me today. I let Einat go, and turn my wonder up to the stars. In this clear night, I spot a huge nebula in the constellation of Bootes that I had never even noticed in my northern sky. A galaxy millions of light years distant, of hundreds of billions of stars, hundreds of thousands of worlds with beaches like this one, perhaps. A head raised from the primordial sludge, mirroring this wonder?

Comet

On Einat's recommendation, I move to the camp she was staying in. She is still here. My heart beats faster. I join her and Judith for breakfast, but the more I know of Einat, the harder this becomes. "Have a good life," I tell her, melodramatically, and wave her off down the street to the taxi rank.

During a long lunch in the Blue Hole, I watch the prow of a warm front draw a woolly blanket over the Hejaz and towards us. Sunbathing is cancelled, so I hike inland to the mountains with three hours of daylight to spend. In the crisp air, the foothills seem nearby; but it is an hour's walk just to their base, where a broad, sand river runs between crumbling peaks. I choose the highest I can see from this tight perspective and make my way across and up to it. The topography is a jumble of upturned eggshells—the smallest, house sized, the largest, mountainous. The loose stone is treacherous on the steeper, lower sides; but following lines of intersection, the gentler pitch of my chosen peak is safely reached, and I gain a view worth the effort of ascent. To north and south, mountains crowd up on the coast and plunge into the deep-blue waters. The course of the sand river sweeps from the western highlands, where its rising is obscured by elevation and distance, to pass below and beyond to the plain. Broad and sure as a glacier, it spills an alluvial fan ten kilometres wide on which Dahab is built. Here and there, tenacious shrubs mark the passage of underground water that trickles on to feed the beach palms and freshen the gulf.

Dropping down into a neighbouring valley, I follow a steep-sided canyon, two metres wide and as much as ten deep. From a catchment area the size of a football pitch, it sweeps and curves, flows and pools, down its two hundred metre course. It speaks the language of water, but is dry as ashes. How did the aeons shape Sinai? In our history, this is an arid land. One day a year, rain comes to this dry place, and that day is today. In what measure of history does the rainfall of one day a year sunder a landscape and silt up a bay? Surprised raindrops splat like bugs on a windscreen, darkening to blood red the pastel ochre where they land. For two hours they fall and are sucked back into the parched air. No drops merge. No pebble moves.

From the East, the front rolls in on a barely-perceptible wind. The sky is closing, yet the lowering sun strikes though and dapples the Hejaz such that the crust seems rent by mantle lava pooling in livid patches. Below it, dark waters fuse into a shimmering white strip that marks the coral reef. From behind, Dahab is a shabby line of cinder-block walls that tourists are not meant to see. Leading there, a vein of quartz zips the rock together like a Stegosaur's back. I follow its gritty trail first down and eastwards. Now steeply rising, it leads me gingerly to the most easterly of the lower foothills. On this outpost, I sit on eagle shit and stare into the coming night. The wind fails and the eastern sky is frozen, clouds stuck fast to its darkened face. Below, the lava cools, the gulf between us blackens, and Dahab lights up like a string of fairy

lanterns. The encircling mountains close up and tower over. I lift a pyramidal quartz crystal glinting in the last-light and run down a scree slope into darkness at its base. I mark, as best I can in the starlight, this outcrop for a return I know I shall never make. An hour later, on the beach road leading to the camps, I fall in step with a German man in his forties. He is greatly bewildered by Dahab. "Is there music in your camp?" he asks. Dahab thumps in the distance like a carnival.

Einat is here. "We couldn't find a taxi!" she says strangely. I give her the crystal—pink, I now see. We dine together, and Einat invites me to visit her in Tel Aviv, but this is a detour I cannot contemplate. I walk her to her hut—right next to mine—and lean to kiss her, but she stops me. I say goodnight and wander down the empty beach to sit alone with my gurgling stomach. I am bewildered. The trip whips out in front of me like a scroll in the wind. I can read none of it, and only guess at its wavering course. I look to the heavens for my new friend. He is not there; but next door, in the Great Bear, hangs a fireball.

Doubt

I fill a pay phone with a stack of the biggest coins I can find. The line is dead and dusty for a minute; then from far away, as far away as it really is, I hear a familiar ringing tone. The phone swallows the coins as fast as gravity will allow. "Hello?"

"Wally? Hello, it's Chris. Listen…"

"How are ye?"

"I'm fine, and you? Wally, listen, I've only got…"

"And where are ye?"

"Egypt…Egypt…Wally…"

"And are ye well?"

"Yes, wonderful. Wally, listen! Have you heard anything about a comet?"

"A what?"

"A *comet."*

"Now that ye mention it, I think I did hear something about a comet. Let me see, a ten thousand year…" The last coin drops and the line is dead. A *ten-thousand-year* orbit around the sun! No wonder we weren't expecting her. When she last came, the ice sheets had just receded, and what we call the 'Dawn of Civilisation' was breaking—not far away—in the Fertile Crescent. How did we view her then? And ten thousand years before that? And by how many of her journeys might she measure us? By how many epochs hanging frozen in deep space, barely touched by the light or pulled by the gravity of a pin-prick sun? By how many falls into the furnace of the solar system? By how many whiplash journeys around the sun? One—when we reaped our first harvests? Five—when we began to paint the world on the walls of our caves? Five hundred—when we first walked the plains on two legs? When did we first exchange wonder?

After breakfast, Einat takes off her Star of David, hangs it around my neck, and bids me farewell—again. "You will come to visit me, won't you?"

With Wally's voice fresh in my ear, a thought strikes me. "Einat?"

"Yes?"

"What size are your feet?"

"Thirty six."

"That's, um, quite small, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Why?"

Why indeed. I have no intention of visiting Israel. Have I?

The sun shines today, so I pass the morning in the Blue Hole. I dive into the gulf to cool off and come up with an impressive coral scrape. The Israelis find the sight of a skinny gentile in his thirties with straggly hair and beard, bleeding from a wound on his side on Easter Monday

almost too funny to bear. At one of the dive centres, an Australian takes a look at the cut and says, “Coral, eh? Stings like a bastard!” He shakes up a can of spray-on antiseptic. “But this stings like a motherfucker!” Despite the inconvenience, the hilarity, and the apologies for such, I am having one of those perfect, doubtless days that come so rarely and are so readily forgotten until the next. As health cannot imagine sickness, as warmth cannot imagine cold, certainty cannot imagine doubt.

Einat is *still* here, as a small part of me knew she would be. “I decided to stay another day—you know,” and I wonder if I do.

She invites me to drink beers and smoke joints with her. I accept the beers but decline the joints, at first. I consider the exhilaration, the expansiveness, and the possible introspective collapse. But on a doubtless day, what is there to fear? I smoke, exhilarate, expand, and collapse. The *Will you sleep with me?* question gets stuck in my teeth. I lie alone in the hut next to hers fantasising about what might have been. Doubt has its revenge.

Black Hole

Einat really is gone this morning, and it is almost a relief. I barely slept for thinking of her—she was plastered onto the inside of my eyelids the entire night. Now that I am awake, if this hangover wasteland can be called wakefulness, I understand Dahab even better than before. Against this azure sky and golden sun, fatigue is nothing. I lie on a blanket in the Blue Hole ordering treat after treat. I epitomise indolence. I rose early, I will stay up till late. I shall achieve nothing. Tourist heaven or tourist hell? Hell, most definitely, the worst kind: for the first week, it feels like heaven.

The Last Pill

After a two-hour breakfast in the Blue Hole, I hire snorkelling equipment, and walk two kilometres south, past rambling verandas and broken walls, to where the beach resumes. Here, I am told I can find a stretch of pristine coral reef called The Islands, which reveals itself as patches of turquoise against aquamarine barely visible from the shore. The water is fresh, and for the first hundred metres, the reef less than half a metre deep—swimming it without damaging each other is tricky, but we manage. The shallows glitter under a thin wash of water and teem with starfish, hermit crabs, sea slugs, and sea urchins. Nearing the edge of the reef, cracks and fissures open into bowls and chambers. In each—looking like a science-fiction b-movie representation of alien intelligence—sits a pensive brain coral attended by a cluster of translucent fishlets. The fissures tear and fold the reef into itself, exposing vertiginous blue depths beyond. To round this margin is to follow near-earth orbit. To hang here is to know blue as more than a colour, it is to know it as an embodiment of life.

In the fifteen metre gap between this and the first island reef, the light slants down as through a high window into the depths of a cathedral. I drop ten metres to silvery bottom, grasp a handful of moon dust, and pour it listlessly. Shoals of bright fish form living mirrors that shatter, swarm, and crystallise around me in tune with unguessed whims. A sullen, blue-green fish munches the overhanging coral, then swims over to inspect me. He crosses out of shade into penetrating light that clothes him in primary colours. “Parrot-fish!” I cough out in my element, and he retreats deeper into his. Buoyancy spent, I kick for the surface. How many times have I seen this! but never with my own eyes. Years of reading Hans and Lotte Hass, and watching Jacques Cousteau have imbedded these images, but never the sublimity of their presence. In contrast to this limpid place, the underwater scenes of my homeland are of rusty decks looming out of green murk; of giant kelp and fat, brown fish hanging still, as surging waters lash the broken seabed back and forth.

I swim on, diving down through the sharp thermocline, until I’m chilled to the bone. One last time, I dive and click my ears three times before settling cross-legged on the sand. I expect

quiet, but the waters are suffused with brush-fire crackling, whose source I cannot guess. I mean to play dolphin, and stay as long as I can; but above is life and light and colour, and down here is the serious business of the sea. I frighten myself with the thought, and push hard for the surface. Crossing the too-shallow reef is a trial with numbed muscles. At last, I fling off the gear, drop into hot beach sand, and allow the Sinai sun to quell my deep-body shivers. And now comes a party of heavily-laden divers, stomping out over the living reef as if it were pavement.

Tonight, old faces are replaced by new ones. I experience more impetuous resentment. I pop my final poison pill with pleasure. I can leave. I celebrate by ordering the most expensive dish on the menu. He arrives: the most beautiful fish I have ever seen. He should be on the cover of *National Geographic,* not on my plate. I can barely bring myself to eat him. Now I hear news from Petra—it is snowing. I'd rather roast in this den of iniquity, than freeze in a more elevated place. Perhaps I shall seek out new faces.

"What do you think of Dahab Disco?" asks Tony, nodding his head to the beat and looking around him.

I open my mouth to speak.

"Fucking crap, that's what it is," he says. "You should try Goa. Fucking incredible chicks in Goa." He gives me a wink that hints of great sexual adventure. "Had to stop giving my address to chicks. All brown and sexy in a miniskirt? Fucking great! All white and woolly on your doorstep six months later? Oh dear, oh dear!"

I open my mouth to speak.

"At least with blokes you can go out for a beer."

I open my mouth, and await an interruption that doesn't come.

Sinai

Moses is on my mind as I pass the usual Dahab day of sun, food, and swimming. I'm going to climb Mount Sinai, in Arabic, Jebel Musa—the Mountain of Moses. He hung out there, boiling his brain and chiselling laws into stone tablets, while the Israelites would engage in whatever debauchery they could. The town gears up for the evening, and by the time I leave, the smelting of golden idols is complete. I forsake the flesh-pots and ride off onto the midnight with a taxi-load of tourists; they have been enticed by my promise of an unforgettable sunrise, but look longingly back at the streets.

Only the driver and I seem aware of the desert landscape slipping by, and he but dimly. The moon is waxing gibbous and sinking into the lower sky. By day, the sun's vantage is such that shadows run into the cracks and dry up; but now, the scene is a relief of creamy pastures and lagoons of night. The Moon curdles, butters the heights, then sets, blackly. The sky sharpens into whorls and rivers of stars that bleed light into the celestial darkness and defeat it. Sagittarius, the brightest region of the Milky Way, is incandescent. Gravity loosens its hold on the imagination and the sky falls away. The galactic centre is three hundred trillion kilometres below. For thirty three thousand years, its light has floated up to powder our eyes. To the north, the unknown comet sails past the pole and buries herself into closer distance—this is our last evening together.

After a few false turns, our Bedouin driver drops stops in an unlikely-looking place. A little dubiously, we stumble into the gloom of his indicated direction. The bulky mountains reveal themselves only by an absence of sky; a wild, wavy line of them roller-coasts around us, shoring up the night. We have no idea of where to go—and this is humbling in such a place—but we trip hopefully on between the unseen giants. My nose scents camel just as it flattens into one. "Camel ride?" comes a voice. We are on the right path. I become excited. An adrenaline hit surges through me and carries me forward in a rush. My friends fall behind, and I find the going easier outside of the flickering cones of their flashlights. The path switches back and forth; but irresponsibly, I cut straight up. Other parties sail through the blackness, tacking across the broad face of Mount Sinai like boats navigating a three-dimensional sea. Only

underfoot can the mountain be seen at all in the most delicate sprinkling of stardust. Unseen also, are the camel trains much farther up, but for when they crest a ridge and vignette the heavens with miniature replicas of the serrated mountains themselves. In place of light: sound. Camel bellows, cries of caution, and whoops of joy blanket the echoing slopes, and my quiet footfalls dart off to weave me into the whole. I pass unseen through effusive groups of pilgrims; they shout, laugh, and fall unhurt from their camels, to shout and laugh again.

One man sees me—a Bedouin. He calls me to his stall by the side of the track and points: "In sky…there…seven days…" he ventures in halting English. The now very faint comet is visible only to an indirect glance.

"Mara waheda fee kuli asharati alaf sani," I reply, hoping that it means: *Once in ten thousand years.* We share a look of wonder (to each his own, probably), and he offers a tissue for my runny nose. He is still in bed, but serves me tea, supine, then tucks himself back in. It is very cold; the wind tears a vocal shudder from my body.

"Not far," he encourages, kindly. Mount Sinai is still there, mostly above us—but then, *not far* means much the same in Ireland—we have more than comets in common. Not far brings me to a wide ledge full of people and camels and the buzzing of generators. Beyond is a spire of unscalable rock. My spirits sink. I stop before the pools of light and feel the sweat chill on my back. It must be possible to go on. I can't believe that Moses would foist the Ten Commandments onto us from so unexalted a place. Unseen again, I hasten through and find, to my relief, a tapering path leading away and up. A hundred metres on, rocks jut up like dragon's teeth and enclose the path in a narrow defile. As it wavers and turns, the little canyon seals off the whole night, all its sights and sounds, but for a shrill headwind and a trickle of stars above. I freeze, heart thumping, spirits soaring. Perfectly framed, and isolated from the background of stars, my comet burns, hair swept back and up in a magnificent gesture of defiance at her retreat.

Knowing this for the right path, no matter where it lead, I race on, gripped with excitement, panting and pawing my way up a flight of cut steps, pack-heavy and knees buckling. The last of the ascent is enclosed in a gully, and I am lucky enough to have it to myself. The steps find their clever way to the top, and I mine by their starlit sheen. Two and a half thousand metres above sea level, I throw down my pack and breathe. I stand in the strong wind cruising over the mountain and dry off. The adrenaline is gone, so I dress in all my clothes and shiver. The very summit is selfishly occupied by a little church. I resist an urge to perch on its roof, and set off to explore instead. I am alone, but soon three Koreans arrive. The first two are well over sixty; liver spots darken their faces. The third notices me and stops: "Mum and Dad!" he says nodding ahead. "Are you Christian?"

"No," I reply.

"You travel alone?"

"Yes."

"Good luck." He leaves me to ponder his meaning. It is about four o'clock. With one lazy kick, I sweep a flat rock clean of dried shit, and lie down, wrapping a blanket up to my nose. I am not aware of sleep, nor even of closing my eyes; but in a flash, the sky transforms. In one moment, the Milky Way twirls above like a ribbon in the wind. In the next, zodiacal light swamps the stars and ushers in the dawn. A meteor trails across the sky so slowly that I have time to turn my head and follow its passing with eyes that I'm not sure are open or shut. The sky lightens further, and the top fills with many denominations of Moses, and a few *don't knows.* Prayer groups begin. *Closer My God to Thee* is sung in Korean. An Orthodox priest in flapping white robes shakes a golden chalice at his following. Head bobbing to his noiseless reading of the Siddur, a young Jew stands on the brink as the east reddens behind him. Cameras whirr, chatter, and strafe the emerging landscape. Close by, a stagnant pool of light rising from the hidden Monastery washes out, and the walls of its steep-sided chasm fall into orange perspective. From there to here, the valley of our ascent gains texture and form. Beyond, a thousand hump-back hills spring up between us and the yellowing horizon. Our sister mountain, Jebel Katerina—a shade higher—broadens, and sinks her roots into the earth. The unhurried pace of dawn is shattered by the sun's coming. I struggle to register his rising, but he mounts the sky in a single bound and glares down on us in sudden day.

Tea-shops, cobbled together from planks, ropes, and tarpaulins, do brisk trade. I poke my head into one. A few-dozen ruddy faces warm to the steaming cups. One looks up and glowers at me—I promised him an unforgettable sunrise, he has that at least. Outside, the cameras fire off a few last volleys, and cease. The summit empties. A queue forms at the head of the gully, and all but a few of us drop out of sight. I breakfast with my Dahab friends, who warm to the serene daytime mood of the mountain. After an hour, the pilgrims emerge below the rock ledge and flow quietly down the ordinary-looking path that resonated so Biblically the night before. "There's another way down," says one of my friends.

"Yes?"

"It's called *The Three Thousand Steps of Repentance."*

"It's called the *what?*"

"Yea, some mad monk built it as an act of contrition." Girded by food, warmth, and anticipation, we set off down the gully. Exhaustion and heat conspire to trip us over into gentle hallucination as we descend through the cratered mountain. Hiding from a direct glance, but there in the eye's corner, pockmarked faces wail and stare at us with toothless mouths and eyeless sockets. Every emotion, mortal and divine, is carved into stone. At the bottom of the steps, before the defile, a fainter path turns left into a U-shaped valley graced by a stand of Cypress trees sheltering behind a dry-stone wall. The long, gentle valley invites exploration; but the sun reminds our rubbery legs and watery minds of his coming rage. Another day, I false-promise myself. Luckily, the path continues, as good paths should, in the most desired direction. Down a shaded, rocky chasm, it trickles like a placid stream, picking its way stealthily through boulder fields. We join another chasm, its harsh, clashing walls fashioning an even-unlikelier vessel for this tender way. We stop in admiration and fatigue more frequently now as the Monastery appears into view in the deep gorge before us. On the knife-edge of shadow and sun, we pause one final time, suck on a bitter orange, and contemplate the route. The mountain is unspoiled. Beyond a handful of metres, the path is not visible at all. It shows itself only when required. It is a masterpiece. We praise the monk that must have toiled like a demon through a Methuselan life to create this apology to his god.

We launch ourselves into the heat of a mature day, and hasten down to the Monastery, which is mercifully closed. Our driver awaits, hair plastered about his face, sleep crusting his big brown eyes, a lavish smile on his mouth. He had just about given up on us. On the long desert road, I dodge sleep, fighting the impulse to drop my head into my chest, willing myself to add just one more detail to this perfect day.

We arrive back in Dahab at midday, worn out. When I open my door, hot air rolls out to greet me. The sun is hammering on the roof, and the room smells like a fart in a sauna. I sleep naked and without sheets for the first time in years. It is disorientating to eschew the weight that anchors my native slumber, but stupefaction triumphs.

Complaint

I understand how the Israelites spent their forty years here. It is eight o'clock at night, and I am just up. Other huts awaken to the cool evening, and another round of indulgence begins. I dine in a restaurant that has one branch in Dublin and the other in Dahab. I order Italian food, which is excellent, except that the main course arrives first. In Dublin, I should complain, but here, I barely consider the possibility. The problem with complaining about a problem is that the problem becomes not that there is a problem, but that a complaint has been made about the problem. In other words: in the first place, you shouldn't complain, and in the second place, you shouldn't complain in the first place.

Reprise

Breakfast in the Blue Hole, and then off to the real thing. Lying ten kilometres north of Dahab is a hole in the coral one hundred metres deep. Fifty five metres down, is an exit leading out of it and into the gulf. 'The Tunnel' is popular with divers that want to weigh their balls. Beyond a depth of fifty metres, air becomes narcotic, fear disappears, and so, occasionally, do divers.

The road dies at the edge of the village, and the open pick-up truck bounces along the rocky shore without the benefit of shock absorbers. Sitting in the bare metal flat-bed is like sitting on an industrial conveyor belt. Eventually, we scrape between rock outcrops guarding the entrance to Blue-Hole Bay, and pull up in front of one of the two cafés. I leave my bag at the smaller, tattier one, and suit up. No chills today, I have hired wetsuit and weight belt. I leap in where the Blue Hole almost touches the shore and hover between sky and sea, between heat and chill. Too buoyant, I duck down, and the suit buckles and looses a jellyfish air bubble. Neutral now, I kick deeper, the suit compresses, and the weights pull me on. Panic now, I swim back to the surface. At ten metres, I am buoyant again—perfect. Snorkelling is so vital, so full of impulse and desire: the lump of fresh air gripped inside that soon festers and burns and demands release; the allure of the depths, the demand of the surface.

With the leisure of warmth, I enjoy the reef more, and hang with the fish, who don't seem to mind this ugly specimen in their midst. I drift with a slow tide over the shallows, and peer down as unobtrusively as an interloper can. Inside small holes, sit big fish in party clothes. They stare up at me slightly abashed, as if they had just been up to no good. From all around comes the brush-fire crackling that I only now recognise as the sound of parrot-fish munching their way through the reef. Clown-fish and trumpet-fish attend the anemones, and octopuses seek smaller and smaller holes in which to squeeze themselves. A tuna flashes through the deep-water fast lane and shocks us all; the fish are gone, the reef quiet; they re-emerge, cautiously, growing out of the coral like Gorgon's hair.

For four hours today, I swim the reef, hauling myself onto every suitably flat rock to bask seal-like, in the sun. When I have sucked out every ounce of fun, I swim back to the Blue Hole, take three deep breaths, and power into darkness. Twenty metres down, it is but a gloomier version of itself; enticing perhaps, but not to me. I am happy to push it behind and burst out into air and sunshine. I dine well in the little café, and soak up the last of the sun. Just before the pick-up truck leaves, I walk to the end of the bay to read a brass plaque dedicated to some of the Blue Hole's previous visitors—all younger than me, and all dead. *May you find peace in the depths of the Blue Hole,* it says.

Tomorrow, my Egyptian visa runs out. I must either leave the country or backtrack to Cairo to renew it. I hate to backtrack. Although I have heard no further weather reports from up north, the decision is clear. I am impatient to continue the trip, whatever awaits. In the morning, I shall catch the Nuweiba–Aquaba ferry to Jordan. I walk up the dusty street and peer into the makeshift restaurants one last time. I am surprised at how many people I know. Hands are shaken in farewell, and good wishes swapped. I thought Dahab was not my kind of place, but it has treated me well. I have regained both health and impetus. As I walk back and past the Blue Hole café, a woman's voice calls out to me. It is Hazel.

Jordan

I spend most of the night setting and resetting my alarm clock according to the different departure times for Cairo and Nuweiba; but in the end, the road wins. At eight thirty, still awake, I watch the Cairo bus leave without me. As I wait, and wait, for the taxi that will bring me up the coast, I think of Hazel, and scrape together all the excuses I can to stay, but in the end, they do not amount to enough.

I am very late for the boat. When I arrive at the closed gate, the guard stiffens. A very loud "Salamalicum" wakens the sergeant from his midday sleep, and he steps out of his hut to have a look at me. I greet him effusively in Arabic.

He knows very well what I am up to, but is generous enough to rise to it. "Mesh!" [OK!] he says to the guard.

In the passport office, I venture the same approach, with less immediate success. The official pulls a sour face and begins a meticulous inspection of my passport. I have a one-month visa and have been here for one month and fourteen days. I was told at Cairo that an overstay of fourteen days was permissible, but—and this was gravely emphasised—not fifteen. I doubt my arithmetic for a moment, but the exit stamp is produced and brought down with force. Now he reads whatever was written up in the refrigerator shop, and shakes his head. He looks at me, then hands over my passport. I turn to run for the boat. "Istenni!" [Wait!] he commands at my back. *What new horror?* I think. He offers a polo mint.

We push out into a Gulf that runs to the horizons. More than five thousand kilometres south in Mozambique, the Great African Rift Valley begins. Widening by six centimetres a year, it tears up through Malawi, Tanzania, and Kenya, to Ethiopia, where the Red Sea finds it. It rises again to cradle the Dead Sea between Israel and Jordan, before giving itself up to the deserts of Syria. Ahead of us lies Jordan and a sliver of Israel. To our right lies Saudi, and to our left, Egypt—each mirroring the other. Between them, steams the *Concord,* the serviceable rust bucket carrying us: a few thousand people, a few hundred vehicles, and as much as we can carry. The deck sports today are smoking, sleeping, praying, and drinking tea. Deals are negotiated between the passengers; they haggle, bargain, and exchange money, goods, and promissory notes. The tone is lively and welcoming. At first, I think myself the only tourist on the ship, but I soon spot other pink faces in the crowds—not many, but present. One hour away, up the blue Gulf, a new country awaits; behind us, Dahab and Hazel recede. I wonder how long her strong face will haunt me; but I shall not soil her memory with regret. I force my fantasy on. What consternation awaits at landfall? What shall infuriate and delight me tonight? The future is like my grandmother's Christmas pudding—full of well-meant surprises that break teeth.

I emerge from the Aquaba ferry terminal into a wild crowd being herded by stick-wielding policemen through a small gate and into a succession of blind, high-sided vans. When each is full and its tailgate fastened, it speeds away. I wonder at the length of the queue, the enthusiasm of the policemen, and the destination of the vans; but there is one exit and one queue. I shrug my shoulders and join it. Immediately, one of the policemen moves over to me shaking his head and laughing. Then, as Moses parted the sea behind us, he parts the one in front. One wave of his stick clears a way through the gate and beyond. "Ahlan wa salan," [Welcome,] he says. I point at the ones cheerfully awaiting places in the vans, and shrug my shoulders again. "Saudi!" he replies, as if in explanation.

I fall in with five tourists that are heading directly to Wadi Rum, Lawrence's desert hide-out, and impulsively decide to join them. We change money, buy provisions, and drive. Only now do I realise that I have press-ganged myself into another hasty departure. I had wanted to wander around a few days and catch a whiff of Lawrence. During the First World War, attacking Aquaba was thought impossible by land, so all its defences faced the sea. In 1917, Lawrence rode his irregulars across the desert and captured the town from the Turks. To see the interminable suburbs of modern Aquaba stretch back far into that broken desert, matched, block for block, by those of Eilat, Israel's Red-Sea port, is to recognise my folly. I am glad to be leaving. For an hour, we battle north against a torrent of juggernauts. We round blind corners at speed on the wrong side of the road in heavy dusk. "Allah karem!" [God provides!] says the driver, as he sneaks us past the toll gate and into the Wadi, where I make my camp on the roof of the Government Rest House. Below, other tourists dance with the Bedouin to Bedouin music, before retiring to Bedouin tents. But that is another world. Up here, a quiet evening passes with the bright Moon and stars, and a bottle of arak. The colossal valley walls stare back out of the night. Lawrence is here.

Wadi Rum

Dawn comes with a crash. For two hours, some fellow travellers have been shouting and banging pots together. They sit dejectedly now; perhaps there is no one left to disturb, for their early start seems to have held no other purpose. *"Guten Morgen,"* I bid them with little irony, for a fine hope-tickling morning it is. Another tourist is enjoying a different start to the day. He passes a fat joint while holding his breath around the first of it. "No thanks," I tell him.

He looks surprised. He exhales with a series of endearing cough-sneezes. "You don't smoke?"

"No thanks."

"Have you ever tried this stuff?" he asks again.

"Listen," I tell him, "the things I haven't done because I was stoned would fill a good life."

"A *good* life!" he laughs. "What the fuck is that!"

I breakfast on a sensational combination of mint tea, bread, haloumi cheese, and dates, and set off with three others to see the wadi, and to visit a siq (pronounced seek)—a narrow-sided canyon. Walking south, we quickly clear the town on a desert piste running between the valley walls. The eastern face is still in shadow, so we step over to explore it first. What looks like a five-minute walk turns into twenty before we arrive at the slope at its foot; from there, an easy scramble over granite boulders brings us to the base of the sandstone cliffs. Our backs pressed into the coolness of starry night, we look across to the far wall. Although more than one and a half kilometres distant, without a hint of haze in the air it seems a stone's throw away; only a dwarfed Land Rover sitting at its foot lends proportion. Now the air shatters. A Mig Fighter—already a speck in the distance—has sliced the valley, thunder surfing its wake. From Lawrence's squadron of wood and canvas planes, whose duels were fought with revolvers, to this, has taken one lifetime. When my grandmother was a little girl, her father read to her from the news-sheet of the Wright Brother's flight. It was a novelty item then. When she was an old woman, together we watched a live television broadcast from the moon. Another thirty years, she lived, yet no farther, nor faster did our imaginations fly as on that night. Our magnificent machines no longer carry us to the heavens, but dispatch us there by force. As the landscape resonates, the Mig returns. If we were not already looking in the right direction, we'd not see it appear to linger a moment—like a mosquito, after-burnt exhaust dangling like misshapen legs beneath—before streaking past.

We continue south to where the eastern wall drops away at the valley's end, hugging the shade till it deserts us at noon, then cross the sand to Jebel Khazali—the Gazelle Mountain. Between the masses of the jebels, the open desert lies featureless but for a few rocky outcrops. In the distance below Khazali, a wash of green rises slowly out of the wastes to meet us as a grove of four metre trees. The cliffs are inviting, but offer no safe routes, so we continue east until we arrive at the siq, where a crack opens the massif from its heights to the valley floor, allowing us entrance. One hundred metres in, the tourist trail stops at a number of inscriptions in Kufic script—an ornate, monumental version of modern Arabic writing; we pass on and skirt some murky rock pools to arrive at a dry waterfall. I tempt my friends with the simple climb, but they do not succumb. I continue, and find the going beyond so easy that I rush back to tempt them again, but no. The siq narrows to a passage one metre wide and one hundred deep. The sandstone walls have the sculptural quality of Gaudi's unfinished cathedral, of cement poured and fashioned into organic shapes. A larger pool, completely blocking the passage, halts further progress, so I climb up the wall along a ledge until, three hundred metres into the massif and eighty up, I am stopped at a blank wall. The sight of the gorge narrowing down into darkness, opening up into sky, and spilling out into the sand flats is breathtaking. The wall closing the ledge is marked with a short Kufic inscription that's sinuous script assumes an air of finality and warning. I feel small against greatness, and with a mixture of disappointment and relief, retreat. Seen from above, there is a clear descent into the passage beyond the larger pool. I take it, and squeeze along a narrow cleft that widens into a tree-lined avenue, two metres wide and twenty long, to where it ends in a moody plunge pool. From it, a greasy chute

reaches up, past where I stood, into the core of the jebel. Content that if there is a through route, it is beyond me to find it or climb it, I race back to my friends waiting at the entrance to the siq. What has been a precious hour for me has been a tedious one for them. We eat a late lunch and start back to the Rest House.

Walking back slightly west of north, we mount a rock outcrop and sight Lawrence's Tree four kilometres off, in the direction of the Rest House. With the sun falling, and the anger gone from the day, the way is easier. Lawrence's shade tree, standing alone at the foot of western wall of Wadi Rum, is now in shade itself. Behind it, sixty metres up a rampart of boulders below a broken escarpment, is Lawrence's Well. The sparkling pool in which he once bathed is stagnant, its spring diverted to feed a water cistern—but this is impossible to resent. Above it, the ways branch and twist back into the massif, but with only fifteen minutes of sun remaining, I am happy to let my companions call an end to the walk. Night claims the boulders, and a bright Moon highlights them as we pick our way down to where the softness of evening persists on the desert floor. In this last breath of day, depth leaps from imagination to perception, and the immensity of the landscape is rendered to scale. For a resplendant moment, the sun-drenched jebels and sky-reflecting sands are as a tangerine archipelago rising from the shores of a magenta ocean.

Sea of Stones

The Rest House manager draws lines in the sand and jabs his finger at the far, eastern wall of the valley. He outlines lines of ascent within the interweaving heights of the ten kilometre long, one and a half kilometre wide massif crowned by Jebel Umm al Ishreen—Mountain of the Mother of Twenty. In one of those unseen siqs, twenty Bedouin were once killed in a flash flood. "Move from one marker to the next!" he emphasises. "No marker—no way!"

Everything seems clear, so I set off with my companions of yesterday to find Rakabat canyon—the entrance to a route leading through the massif to the wadi on the far side. A twenty-minute walk brings us to the right of the enormous fissure of Bahr al Karazeh, where a now-dry waterfall has abraded the cliffs down to eight metres above the wadi—Goat's Gully, the manager called it—an easy climb. I start straight up. "I don't think we want to come any farther," comes a little voice from below. I am scared to continue alone, but hooked.

At top, a ledge leads to another, slighter waterfall. Before a higher line of cliffs, a wide, broken plain opens up, a dry riverbed scooping and pooling across it in anticipation of the next flood. I follow its course, but it uncoils into a bewilderment of gullies. I get lost. Only now heeding the manager's warning, I backtrack to the last Bedouin marker. Placed at strategic intervals, these piles of stones, a few tens of centimetres high, mark the route. From any one, the following should be sighted before advancing. With as much as a hundred metres separating each, it takes a frustratingly long time to spot the next; but—for me—navigating this alien landscape without them is impossible. The way curls up above the broken plain, through a saddle, then drops into a small canyon. Perspectives shift from one footstep to the next; an interlocking succession of bluffs opens unexpectedly into the delicate tracery of a watercourse that leads into the mountain. The way is marked when needed. Near every obstruction is a tell-tale pile of stones—barely distinguishable from the rock itself—that shows a clever route around it. Sometimes the way threads through the floor of the siq, where it closes in places to less than half a metre, then steals back and twists up around the sides, skirting dry waterfalls and boulder chokes. From a hanging valley, I spot wide canyon leading confidently through the massif, but can see no possibility of entering it. The ascent steepens. Barriers become abominable, and their avoidances harder to find. At each, I pause five or ten minutes before finding my way. I find myself twelve metres up the valley wall with the next marker on the opposite side. I try to talk myself out of it, but cursing stubbornness aloud, I hop one and a half metres onto a meagre ledge, and paw my way up a sandy overhang. As I reach the marker, I see it to be a natural feature. There is no possibility of continuing. There is no point in waiting for help. There is no option—I have to shuffle down and hop back. I curse my non-existent god now, and sit a few minutes feeling very miserable, taking in as much of the lovely day as I

can—just in case. In the end, the return is simply necessary, and it goes well. I thank my non-existent god for my continued existence.

I should turn back, but can't. After that fright, the real route seems easy. My muscles pull like pistons and my concentration is absolute. In five minutes I cover the distance that took an hour before, until I reach a steep rock apron, which I repeatedly try to run up, just to slide back down on each attempt. Regaining some sense, I attack a crack to the right, and squeeze up twenty five metres to the bottom of a short wall. It is perhaps three more metres to the top, but a sheer climb on crumbly rock. Below, the little valley that scared the wits out of me looks innocent and inviting. It trickles down to the saddle, through which a view of the wadi beyond now spills. Above, all is bare and frightening; I grab two fistfuls of it and pull. A deranged voice vents from my mouth "Don't do it, you fuckin' ejit." It echoes back, saner, and I heed it.

On the descent, the problems breeze by, and I am back at the saddle with three hours of daylight to spare. Looking down onto the wide, broken plain and its bewildering gullies, I realise that there are cairns everywhere, leading into every crack in the massif. I am a fool to have believed my trail to have been the right one. I look for the real Rakabat Canyon, but find only a chasm dead-ending at an impassable fifteen-metre dry waterfall that, I suspect, leads to the wide canyon spotted from the hanging valley. I follow, instead, many cairned routes to where they end at vertical climbs. At last, one leads around a precipitous ledge and into Bahr al Karazeh—the Sea of Stones. Five hundred metres deep, one hundred high, and thirty across, the canyon is filled now with the long shadows of evening. At its farthest extreme, it is sealed by a great stone wedge struck squarely by the sun. So strongly does the orange rock reflect the failing light that it glows like a stained-glass window bathing the sea of stones at its feet in a fiery radiance. The lowering sun gushes like melting wax from ledge to ledge of the flanking walls, until it sinks behind the western massif of Jebel Rum, drawing up behind it a grey curtain of dusk.

Eclipse

I buy *Treks and Climbs in the Mountains of Wadi Rum and Petra*, by Tony Howard, and head back for a second attempt at Rakabat Umm Eijl—The Narrows of the Mother of the Calf. The chasm dead-ending at the dry waterfall, may be bypassed by an ingenious Bedouin route. To the left of the entrance is a pink slab that looked unclimbable yesterday; but the top is reached by zigzagging up lines of weathering. From there, a heart-stopping traverse over a fifteen-metre drop leads to just beyond the top of the waterfall to where the wide canyon leads confidently on. The massif is fissured throughout. Dead-end valleys, some dark and reptilian, some airy and abundant with life, lure in every direction. One leads to a hidden garden the size of a tennis court. Grasses, bushes, and a few trees sprout from soil tilled by scarab beetles, eagles circle their eyries above, and hundred-metre cliffs enclose it, but for the narrow entrance. Mostly, I follow the book, but cannot resist excursions, and the more I make, the more my confusion resolves into an intimacy with the mountain. I recognise the hanging valley from where I had glimpsed this canyon; I climb pinnacles that overlook the puzzles of yesterday; far-off heights, seen from new perspectives, gain substance and shape. The way is troublesome to find—there are so many options—but this path alone has the shine of use, and a polished top to a boulder is often enough to mark it. Where there is no alternative, a step or two is cut into the rock, but mostly it finds its way by stealth. It leads swiftly up then down through a tangle of deep, narrow passages to where the ochre sand dunes of Wadi Umm al Ishreen rise into view. It drops to the wadi floor and a wide, sun-baked avenue that leads out of the massif and into the desert. At its edge, on a high ledge in the shadow of Jebel Umm Eijl, I lunch and gaze out over the wadi to the pyramidal peak of Jebel Barrah, only a few kilometres distant. Another day, I think, and fall asleep.

A few hours later, I race back through Rakabat. Familiar in layout if not approach, the route unfolds adorably. Its surprises are welcome ones now. Back in Wadi Rum, below Goat's Gully, there is plenty left of the day, so I walk a half kilometre north, past Bahr al Karazeh, to Al

Makhman—the Hiding Place. The entrance to this canyon is narrow and cluttered with granite boulders, but rises to a smooth sandstone floor. It narrows further and entices the visitor to a short climb leading to a final, dry plunge pool. But back towards the entrance is a concealed path reached by more Bedouin steps. Hand and toe-holds cut into a wall, worn and camouflaged with age, gain a rock ledge that broadens into a higher section of the canyon beyond the pool. This route is for herding goats up to water; but like an insomniac coaxing sheep, I cannot imagine their passage. I follow it back, up water chutes and around stagnant pools, to where it ends in a little beach couched beneath an overhang. In this perfect hiding place, I sleep again.

The awaited sunset does not penetrate this far, so I walk out into the wadi and watch the setting sun paint the massif of Umm al Ishreen. A little to the south, the Sea of Stones smoulders in its reflected light. Above, the jebels and siqs are thrown into pop-up relief. I begin to know this labyrinth, and I stand a long time marking my passage within it. A feed of kebabs and a stiff arak send me early to sleep under the cool light of a full Moon and a few of the bolder stars. Five hours pass in a wink, and I awake bolt upright in an instant, knowing something to be very wrong with the night. The sky is tar-black and awash with stars; a sallow new moon hangs upright—Irish style—in the heavens, clasping her dead, bloodstained self to her side. An eclipse, I realise belatedly. Two and a half millennia ago, the ancient Greeks understood a solar eclipse to be the moon passing before the sun. What unseen monstrosity could pass before the moon? they wondered.

Three Springs

A voice comes to me on the roof of the Rest House as I am rising. I recognise the language as Hebrew.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Hebrew."

"You are Jewish?" He asks.

"No."

"Then why do you wear this?" He lifts Einat's Star of David, still hanging around my neck where she laid it.

"An Israeli woman gave it to me."

"You will visit her in Israel?"

"Ah…no, probably not."

"Believe me. If she gave you this, you must visit her." He sparks off a trail of thought in my mind that is as hard to follow as a Bedouin route. I try to force it out by reading *Treks and Climbs*, but today's destination jumps out. A ridge leads up to an isolated peak just to the north of the Rest House—Jebel al Mayeen, Mountain of the Two Springs. I walk up to gain a view of the wadi, and climb the house-sized boulder that claims the summit. Sitting apart from the massifs, it commands a panorama of Wadi Rum. The day is clear and warm. I have dates and halva. I ditch my clothes with the day's plans, and search out marker cairns in the landscape of my thoughts.

Rock Bridge

I am adopted by two friendly English climbers, Chris and Paul. Together with three others, we hire a pick-up truck to take us twenty kilometres south and east to Jebel Burdah and its rock bridge. Knowing the wadi by walking it, and by hurtling through it are distinct. In a disturbingly short time, we arrive at the foot of the jebel. Two opt to walk up the gentle Burdah North Ridge, where the massif tilts to run the desert through; but Chris, Paul, and I decide to climb straight up its flank by the Bedouin Bridge Route. The promised marker cairns are nowhere to be seen, so I veer right and find an easy enough way to the top. I wait for the others, but they are stuck. I return, and show Paul the simpler route, but Chris is out for a challenge.

He stubbornly continues up, and wishing to learn something, I follow him. He quickly outpaces me and soon I am clinging to an exposed slab with no idea of where to go. Just as I am considering retreat, I spot his trail. Leading up an impossible-looking crack—that first slightly overhangs this slab, and then disappears from sight—are some specks of fresh blood. The blood says two things: first, it is possible; second, he found it tough too. I go. The overhang is not so bad, but immediately after, its rounding edge is climbed on friction alone. I have, at least, a map of the best handholds in front of me.

The Rock Bridge is a spectacular eight metre span straddling a twelve metre chasm. Chris and Paul are standing extravagantly on its metre-wide crest, hands on hips, casually indicating distant objects as other tourists shuffle on all fours barely daring to peek. I march up to join them, hands in pockets, reflecting that I lack the courage and the sense to sink to my knees. We enjoy an unhurried snack and a little snooze in the shade of a wide ledge before continuing to the summit. We leave our bags and I lead along the shadow of the ledge to where it narrows. Hearing a gasp, I look behind. Chris and Paul are gaping at me. I lift my Ray Bans—unnecessary in the heavy shade—and realise my position. I am strolling a slim ledge aloft a lethal drop. I become brave: I sink to my knees and crawl back. The others crawl carefully over, but I cannot. I am spooked. I climb a far more difficult crack rather than face again that chilling drop.

In the forty five minute scramble over broken rock in the fierce sun, we regret leaving our water at the bridge; but the false summit is not too far from the real one, and we are soon sitting in its shade. From this overview, the geology of the region is apparent. The massifs are founded on granite, from which rises a soft, purple–red sandstone capped by a harder, white sandstone. The white sandstone is weathered into the rounded domes of the jebels; but where exposed, the softer, purple–red sandstone is riven to its granite base. The whole system is tilted down towards Burdah. To the north, the granite base surfaces, exposing the softer sandstone above to the wanton erosion that characterises Wadi Rum. By Burdah, the harder white sandstone, and its gentler contours, is dominant. To our south, the white domes sink deeper, till approaching the border of Saudi Arabia, they barely break surface. Seen from here, it is not the buttressed massifs that dominate this landscape, but the besieging desert. “There’s Lawrence’s tree,” says Paul, justifiably smug that he spots it. Almost twenty kilometres distant, the little tree offers the true only contrast to its arid setting. Its droplet of green does well to penetrate the haze between us. It sears through the dust to ignite our thirst.

We lunch back in the shade of the wide ledge, then split up to make our separate ways down. At first, I follow the tilting Burdah North Ridge, but every direction is inviting, and every vista companionable and eager to please. The curvaceous watercourses—some half-filled with emerald water—and the listing slabs have a stiller nature than those of Wadi Rum. The quality of white stone reflecting dust-whitened sky is enchanting. Horizons seem frivolous, and shadows insubstantial. The domes roll in waves, and ripple gently; there is no urging, no command in the paths that lead among them. The sun’s mind runs elsewhere, and time curls up and sleeps. My chosen way leads to just above the wadi floor. I skirt around and around, but the sand, though tantalisingly close, comes never closer than ten metres. In the end, I must retrace my steps almost back to the bridge before finding my way down. Thankfully, Salim, our driver is also late, and the hour we spend lying on our backs in the sand awaiting him, the warm afternoon blowing over us, is perhaps the sweetest of the day. As evening comes, so does the roar of his pick-up. Driving back through the gloom, Salim seems bent on annihilating every bush in the desert. “Ana majnoon!” [I am crazy!] he cries, as each is flattened under his wheels.

Aquaba

Chris, Paul, and I ride a crowded Bedouin bus, the only pink faces in a palette of desert hues. We are taking a break from the valley. When the bus—the first of the day—pulls in to Aquaba, and its doors open, everyone sits a while waking gently to the morning air before stepping into a busier world. The climbers go snorkelling. I catch a reflection of my straggly self in a shop

window and decide to tidy up. My meagre stock of clothes is ruined: beloved linen trousers hang in shreds and swatches across the prickly rocks of Wadi Rum. I shop. Dressed now in my first pair of shorts since I was small enough to be persuaded to wear them, I sit in an old-style barber's chair as the razor is stropped. Off comes the traveller's beard, off come the locks. My old self emerges from under the hair, and I recognise him somewhat. Eight weeks ago, he sent me here without really knowing where here was. We were broken hearted then. I barely remember why.

I wander about. Although the history of the Red Sea's right armpit is as old as history itself, the town's ruins date back only to the 7th century, and the medieval city is reduced to a few old walls half-buried in the sand. A fort survives, much altered, from Mameluke times. Built in the 14th century, it was captured two centuries later by the Ottomans. Four centuries later, Lawrence helped win it for the Arabs. Now it stands, strategically impotent, a museum to itself. The caretaker is indulgent; he gives me run of the little maze of staircases and dungeons. In the courtyard, stand two cypress trees. He walks to one, over eight metres tall, and stares up into it. "This tree, my father plant. He is dead." He looks down to the ground and then up at the other tree; its top leaves flutter just over his head. "This one I plant."

"That your son may plant a third, and his son…"

"Yes," he interrupts with a look that means no. He refuses the money he accepts from other tourists, and returns to the shade of his father's cypress.

I sit on a beach lined with tea shacks. A vined pergola runs out from each and down to the quiet shore. Between palm trees, wicker chairs and tables vie for more custom than can be got. In the softening afternoon light, the industrialisation of the coast stands out. From the coddle of a wicker ottoman, I watch flotillas of container ships await their turn in the twin Red-Sea ports. A few hundred metres away, Eilat, with its high-rise ziggurats, shouts Israel's conspicuous wealth. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan are conspicuously inconspicuous in comparison. I revel in tea and sun till the former grows too strong and the latter too weak for my comfort.

The evening come, my climbing friends and I walk the busy streets of the town. Chris and I buy Japanese watches marked with Arabic numerals, while Paul considers *The Prayer Calculator,* a watch that rings the five prayer times and indicates Al Chebla, the direction of prayer. There is some confusion about this; in all of Africa and Sinai, Al Chebla is west; here, a few kilometres distant in the Middle East, it is south. Paul wants to know if the correct direction is always indicated. "What if I go to Dahab?" he asks.

"Go to Dahab!" replies the shopkeeper, glaring at him, as he puts the wondrous watch beyond the infidel's reach. We find a beach restaurant some kilometres south of the town, and round the night by eating fried fish to the accompaniment of a dozen pleading cats and the splashings of smaller fry dancing in the moonlit waters.

Jebel Rakabat

Bags of shopping in tow, we arrive back at Wadi Rum in the early afternoon. Chris and Paul are champing at the bit for a climb, so I race back to my favoured Rakabat Canyon. Above Goat's Gully, I think I hallucinate a flute, and stop, blood thumping around my hot head. It comes again, and again—a simple tune from a pan flute echoing from the valley walls. As I rise up, it comes clearer. Nearing the Rakabat entrance, I meet three young shepherd girls—the eldest, just old enough to be in school, dressed in emerald green, a younger one in purple, and the tiniest in shocking pink—minding a herd of wilful goats. The eldest sits, blowing her flute, as the other two pelt stones at strays. I pass with a smile and a wave, and skip up to the heart-stopping traverse, which seems friendlier today. I ascend into the canyon system with the pure single tones of the flute echoing into harmony and cascading down the valley walls to greet me at every branch and turn.

I go halfway and cut left to where another hanging valley stares down into the Sea of Stones. Just above, the North Peak of Jebel Rakabat is easily climbed—if you find the route. Bedouin

routes are wily beasts, finding the easiest if not the most obvious way. Instead of attacking in full-frontal Western style, they yield to their obstacles, connive with them, flatter them almost into submission, before trouncing them. Marked for the keen eye with pebble cairns at crucial points, this path turns a brutish climb into a walk. At end, finding the right line very slowly, I crest the Jebel and wave to the shepherd girls, specks of plastic colour in a shifting pattern of goats—so far are they below me now. In the guide-book, this northern peak is marked highest: but from here, I see the south peak to be higher still by a hundred metres. I follow a ridge down and up again to where it stops at a gnarly crack just a few metres short of the true summit. Some days ago, I wouldn't have climbed this, but today, it is as if I must. Though crumbly and sheer, the crack gives just enough of itself to cling to, and the unorthodox move of jamming my head into it brings me to the top. The view is blissful with a full charge of adrenaline to bolster it. I shout once more to my tiny friends; they wave and dance and blow shrill on the flute, quite convinced of my happiness. I perch in this eyrie as long as I dare, watching first the colourful band trickle down Goat's Gully, and then the sun speed west over Jebel Rum before I follow. I take a few minutes to build a wobbly imitation of a Bedouin cairn at top, then saunter down like a contented old goat. Blank in my weariness, hands in pockets, I stroll across the heart-stopping traverse before recognising it. I have become either confident or lax.

A Mad Walk

"Anyone fancy a mad walk?" Feeling cocky, I want to attempt a difficult Bedouin route, so march about the Rest House inviting one and all to join. Two guys jump at it, but I make them read the guide book first.

> #98 Mohammed Musa's Route
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> Simple in concept, but confusingly complex in detail…a masterpiece of Bedouin routefinding…a really challenging adventure…requires climbing grade three without ropes above big canyons and crevices with confidence. N.B. A Bedouin guide is recommended.

I make them read it all. They seem happy enough, and I am frothing at the mouth, so off we set. What a mistake. They plod along in my wake, hating every moment. I want to race ahead, but hang back feeling guilty for foisting my enthusiasm upon them. In some ways, the route we find does match the one in the book. But I am far too much of an optimist to be let loose with scanty detail—I will always attempt to make it fit. A *grade three chimney* disappears in an oversight. A *grade four jump* becomes a little hop down into a valley. A *right turn* becomes a left. Sandy, ramping cracks unmentioned in the book dog our progress, but we scramble up them very uncomfortably. By courting my companion's agreement, I find it, and so we doggedly continue the whole long morning, pushing a route into the mountain that leads us through a charmingly wooded siq to one very final dead end. The way on should be a *grade two slab,* an easy move, but every direction seems impossible. We are lost. Courting my agreement now, they find it, and we decide to abort and descend. As they idle down ahead of me, I dash about for twenty minutes, like a rat in a trap, vainly seeking the route. By the time I catch up with them, they are helpless on a gritty descent, stuck to it only by their sweat; it seems that their climbing experience is not as great as they hinted. By now they loathe the very sight of me; but the way down is hard and long, and by the time I have helped them through some of the nastier bits, they are almost convivial—as the victim thanks the torturer for some small measure of kindness, I think quite cheerfully.

In what is called the Rest House kitchen, I ask a bearded climber called Tony if he knows Mohammed Musa's Route. I can see by the turmoil of excitement and caution in his eyes, followed by a sudden onset of modesty that, not only does he know the route, but that he is obviously the Tony that wrote the book. I roll with it. I string him out with extravagant praise

for the book's strengths, while denigrating my abilities as a pathfinder. It works. I get about as detailed a description of the route as can be imagined, short of his carrying me up it on his back. "To follow a Bedouin Route," says Tony, "you must learn to think like a goat." He catches me considering this a little racist, and continues, "No, not the Bedu, the Ibex. Ibex make the routes, the Bedu only follow them. In bare feet, armed with stone axes, they hunted these hills." I picture, rather, trainers and assault rifles as they chase up the paths in quest of meat and manhood, but no matter. It makes sense: only decadent Europeans would risk all to gain a distant view of something better seen close up. Armed with a personal description from the author, I try to spot that illusive ridge by the light of a low, waning moon some hours before sleep.

Mohammed Musa

"Anyone fancy a mad walk?" doesn't work so well today. Word has spread about the Irishman, and rightly so. Those that have no inkling of the danger that I am to myself and to others allow me first to talk them into the walk, and then to talk them out of it. A futile stab at gaining company, I know, but some deeply-repressed vestige of common sense demands the attempt. In the end, I am happier to go alone.

As I cross the broad plain of the Wadi floor, my goat girls—green, purple, and pink djinns shimmering above an early mirage—call out to me. Tea, I think unashamedly, and change direction to join them. Tea *and* bread—still rising as I juggle it in my hands, loosing dust and cinders. An hour it takes to eat the living loaf and drink the three cups—a perfect hour in easy company. I leave with a promise extracted to wave from every summit.

I find the overlooked *grade three chimney.* It is very much higher than I had hoped—a lethal height, at top. But there are two chimneys side by side—a choice at least. I climb the easier till it seems hard, then cross to the harder, which now seems easier, and up till it becomes abominable, then back to the easy one, which is now just hard. I reach the top. From here, the path skirts the valley route of yesterday, but rises hundreds of metres above it, twisting up and along a snaking ridge. The *grade four jump* is unbelievable. The ridge ends near the summit of an egg-shaped jebel next to another egg-shaped jebel. Above, the summit to summit distance is twenty metres, and one hundred metres below, the jebels touch. Here, where the walls tend to the vertical, is a gap of two metres. A slip would drive the fleshy wedge deep, yet not stir the gap to widen. I climb out carefully and take a look across at the far wall. There is no possibility of a run up. The book and its author promise a steady, if slim, ledge and firm, if meagre, hand holds. A vestigial survival instinct transmutes my first two attempts into gigantic twitches, but the third lifts me like a bird from perch to perch. The ledge is steady, the holds firm. It is so nice, I do it thrice. I even manage the *right turn.*

A cunning ledge finds the charmingly wooded siq much more easily than by the sandy, ramping cracks of yesterday. So we were on the right route! if only for a hundred metres. This cunning ledge, I had missed yesterday; but the way on, the *grade two slab,* I had seen as I dashed around the dead end. With apprehension, I approach it again, hoping that, with the certainty of passage beyond, it will not look so daunting. It does. I can't believe I am in the right place; I waste three hours exploring alternatives, seeking different explanations for the directions offered in the book. More than once, I curse myself at the top of a sheer climb facing nothing but the possibility of a dangerous retreat. I keep coming back. The move is not a hard one—I see that clearly—at ground level I could do it hands in pockets, though not here. The path continues by way of a sandy slab tilted at forty-five degrees; but from this perspective, its base curls away to unseen depths. I have risked worse today, but that unguessable fate curdles my blood. I try to think like an Ibex; but however impoverished my concept of eternity, it outshines that of an goat. I cannot continue. Perched now not in an eyrie, but nestled in a chicken coop, I feel good—elated even—to have registered a limit to my recklessness.

On the way back, I remember the promise, but my colourful djinns are nowhere to be seen. A dust-devil the whole height of the valley takes their place. He twirls for a minute, then unravels into a powdery veil that settles with the dusk.

"I bottled out at the *grade two slab,"* I boast, in climbing argot, to the assorted climbers in the Rest House kitchen.

"You made the right decision," come the replies, but I sense reproach in their eyes.

Fucking right I did, you insane bastards, I think, as I watch their twitchy head shakes.

"How did you find the directions?" asks Tony.

"To be honest Tony, a bit light." But I counter diplomatically: "Then, if you can't find it, you shouldn't be there in the first place." Tony, not being an insane bastard, smiles and winks.

I bump into Chris and Paul, back from a two-day epic up Jebel Rum, and arrange to meet them the following evening, some distance away in Barrah Canyon, for an overnight stay in the desert. They are planning the highlight of their trip: the ascent of Merlin's Wand—the Super Crack of Rum, so awesome, it has two names, I suppose. "Here, read the description," says Paul, pawing the page, a gleam in his eye, a fleck of spit in the corner of his mouth. I wipe the page with my sleeve, and read.

> #210 Merlin's Wand—the Super Crack of Rum.
>
> One-hundred-and-fifty metres of meticulous technical climbing…sustained, superb, and surprising situations *(that accounts for the spit)*…requiring a good selection of nuts and many friends.

My climber's argot is exhausted, but even I know that this does not refer to savoury snacks and a supporting audience.

Barrah Canyon

At dawn—literally, for a change; not my usual ten o'clock dawn, but the actual cold grey thing—I arrive at Salim's. The cinder-block house looks comfortable, but the family is asleep in a tent in the garden. Salim and his father inspect the pick-up truck in a cursory manner. His father points to dents and scrapes, then flicks his right hand from the wrist—as if closing a tap—in a gesture that says, *Huh?*

I dump mattress, pillow, and blankets borrowed from the Rest House, food, water, and a change of socks into the flat bed. Chris and Paul jump in and Salim slams his door. The father's wrist is flicked in my direction now. "I walk" Another flick. "Salim's driving. I prefer to walk." Salim buries his head in his sleeve and laughs, to his credit. As they pull away, the father shoots me a last look and a peculiar smile, and goes back to lie down. On the outskirts of the village of Rum, I lather my arms and legs with factor four and wrap my big scarf around head, face, and neck. It's going to be a long day.

In the fresh morning, I cover the few kilometres north through the Wadi to where the massif of Um al Ishreen is laid to the desert by Wadi Siq Makhras. Here, in gathering heat, I pick my way west without stopping, past the remains of spent mortar bombs and ornamental stone cairns, up a wide, bone-dry watercourse, and cross into the ochre desert of Wadi Um al Ishreen. Turning and following the massif south, with the sun mounting, I cover the next leg in ferocious heat, stopping, at last, just before the worst of the day. At the opening of a wide siq, the entrance to the Nabatæan Steps, I see my two companions from the abortive mad walk sitting in the shade, boiling water. They have their backs to me, so I walk up before speaking. "Any chance of a cup of tea?" They stiffen. They do not even turn around to reply. But I really want that cup of tea: it is my price to leave them in peace. As I drink it, they sit sullenly, staring at their feet. They really know how to bear a grudge. I am impressed, but drink my cup in feigned ignorance.

The lower course of this siq that runs west into the Umm al Ishreen massif is dry, and its upper course was once unreachable even to Ibex. So—more than two thousand years ago, almost a millennium before Mohammed—up and along its southern wall, poor ledges were

widened and lines of weathering exploited to cut a path to a water-rich upper valley. At that time, the Nabatæans ruled these deserts, so works of that period are usually credited to them. Precarious and delicate, yet sure, the steps twist up to a hard rock stratum about twelve metres above the valley floor, and follow its course for a few dozens of metres. The way is so narrow that it would be tricky for two to pass, yet its nature is confident and secure. A few carved handholds seem unnecessary, but I am not herding wilful goats, nor shouldering their skins bloated and slippery with water. The high valley opens and invites up a further few ledges to where it ends in an eccentric amphitheatre, an inky plunge-pool in its midst. The end seems very final, but I am sceptical. Though circled by high walls, the feeling of enclosure is not complete. Tony and his friend Di spent long, hot days piecing together scant clues to find the routes they did—the Bedouin don't give up their secrets easily. I imagine that these massifs are criss-crossed with routes, and this feels like one of them. I search for possibilities, and gaze longingly at far-off cracks, but I am no match for this puzzle.

Returning to the steps, I hear the simple flute tune again, and I sing a reply to my friends. I skirt the valley wall by the Nabatæan path, looking for bright swatches of colour all the while. I see first the goats, then rounding a corner, an old woman below dressed in black, sitting by a fire—the same tune by another's breath. I decide unashamedly again to invite myself to tea. As I pass with a "Marhaba," [Hi,] the anticipated invitation comes singing back. Now I see her small companion in primrose yellow tending to tea and fire: a blackened kettle steaming on a pile of crackling twigs. I join their shade. As the woman sits placidly, eyes ablaze, the child explains things to me. I catch some meaning. She reaches to the woman's handsome, weathered face, and points to four diamond-shaped tattoos. She shows her own face to be free of them, then shakes her head and wags a finger. *This is a custom from long ago*—she seems to tell—the bottomless long ago of a child. Her eyes flicker with excitement for this new world she is born into. The woman reaches across and touches my single gold earring, flicking her hand from the wrist in this now-familiar gesture. My grandmother wore this sovereign from her sixteenth birthday till it passed to me eighty three years later. A jeweller's hammer crescented it into this keepsake. I long to tell this story, but have no means. *A custom from long ago,* I repeat to the attentiveness of her gaze. A lie, but as Lawrence said: *Here, truth is to be admired, not sought after.* Another flick lifts the flute to her lips. She seals the fire in her eyes, and blows a tune that races out into the day. I try to fasten my mind to the melody, but it dances away like the spangling of sunlight on clear water.

Three cups of tea later, and my plans for the rest of the day approved, the pair enquire as to my water supply. I have plenty, I assure them. The old woman lifts bread and cucumber from a sack and invites me to it. I eat a morsel of bread and praise it, offering halva in return. They take a morsel each to place in their mouths as reverently as a Catholic might receive the host. Regardless of the rules of hospitality, you don't strip anyone bare in the desert. They comment, with great respect, on the smallness of my bag compared to those of other tourists. I remember the consignment I forwarded this morning, bed and all; but phoney that I am, I play the part, sling the bag purposefully, and march off into the desert with what I imagine to be measured strides.

The sun is fallen to westward, and Jebel Umm al Ishreen bathes this side of its wadi in shade. I continue south, looking around for my walking companions, but they have fled. Two kilometres on, I come to the Waters of Umm al Ishreen, a deep green pond locked to the base of a sheer cliff at the wadi's edge. To a Bedouin, a miraculous bounty; to an Irishman, a deep green pond. I pass on. Three kilometres more brings me to where I must strike east across open desert. I have timed it well. It must be about four o'clock. I can cover the last ten kilometres in two hours. That leaves an hour to spare before darkness: half an hour here for lunch, and half an hour in which to get lost—perfect. Before me lies the open desert of the Rad al Beidah; but there are three growing pools of shade to speed me between here and Barrah Canyon. The shadows cast by the island massifs are substantial now. As I lunch on tuna, bread, and fiery tomatoes, the sun settles a little more into the haze, and the shadows reach out farther into the sands. I get up a good pace before crossing the line into sunlight. From here, the walk is a meditation; there is no thought for anything else. I soon pass into my first pool of shade. I don't wish to slow for anything, so drink on the move. Now I hear, from a nearby bush, the shriek of

a bird. A little martin is caught on a twig, a string, perhaps a snare—I cannot see—but decide to free him, whatever. I part the branches and meet the bird's eye, he is pinned by the neck in the jaws of a horned viper, hanging, tail curled round a higher branch. The martin's eye death-mists, and the gruesome embrace twists such that the viper's eye meets mine. What a commanding stare! He weighs the odds, looses the bird, then drops in a coil at my feet. "Bon Appétit," I say, obscurely, and withdraw.

I hope I'm not lost, though the consequences if I am are not dire: a cold night feeding a twig fire, and a ten kilometre walk due north at dawn to meet a minor road long before the sun sucks me dry. The shadow-pools merge, flooding the desert and quenching the day; but with time to spare, I skirt the northern edge of the Barrah Massif and enter the horseshoe-shaped Barrah Canyon. I find my climbing friends rosy and chuffed at the foot of their conquest. Looking up in the scarlet last-light, the nail-wrenching one hundred and fifty metre crack tears through the rock like a martyr's path to heaven. And I was just about to tell them of my exciting day. Our bivvy is perfect. We spread out mattresses next the rock, and light a fragrant brushwood fire on which to cook dinner. We eat ordinarily unpalatable junk that tastes divine beyond the confines of civilisation. We talk, we boast, we say manly things to help each other into the ill-fitting clothes of maturity, but our scabby knees and bristling pocket-knives give us away.

Deluge

In Barrah dawn, we shiver in deep shade as the canyon's western wall rouges with morning sunlight. Before stoking the fire, I pull out potatoes buried the night before. A little misjudged, blackened but edible, they warm first hands, then stomachs. My second treat, three crème caramels, raises spirits then dashes them. Gaudy testaments to my stupidity, the colourful packets contain the powdered ingredients only. Undeterred, I press on without benefit of the main constituent—milk. We make little effort at eating the resultant gelatinous muck, but leave it as a banquet for an ant nest. With cups of tea, we consult our guide-books and await the day before shrugging off the last blankets. The climbers play cribbage as daylight washes out the western wall and creeps across the valley to dispel the lingering desert night. Brushwood crackling in the fire, the kettle's rattling and spitting, and bird-song echoing between the high walls are the only sounds.

The books speak of a great through route, Abu Iglakhat Canyon, just across from where we are camped; so packing the recommended abseiling rope, we cross to its narrow entrance. The tight canyon is choked by boulder falls. We squeeze our way over, around, between, and under the stones with great enthusiasm, seeking always the most challenging and least reasonable path until, after a kilometre or so, we hit the main obstacle. A thirty metre high wedge marking the canyon's watershed blocks the route in front of us. The wedge's face is striped with sheer chimneys running from top to bottom. I unenthusiastically explore a few of them, while Chris and Paul unenthusiastically watch. Yesterday was tough on all of us, and this is becoming too much, so we decide to turn around and tackle those boulder problems from the other side. Just as we give up, I remember to think like a goat, and spot a perfect avoidance one hundred metres back on the right. A ledge runs from five metres above our heads, by way of a few scrambles, to the top of the wedge—a possible route. Paul is not interested, so heads back to camp; but Chris and I persist at gaining the ledge. We struggle up a bit—first one and then the other—contemplating, in turn, the climb above and the fall below; but the will to commit ourselves is absent, and we drop back on each attempt. I don't want to do it, but can't let it go. In desperation, I squeeze my whole body into a crack and work my way up as if by capillary attraction. "You skinny bastard," says Chris. He throws up the backpack with the abseiling rope, and rejoins Paul. As he walks away, I wonder what I am doing. He, an experienced climber, is walking away, and I, little more than a fool, have decided to continue. Two days ago, I thought I had registered a limit, but nothing of the sort. I watch him go in disbelief.

The rest of the ascent is simple. The thirty-metre chimneys are bypassed, but on the wedge's far side, the missing abseil points more than compensate for my relief. It is a ponderous worry. On the right, a vee-shaped crack descends to the canyon floor. At its outside edge, it is too wide

for me to bridge; yet the whole thing is overhung by a large slab, so I cannot get into it far enough to brace out against the walls. At last, I notice a little light on the inside of the crack where it should be dark. Climbing back a few metres, I find a hole down which I can squeeze to reach the bridgeable inner crack. I cannot fasten the rope anywhere. I cannot carry it down with me. I am reluctant to drop the bloody thing thirty metres. But it comes in handy for lowering down the pack, which in turn, came in handy for carrying the rope. I leave one coil trapped under a heavy stone at top, in case I do not make it all the way, and must return. Still experiencing disbelief, I lower myself into the disturbingly greasy little hole and, trying to ignore the brutal fall beneath, slither and scrape my way down the inside of the crack to the bottom. I feel relieved, elated, and stupid—to compound that, I yank the rope and only just remember to dodge the stone.

As I continue down Abu Iglakhat, the siq becomes repeatedly overhanging: a series of pagoda-like roofs close in to seal out the day. Under the lowest eaves, long-abandoned dry-stone food stores lie in perpetual shade. What I take to be a wavering crack running the valley floor is roof to another floor beneath. It opens, and I descend to deeper shade and coolness, and continue by this subterranean way. The crack above becomes another of the layers of enclosure that trap passed millennia in a still underworld that rings with histories sensed only by the imagination—but none the less potently for that. I walk in the company of generations of Bedouin that walked these ways, and they rise with me into the upper canyon to repossess it a moment. Now the stillness moves and shifts before a hot, dry wind that drives the ghosts back to their cool recesses. Noon announces itself in a tempest of ochre dust. At the valley's abrupt end, I cross the shadow-line into sunlight that falls like a blow to my back. The Rad al Beidah is ferociously hot. High cliffs that spilled generous shade across the open desert yesterday afternoon are reduced to shading their own flanks. For two long hard hours, I labour through soft sand by the edge of the Barrah Massif. The blast-furnace heat sobers me from the intoxication of the past two weeks, and I realise that my last mad risk—my through route—is the moment at which to stop. Tomorrow, I shall leave Rum.

Salim arrives an hour and a half late, his pick-up spluttering and clanking like the wreak it is. I start the ride standing in the flat-bed, gripping the roll-bar, but as night falls, I abandon this for the relative safety of the cab. I begin to understand Salim's driving somewhat. He has no brakes in the conventional sense, so must rely on the occasional tree to retard his speed. The only electrical amenity still functioning, however, is the brake-light circuit, and this, in turn, operates the display panels and in-cab illumination. So when he wants to find a misplaced pack of cigarettes, or join a some stray wires together, he pumps the break-pedal. The engine overheats and steam fills the cab. The radiator has no cap, but neither does the oil filler, nor the fuel tank. During the fifteen-kilometre drive, we stop five times to fill the radiator, and once to refill the fifty-litre water container. We use enough water to take a camel to Baghdad.

In the middle of the night, raindrops fall like handfuls of warm grapes flung from an Olympian banquet. I improvise a shelter from bed frames and blankets, but am joined by the roof's ant colony. I run to the Bedouin Tent by the Rest House just as the deluge begins, and stand in the fat rain until the last ant abandons me. Lightening flashes. Thunder roars up and down the wadi like a trapped beast, and the interlocking jebels flicker in and out of darkness like a pantomime stage set. Were I not so tired, I'd stay and watch; but can think only of sleep. Other tourists, driven from their desert bivvies, fumble about in the dark to find sleeping space. One late-comer rams a finger right up to the knuckle in my nose. *"Jesus fuck!"* I shout.

"I'm most terribly sorry," he offers. "I thought you were my wife."

Al Chebla, Fin?

As I spend my last morning in the Wadi, I reflect that I shall remember these days as some of the most fulfilled of my life. I am sad to go, but it is better to leave wanting more, and best to leave alive. The bus for Aquaba is hopelessly oversubscribed, but I place my trust in Salim. By

some machination, he reserves the front seat for me. I like him, but am glad he is not driving. He waves as we pull away, and I feel immediately nostalgic, but not so much for Wadi Rum as for me. I like the person I have allowed myself to be these last two weeks. I wonder shall we meet again.

I am tired. I shall continue on to Petra, but in a few days time. I need rest. I sit again under the palm-frond pergolas of Aquaba, allowing my crippled knees the luxury of a chair, dabbling blistered feet in the gulf. It is Friday, holy day, and the young join me on the beach. Baseball caps are resolutely reversed and mobile phones justifiably brandished. I sit on into the evening, unwilling to test my knees, until hunger drives me to a restaurant. I am disappointed to see that even on holy day alcohol is on display. I had heard that it was served in teapots and drunk from china cups—I had looked forward to that. At the end of a delicious meal, I hand the waiter a large-denomination bill and settle into a final glass of arak. I awake from a long, desert daydream to see the terrace empty, tables and chairs stacked, and the four waiters waiting for me to be gone. "Al Chebla, fin?" I call over to them to them. I think I have said *Al fakar, fin* [Where is my change?] I have instead inquired as to the direction of prayer. They exchange a stunned look, then as one, point south. "Al Chebla, fin?" I roar.

Lassitude

I shop a little more. I drink coffee boiled with cinnamon and cloves to negotiate the buying of a can of tuna. My poor knees are confounded. I retire to blissful lassitude on the beach. As I contemplate the gulf, it laps meekly at my feet—the moon pulls even in this outreach of the Indian Ocean. A light swell shelves the sand under the legs of my wicker ottoman and I descend uncaringly into the water's caress. Tomorrow, perhaps, I shall move.

When I return to my hotel room for an early night, I find the window forced, but nothing missing. I complain to the manager, but he reassures me: "This not Ali Baba hotel! Everything OK!"

Wadi Musa

Two calendar months into the road, I board the Petra bus in Aquaba station. "When bus full," is the departure time. This is fine with me and with everyone else, Middle-Eastern time being more plastic than the Western variety. And I am in no hurry to leave Aquaba behind, so good has it been to me these two lazy days.

Wadi Musa is less welcoming. The town nearest to Petra has been racked by tourism since Petra—which is Greek for stone—was rediscovered to the West by the Swiss traveller Johan Ludwig Burckhardt in 1812. In contrast to the coffee-drinking shopkeepers of Aquaba, one man scowls at me for being able to read his prices in Arabic, and refuses me my due change. "Go back Holland!" he shouts. The hotel I am staying in is dirty and expensive. The glass of arak I have just been served is half-full. This is too much. I go to the bar and—mustering all my Arabic—complain. I must turn an Egyptian phrase, because the barman asks, "You have been to Egypt?"

"Enta Masri?" [You are Egyptian?] I guess.

He nods. "Aiwa. [Yes.] You like Egypt?"

"Masr quiess," [Egypt is lovely,] I say.

"You are from Holland?"

"La, Irlanda Shamaliya." [No, Northern Ireland.]

He fills up my glass and asks: "You like Israelis?"

"Israelis?" I stall. It is time to give up on speaking bad Arabic. I look at the two metre high carpet portrait of the King of Jordan that hangs on the wall, seeking inspiration. Such an easy

thing to pull down and wipe feet upon, should the political gambit for peace with Israel backfire, I reflect.

Luckily, my friend's question is rhetorical. "We love Israelis," he continues. "We not kill them."

"I am happy to hear that."

"I must ask of you favour. It is very important."

"Yes, of course."

Please can you love English, and not kill them."

"Yes," seems the only reasonable answer.

"Thank you. You have big heart." And for a moment, in the glow of the evening, I imagine that I do. "It is very important," he continues.

"Yes, of course."

"It is very important—because all these people," he sweeps his arm around the room, "are *English."* I shan't kill them, of course. I dislike tourists, but am one. I have no desire to be alone in the wilderness. I need tourists for an occasional cultural touchstone. I have had wonderful moments, then bottled up that wonder and carried it around until it became brackish and unworthy of sharing. I seek a knife-edge frontier tourism. I want to share my perfect moments with a perfect stranger that need only smile and walk off into the sunset. I feel no need to fling myself from the edge of Ptolomy's map into the realms of dragons that ignite their ethers, and lustful sea nymphs that toy with men's testicles till they turn blue. Here in this room, however, the number of possible confidants to every revelation is excessive.

The barman refills my glass without charge. I can't reconcile being on holiday with getting up early, they seem mutually incompatible; but I gulp it down and head for an early night. Before I can lift myself out of the chair, the glass is refilled. I slump back into the chair—once again a slave to the evening.

Petra

I rise early, breakfast twice, and buy food and water. I had intended to sneak into Petra, in order to save the expensive—by Jordanian standards—entrance fee; but am warned that a Dutch messianic group intends to commit mass suicide here today, so all the passes are guarded. This seems a tall story, but explains the town's obsession with Holland. Unless I take my chances hiking across the mountains, the only way into the valley of Petra is via the world-famous Siq. On the eastern edge of the desolate plain of Wadi Araba, where the Great Rift Valley spans from Sea to rhyming Sea, an isolated valley is ringed by sandstone jebels. In this inaccessible place, the Nabatæans chose to build their capital—Petra. The best entrance to the valley is from the east, where the massif of Jebel al Khubtah has sundered under tectonic forces to form As Siq—*The* Siq. I buy a three-day ticket. Bettering my usual crack-of-noon start, I arrive at the gate just after the tour coaches. With the sun rising at our backs, I overtake one tour group then stalk another in an unreasonable quest to be first. Although in places two hundred metres deep, As Siq closes in to just a few metres from wall to wall. All sense of day is shut out. Above, morning is complete, but the floor of As Siq is as grey as the earth-lit moon. At the end of this narrow passage, more than a kilometre on, the turning of a corner opens the view to the most famous of Petra's buildings—Al Khaznah, the Treasury. Its façade of iron-laden sandstone, struck by the full of the morning sun, appears as a livid crack widening from the charcoal walls. I stop. From the neck of As Siq, Al Khaznah is at its most alluring—as a leg glimpsed through the slit of a skirt. I am joined by a crowd that stands, cameras reverentially holstered, in the reflected crimson light, as unwilling as I to hasten. We pass out, one by one, each leaving space for the other to savour the broadening of the façade. Petra. Here, Burckhart must have known that he had found the lost city. And thirty three years later, the poet, Dean Burgon perhaps had this sight in his mind when he wrote:

> Match me such marvel save in Eastern clime,
> A rose-red city 'half as old as Time'!

The era that sculpted Petra left the finishing touches to the Nabatæans. Al Khaznah, a classical building complete with columns, porticoes, and friezes is carved from the mountain. Every detail is part of the living rock of the massif—no stone is added. The weathered cliffs are chiselled away to reveal the builders' imaginings, and what remains, has remained since the sandstone was laid down next some Palaeozoic beach at the edge of time. Time since has carved Petra more, and shall, in a blink of its eye, reclaim it. Edges, once sharp from the rasp, are polished and guttered now by wind and water; but a solid sandstone urn resting thirty metres above us bears marks of a different erosion. The name, the Treasury, comes from a myth that pirates hid their horde in this three-metre-high urn that crowns the façade. In the generations since the gun, countless fusillades have been aimed at it. One day, someone will unleash a more potent weapon, and myth, and urn, will finally shatter. The inside of the building is a large chamber bare of decoration, but for two porticoes that give to smaller rooms, one on each side. The layers of sandstone on the inner surfaces are rippled like salmon flesh that darkens to the colour of blood in the chamber's darker reaches. A single stratum can be followed from underfoot to where it mounts the wall, crosses the ceiling, falls, and waves its way underfoot again. Nearby sounds seem distant echoes. The sense of enclosure within the mountain is total.

Migs roar though Petra towards Rum, a few calm aviator's heartbeats away, as I continue west along the broadening siq. Nestled in the reshaped belly of As Siq's curve, a two-thousand year old amphitheatre still seats more than seven thousand people. From its highest tier, I climb the north side of Jebel al Madhbah to the High Place of Sacrifice, where the top of the jebel is quarried flat and marked with obelisks. Now by a flight of twisting steps forged from the walls of a descending watercourse, I drop down into the valley again. Unlike in Wadi Rum, it seems that any route in Petra is possible—a way is carved through all obstructions. On every surface is evidence of some working: the remains of steps, a tomb, house, or water channel. As well as sculpting the jebel to house their living and their dead, and forcing stairways and passages to every destination, the Nabatæans wasted not one drop of its rainwater. Each catchment area is bounded by carved gutters that feed larger and larger channels, gardens, and cisterns, from the top of the mountain to its foot, where broad chutes sluice into underground cisterns. Every step brings surprise and delight. The interplay of mountain, and passage for humans and water is so organic that it tough to tell what is shaped by wind from what is shaped by hand. At the base of the twisting steps, in a narrow canyon, is the terrace of a tea house. I drink a strong cup before working my way along the south-eastern wall of the broad Petra valley, enquiring into every niche, half demented with discovery.

The Bedouin that once lived in Petra, taking the grandest tombs for their houses, have been evicted and moved to a new village—but off the popular tracks, some linger. Here and there, a sheet of corrugated iron and a scattering of goat's droppings marks a barn or stable borrowed from the ancients. At one turn, a spread of colourful acrylic clothes laid wet in the sun alerts me to the presence of a cistern. A few metres directly above its entrance, and reached by Bedouin steps, is a small stone header tank. Water hauled up and poured here spouts off along ledges, following natural veins in the rock, to wet a dozen gardens. By Snake Monument, in the southern extreme of the valley where the land rises to a fertile plain, the Nabatæan spell is broken. Rocks are again just rocks, and nature has her way. From a small tomb at the edge of the plain, a woman dressed in black steps out and invites me to drink tea with her and her daughter. As we sip the hot, strong tea, she searches out a handful of Nabatæan coins—genuine, perhaps—and tries to sell them to me for more than I can afford. I search out a tub of halva and share it with them. The little girl makes a halva sandwich the size of her fist and swallows it whole. It takes a long time to slide down her throat, and she sits unmoving, eyes bulging, before gasping for breath and licking her fingers. It is suddenly late afternoon, time to go back. Turning north, I pick my way along the south-western wall of the valley, stopping to poke my head into every hole. I am again invited for the same tea–coin combination, this time served by a young woman, whose beauty so shines through her disfigured face that only beauty remains.

On the western side of the valley, opposite the entrance to As Siq, rises an isolated jebel—Al Habis, the Prison. On top of this outcrop, one millennium after the height of Nabatæan power, the Crusaders built a castle from which to harry the region. At top, cling a few ruins—but it is late, and tourists are being shepherded down the main steps by a lone guard. On its north-western face, I find a disused set of steps, and sneak up them instead. I eat a very late lunch and watch night pull a cloak up the eastern wall of the valley—Al Khubtah massif—before sneaking down to visit the conventionally-built city ruins in the middle of the valley. Only one building stands, and it restored and stripped of meaning. I resolve to find another way out of Petra to the north, so walk concealed in a small wadi until I am headed off by a Bedouin. "From Holland?" he asks.

I wave my Irish passport, "Irlanda Shamalia!" and he is happy. "Is there another way out of Petra?" I ask him.

"There is another way out, but you will never find it," he says sadly. "You can try if you please, but the way is not very interesting." He sighs and spreads his hands, palms up. "Even if you know where it is, it is not worth the trouble of finding it." He is a master of the art of dissuasion. I turn south past some impressive tombs looming from the darkness, and slip back into As Siq. Alone in the dark, I find the timeless path spirited. A thread of stars overhead casts so a thin a light that it is more an absence of dark, and the tall walls echo my footsteps in conspiracy with their passage. I mount into the town and look back over the massif, now just an inkier patch in the night. Venus—my companion—burns above, and under her, Mercury sparks like a solitaire on the rose-red horizon.

The Monastery

This morning's passage through As Siq is earlier, colder, and quieter than yesterday's race. I take time to inspect the original Nabatæan terra-cotta piping that helped supply Petra with water, running at a steady decline recessed into the northern wall. Some sections are still functional, and look as if only a few years old. Al Khaznah is sleeping as I pass it and move out into the valley, heading north to the tombs that were glimpsed in last night's dusk. In daylight, the Urn, Corinthian, and Palace Tombs are impressive, but cannot hold my attention. I am blasé now about sculptural architecture. I pass them with an admiring look, but crave the mountain they adorn. Rounding the Palace tomb, I note the builders' miscalculation: a few blocks have been added to its uppermost northern edge, where it rises a little proud of the cliff. Just beyond the tomb, a pristine staircase leads up a wide avenue to the top of Jebel Umm al Amr, southernmost outpost of the Al Khubtah massif. I climb up, stand at the brink, and gaze across the valley towards the Crusader Castle. A young Bedouin man is suddenly at my side. "You are from Holland?" he asks nervously.

I reassure him by stepping back from the edge and engaging his conversation. "Is there another way down?"

"There is another way, but you will never find it." He is right. But with a combination of Bedouin steps and Irish leps, I find my own absurd way. I cross the valley by a long detour so as to know Petra's northern extent. As in the south, by Snake monument, the valley simply ceases—from one rock to another—to be Petra. I visit the dreadful museum and restaurant before following an ancient staircase rising up a watercourse into the western wall of the valley. Here, a few kilometres into the heart of the massif, is Ad Dayr—The Monastery. At first it appears small, but grows interminably on approach until its visitors appear, dwarfed below it. At fifty metres high, it is not much larger than Al Khaznah, but its seclusion lends it grandeur. As in Wadi Rum, the jebels are capped with a whiter sandstone, and from one last upthrust of this, ad Dayr is carved. The seven metre high doorway leads to a plain chamber with Christian graffiti scratched into the walls. A flight of—I suspect—Bedouin steps leads up the façade to the top; from here, looking west, the emptiness of Wadi Araba unfolds more than a kilometre below. Eastward, lies As Siq, and Wadi Musa. To the south west, Jebel Haroun—Aaron's mountain—is white-capped with the dome of a small mosque. Below, due south, a few hundred

metres off, I notice a faint trail just reflecting the slanting early-afternoon sunlight, and feel very smug.

I drink tea at a stall in a cave opposite the monastery, then follow the faint trail passing to the west of Jebel ad Dayr. Close up, the way is all but invisible: the trace of a footprint every few hundred metres, the occasional gloss to the top of a stone, an out-of-place scattering of pebbles. For hours I search, but make scarce progress. My sorties lead to abrupt precipices. My enthusiasm blunts. The Bedouin voices chorus in my ear: *There is another way, but you will never find it.* It is true. My eyes are all but blind here. There is another way off this as off all these mountains—a perfect way that flits like a swallow on the evening, that falls, swift and true, but I shall never find it. I shouldn't even try. I give up, sit down, and stare into the jumble of cliffs and boulders. Disappointment washes over me and into my eyes—and now the path jumps out as if it had been hidden in another dimension. I blink and look again—it is gone. I know where it is, but can no longer see it. I remember Tony Howard: *To follow a Bedouin Route, you must learn to think like a goat.* What does it mean, *to think like a goat?* How can I not parse the world through my monkey brain; not burden every sensation with impression, and every impression with consequence? I relax and let go my mind. I try not to seek. I open my sight and allow it to become as passive as its companion senses. Nothing happens. At the end of hope, I just get up and walk. Down mad scree slopes and across narrow ledges, past far-flung cairns and footprints, I plunge into the canyon that drains Petra to the west. I do not stop to think. I feel, and that barely. I walk.

The Wadi as Siyyagh is lush, its floor carpeted with grass and trees. Its sides are the remains of quarries whence came the stone to build the city of the valley. Gigantic corners cut from buttresses of the jebels mark where the surest sandstone hung before it was parted and pared into blocks. There is the sound of a breeze blowing through the leaves of the trees, though the air is still. I think it a trick of the wind, but it is gushing water. From a crack in the rock, the spring of As Siyyagh gives birth to a clear river. I dunk in one of its pools, and drink its water, fresh from the core of the jebel. I follow the little valley west, enjoying the company of a young river. But again, Petra stops. The wadi becomes suddenly rocky and barren, and the river rushes to its fate in the wastes of Wadi Araba.

Back east towards Petra, just beyond my path, a shaded, descending siq is dammed at bottom to form a green reservoir. A well-tended garden surrounds it. Hornets the size of humming birds lap water at its edge. Now the wadi meets the main Petra valley and splits to enclose Jebel al Habis, the Prison, upon which the Crusader Castle is built; I take the southern path. About the plinth of the jebel, at varying heights, are small holes, some barred with doors—one is fashioned from vintage Shell kerosene cans. It is five metres up, and there is little purchase, but I can't resist a peek. When I swing the door open, a feral cat springs over my head and lands with aplomb five metres below. Sore knees and blistered feet carry me along Petra's main street once more. The sun is sinking to my back and the ruins are half-lit, but my eyes jump on to Jebel Umm al Amr, southern outpost of the Al Khubtah massif. There in the oblique light, I see, above the Urn Tomb, the steps that I searched for fruitlessly this morning. Numb from exhaustion and stupidity, I start straight up. Hidden in gullies, concealed behind pillars of rock, the steps that were invisible in the flat light of day, are as a gilded staircase now. At top, a lone goat trots over, tilts his head to the side, and gives me a devilish look. We eat a late lunch and discover that he likes halva—sticky though he finds it. He bleats and coughs at the same time, and stares longingly down at the valley. He paces back and forth, unsure of which way to go. We compare my Irish route to the Nabatæan one; but he is indifferent, and awaits my lead. "Think like a goat!" I tell him, but he does not appreciate the irony.

On the way back to Wadi Musa, I part with the goat, and fall in with some locals. They tell me about the Garden Hotel, how wonderful and friendly it is. I move. In the foyer, I meet Joe from the States. "Hi! I'm Joe from the states!" He limps over, grasps my hand, and gives it a good shake. I admire the old buffer, with his balding head and ample frame making his way across the Middle East with a halting step and a sense of adventure.

"Would you care to join me for a glass of arak?" I ask.

"No thanks, gotta go to bed. When you get to my age…!" He winks and gives his belly a good slap.

"Yes, of course…."

"Say, what age are you?"

"Thirty seven," I reply, "and you?"

"Thirty four," he says quietly.

The Mother of Cisterns

I make a cup of tea in the kitchen of the Garden Hotel. The owner comes in and takes the cup from my hands. It is the only cup with a handle. "It is *my* cup!" he hisses. The sun is up. By now I should be in As Siq, but little muscles in my ankles shout at every step. I sip tea on a café terrace and allow the sun's first rays to warm me gently. My three-day ticket finishes today, so I shall go—in a while.

Passing the amphitheatre, I hear a voice from under a tent. "You like tea? Come, drink tea!"

"No thank you," I reply.

"You like tent? Come, lie in my tent!"

"No thank you."

"You like mule? Come, fuck my mule!" His offers fly after me, but my blistered feet are faster, and he trails off laughing as if falling down a well. Today I want to climb Jebel Umm al Biyara, the Mountain of the Mother of Cisterns—at almost twelve hundred metres, the highest place in Petra. I start straight across the valley, towards its base on the western wall, ignoring the path that winds along wadis and across obscure ridges. It takes me an hour to cover less than a kilometre, when the Bedouin route would have fetched me there in half the time. I reflect that the mule and I might not be a bad match. I labour up the first hundred metres, one broken stone at a time, then turn to sit and rest. In a hollow of the valley unseen from below, a Bedouin woman rocks a goat's skin of milk into cheese under a squat wooden tripod. She sends up her perfect, six-year-old twin daughters. They are here in a moment, dancing circles around me. "Drink tea! Drink tea!" I can't contemplate losing altitude, even for a tea. They help this old buffer up the hill with shrieks of encouragement, and I rise with some of their spring in my step.

A broad ledge to the right leads to a series of deep, natural overhangs worked into tombs. In the penultimate and grandest, sits a sandstone ceremonial bowl a metre across. Now a Bedouin barbecue, it cups ashes with the dignity with which it once fulfilled an unguessed purpose. In the deep overhang, under its farthest shadow, I crouch an hour by the bowl, unmoving, staring unthinkingly into the landscape beyond. I see only shadows scudding, and hear only the panting of my breath. When I come back to myself, I brush the bowl clean of its ashes, rinse it with some precious water, and level it. Whatever possessed me this hour, carries me on to the top. I lunge up the surviving rock steps and through halls of stone bent to the astonishing will of the Nabatæans. The audacity—of a mountain range carved into a city; of landscapes of rock wrought into sculpture; of galleries of staircases wrestled from the soul of the mountain—thrills me. A path fit for angels shears through the Jebel to the plateau of its summit. All my Petra walks, all my cups of tea, all my meetings, all my lunches, all my wonder is laid before me like an offering before the Mother of Cisterns. The enigmatic path I walked yesterday cuts a slash across Jebel ad Dayr from the leaden Monastery to where the optimistic river spills into the lush wadi. From all around, my memories shout up to me. I greet each in turn and bind it forever inside, then climb to the highest outreach of the jebel and sleep.

Returning along the lower, eastern edge of the plateau, I witness again the extraordinary water management of the ancients. Even on this barren top, every raindrop is channelled into three enormous cisterns burrowed into the sandstone. Such works, done in modern fashion are an affront to nature. These works, though they transform nature herself, are symbiotic. I make my way down sadly, gladly, and cross the valley floor a last time. It is early afternoon, and I cannot resist a final detour. In the tea-house terrace at the foot of the twisting steps, I drink tea

and share my bananas with a Bedouin woman, where another little sleep gives me the strength to mount the steps to the High Place of Sacrifice. Beyond the Mother of Cisterns, a sandstorm rises from Wadi Araba. A wall of desert sneaks up and engulfs her, then rolls down into the valley between us. Dust spews through the entrance of the lush wadi, and invests and overpowers the Crusader Castle. The valley of Petra fills to the top with brown dust that spills now over the eastern wall to take the jebel on which I stand. Winds whirl and buffet in every direction; the air is abruptly thick and cold. The High Place of Sacrifice detaches from the world. Light falters, and the obelisks tower to command the void, casting shadow over *everything*. I wrap up, and shiver. The storm clears. It lessens, lightens, and gives way, allowing gravity to wrestle it to the ground. Channels cut in the rock to drain not water, but sacrificial blood, fill with dull red sand.

With no further wish for excursion, I follow sure steps down to the amphitheatre. Though there is an hour and a half of light, the other tourists are swept from the valley. It is time also for me to leave; but I cannot. I climb the amphitheatre and swing around the western edge of the jebel about half-way up. I see nothing I have not seen elsewhere, but have the pleasure of familiarity. The vocabulary of the mountain is plain to me. Everywhere I guess steps, steps appear. Every route I choose, leads through. Weaving around the tombs are grooves feeding channels feeding cisterns feeding gardens everywhere. Before the twisting steps, just above the tea-house terrace, an open-air cistern appears; its bottom is cracked and it has filled with enough soil for it to become a sunken garden itself; a mature tree is concealed entirely within it. On an outpost of the jebel, a wild Bedouin girl asks me to light her hand-rolled cigarette. She puffs it awake and offers me a pull; I choke and almost wretch on its harsh taste. “What is this?” I ask.

“Smoke,” she replies. Whatever it is, we share it.

I return to sit in the silence of As Siq where it meets Al Khaznah, before leaving Petra to the dusk. Two children are beating a sweet little donkey across the back for no apparent reason. “Chalas!” [Enough!] I shout at them.

“It’s alright mister! It’s alright!” They shout back, grinning. They are sweet kids: everything about them is sweet, but for their unknowing cruelty. They mount up and gallop into As Siq, waving back at me. I walk after them, turning to glimpse the narrowing façade, stopping to hold its closing. There is no moon to light it tonight, but even so, the rose-red sandstone seems to anticipate the dawn.

Back in the despised Garden hotel, the owner calls me mad for not wanting to change money with him at an unfavourable rate. Too tired to flee, I sit down in front of the television to distract myself. Two other tourists are watching a stage hypnotist. “How does he do that?” One asks me rhetorically.

I do not feel rhetorical. “It’s fake. He has plants in the audience.”

“No, really?” he replies.

“Yes, really.” Later, they discuss their trip through Israel into Jordan, and their intended trip onward through Syria into Turkey.

“You understand that Jordanian entrance stamps are tantamount to having Israeli exit stamps in your passport,” I tell them.

“But we have Israeli entrance *and* exit stamps, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Then you haven’t a hope. The Syrians won’t let you in.”

“Perhaps they won’t notice.”

“You cannot visit Syria on those passports.”

He turns back to the television, and seems to consider this for a few minutes. “I’m gutted,” he says.

“About Syria?”

“No, about the hypnotist. I’m really gutted.”

The King's Highway

That teacup, differing from its fellows in one respect, loses its distinction with a satisfying snap. The porcelain handle sits cool in my pocket as I march up the hill leaving Wadi Musa this early morning. There are four routes from Amman in the north to Aquaba in the south of Jordan: the old Hejaz Railway, built by the Turks to ferry the faithful to Mecca, but now mostly closed; a restricted road along the Dead Sea and through Wadi Araba; a dual carriageway that runs straight through the desert; and this, At-Tariq as-Sultani—the King's Highway. The first two roads choose the level ground on either side of the mountain range that continues up from the Hejaz, but this road roller coasts over the top. There is little public transport here, so I stop on a straight and stick out my thumb. I remember why I gave up hitch-hiking. I haven't the patience. Within the space of ten minutes, I curse three drivers, relenting when they turn off the road within a few hundred metres of passing me. Driver number four, narrowly averting a stream of abuse, stops and sweeps his back seat clear of sacks of fresh bread. "Hamsa Dinar la il Shobak," [Five Dinars to Shobak,] he says. I am headed for Kerak, site of one of the backbone of Crusader Castles that stretches from Turkey to the Gulf. Shobak is twenty-five kilometres down the road; Kerak is only another hundred kilometres farther. We settle on one and a half Dinars, and he throws in two loaves of bread to sweeten the deal. A psychotic mood swing brings me to imagine that I shall reach Kerak within a few hours.

Outside Shobak, I see six cars in four hours, and their drivers seem too surprised at my presence to stop. The hottest part of the day is here, and I am freezing. A chill mountain wind and heavy clouds make nothing of my light clothes. My teeth chatter and I despair of being able to continue. Only the cool feel of the porcelain handle in my pocket sustains me. Now comes a bus heading back towards Wadi Musa. My hand goes out to stop it, but a plan forms in what I sometimes think of as my mind. If I make a symbolic commitment to the road ahead, such as deliberately missing what might be the only bus for a week, I am sure to get a lift. I draw my arm back into my pocket, grip the cup handle, and watch the bus rumble past. Before the realisation of what I have done sinks in, a car stops, "Amman, malesh!" [Amman, no problem!] shouts the driver.

"La il Kerak?" [To Kerak?] I ask.

"Kerak, malesh!" [Kerak, no problem!] I jump in, cold and grateful. When, after a few minutes, we turn off the King's Highway and drop down to join the Desert Highway, I offer not a whimper of complaint. All that wonderful mountain scenery passes behind a heat haze, and I let it. When the Kerak turnoff looms in the flat desert distance, I decide to say nothing, and roll on to Amman in this delicious heat; but he stops. We stare down a black ribbon of carless oblivion. "Kerak!" he laughs.

I get out and thank him, "Shoekran."

"Malesh!" he replies.

Within a minute, a car pulls off the highway and stops in front of me. Two men jump out and smile and wave. What a welcome, I think in blind optimism; but as I shake their hands, the car pulls away to rejoin the Desert Highway. We are now three—not good. I'd like them to retreat from the turnoff in good hitch-hiking etiquette, but it does not occur to them to do so. I motion them down the road. "Ma salama," [Good bye,] I say as kindly as I can.

"Ma salama," they reply kindly, not sure of where I intend to go.

"Ma salama," I say again, and leave them to pole position. I walk about fifty metres and turn to find them with me. They are extremely friendly. I demonstrate that they should walk ten paces in one direction and I ten paces in the other; they nod in agreement. We turn back to back. I count to ten in Arabic as we walk. I regret that we do not have pistols. When I regain pole position, a car passes me and stops to lift them.

I check into the Castle Hotel in Kerak. It is friendly, cheap, and quiet—I am its only visitor. The staff joins me on the roof to catch a far-off shimmering of sunlight on the Dead Sea. The lowest place on earth is a look away, yet the air is freezing. How can this be? We shiver with cold in our flimsy clothes. In Norway, the same chill brings out wind-stopper sweaters and felt boots; but here, as in Ireland, though winter comes once a year, it seems to come as a surprise.

Crusade

"Many Irish people come today—soon!" says the hotel manager. "Very good people. Come to Jordan to teach Arabic!"

"Teach Arabic?" My heart beats faster.

"Teach Arabic, sometimes learn English!"

"Ah, *teach* English. *Learn* Arabic."

"That is what I said. Very good people. Teach Christianity!" He notes my shock. "Not teach Christianity here!" he takes my arm and laughs. "In Africa, where people have no God!" The arrogance of monotheism is absolute. In Ireland too, we once had our own gods, but the Christians considered them unworthy and swept them away—but whyever did we let them? They lived among us. They were our companions: the animals, the trees, the rocks, the sun and moon and sky. We walked and talked with them. They were our world and we were theirs. Whatever made us abandon them for the jealous god of a desert religion?

The good people arrive presently. I greet them. They do not reply. One asks the manager—in Arabic, which he assumes I cannot understand—what I am doing here. "Siyagha!" [Tourist!] he replies, and smiles appeasingly at us both.

I am here to see the famous Crusader Castle of Kerak. When, almost a thousand years ago, Europe found herself with too many young noblemen and no wish for a war in which to kill them off, she sent them here. On the pretext of clearing a safe passage for pilgrims to Jerusalem, they plundered a sub continent, and did whatever they pleased with the people they found along the way. The Pope gave the Crusaders a first-class ticket to heaven in return for freeing the Holy places from the scourge of Islam, and didn't much mind how they did it. In one instructive decree, he gave them special dispensation to eat Muslims—but only when were very hungry. When they eventually breached Jerusalem's walls, they butchered for two days—Muslims, Jews, and Christians dying with the name of one god on their lips. The Holy City was left a charnel-house, its streets awash with blood. A generation later, in 1132, King Baldwin the First of Jerusalem built the castle at Kerak; but just fifty-six years later, Salah ad Din—Saladin—took it for Islam. The sitting governor, Renauld de Chatillon, a man renowned in the East for his barbarity was given his just desserts by Salah ad Din, a man renowned in the West for his chivalry. The castle's situation in the middle of a modern town lends nothing to its sense of history. Above ground, the outline of the fort and a few partially-restored towers are less interesting than the views into the town itself. I poke about in the inner recesses of the vaulted underground chambers, but stir no spirits. I leave wondering, as the Crusaders might have done, why I came at all.

In the Castle Hotel, the Muslims encourage the Christians to exercise their Arabic without worrying why they should need it. I clench my fist over the cup handle and grit my teeth. This is their business. Their enmities are forgotten now: Jordan is a stepping-stone for new crusades.

Arnon

I race for the shower, but one of the Christians beats me to it. He and his friends shower en bloc. As one finishes, he holds the door for the next. As the last dries himself, I watch one enjoy an unhurried shave, turning his other cheek to the last of the hot water gushing down the plug-hole. By seven o'clock, I am breakfasted and on the road. "No bus to Ariha," says the bus controller as the bus to Ariha pulls up. From Ariha, the next town is just a crease away on the map, but that crease is a one kilometre wide canyon that cuts a gash through the mountain range and the King's Highway. There is public transport to and from the towns at its edge, but none across it. The Wadi al Mujib is the biblical Arnon, the valley that separated the Moabites

from the Amorites. As I make to leave the bus, the driver asks "Madaba?" Madaba is my ultimate destination on the King's Highway.

"Aiwa, Madaba," I reply, feeling quite sorry for myself. It is said that one car a day crosses Arnon in each direction.

"Istenni," [Wait,] he says, motioning me to sit down and shut up. He holds a quiet conversation through his window with some gathered people. They join us in the bus. As we pull out of the station, do I only imagine that he looks around guiltily, before turning towards Madaba? Everyone in the bus is quiet. The driver creeps along in first gear, looking more into the rear-view mirror than at the road ahead. When we leave the town's limits, he puts his foot to the floor. The passengers cheer. It seems we have borrowed the bus.

Atop the plateau, there is little impression of elevation. The landscape is gentle and rolling, if broken and awkward in places. The rim of the wadi appears as a sea—I expect to see sunlight's glint on water. But as we approach, the illusion of shoreline vanishes along with one half of the horizon. The bus is again quiet. Our driver shifts back into first gear and creeps again along the road. It feels as if only our weight is holding this half horizon from tipping into the emptiness ahead. Here it is suddenly, like a mistake, a vast and embarrassing violation of the earth—it feels wrong to look so far into her. The tilled soil is as the outer peel of an onion-skin. We switchback through layers of eroded sandstones, dropping a kilometre or more to sea level and beyond, before bottoming out and crossing an insignificant stream. In conspicuous disregard of its situation, a well-kept Post Office flanks the bridge. We take two hours to travel down and up—mostly up, caution playing a minor role. At top, normality returns with its irritating command: the gentle landscape resumes; the awesome gash is but a disturbing sensation behind us.

In comparison, Madaba and its ancient Christian mosaics make little impression. A 6th century map of the Dead Sea and its surroundings should captivate me; but my first sight of Arnon repeats with the surprise of an upside-down image in a slide show. I detour to Mount Nebo to see the most famous mosaic of all, but am again distracted. I look at it for all of ten seconds before strolling over to the edge of the mountain. As I get closer, a living map unfurls. Though I stand only eight hundred metres above sea level, twelve hundred metres below, the Dead Sea glistens, its far shores just visible as an absence of sparkle. The Jordan River runs like a green thread to drain into it. Just north of that, lies Jericho. Barely penetrating the haze that edges the scene, its spires a ragged grey outline traced on parchment, is Jerusalem.

Hitch-hiking on to Amman is mostly uneventful. On one particularly long, hot, deserted stretch of road, I am heartened to see a convoy of three hire cars. They slow down. I recognise the Christians from the hotel, and they me. They speed up. Each car has a *Ye Must Be Born Again* bumper sticker. *Better that ye had not been born in the first fucking place.* I mutter to myself.

The First World War ended four centuries of Ottoman rule; but the deceit and duplicity of the Arab allies, Britain and France, left the region in turmoil that may perhaps be endemic. It would take another thirty years for the modern Middle-Eastern states to emerge. During this time, Abdullah, son of the Sherif of Mecca, declared the small town of Amman as seat of his rule. Today, the Kingdom of Jordan has this modern city as capital. Amman—a sprawl of roundabouts and tenements—I love it. So devoid is it of antiquities that only experience of the most leisurely kind awaits me. As shisha was the staple of my Egyptian nights, so has arak become the staple of my Jordanian ones. I have a bottle in front of me; it reads 100° proof. It burns a hole in my belly.

Irish Night

I confirm that Syrian visas are not issued in Amman, though many fellow travellers have said that they intend to pick one up here. I am amazed I had the foresight to get one in Cairo, and picture myself the only tourist in Syria. It seems that most foreigners in Jordan come through Israel, and the Syrians will not tolerate anyone's visiting both countries. The situation is

confused in that since the Six-Day War, the west bank of the River Jordan, formerly Jordanian territory, has been occupied by Israel. However, the West Bank—according to the Jordanians—is still part of Jordan. So it is theoretically possible to go there without passing Jordanian immigration. It is only necessary to get a pass to visit the West Bank. Once there—since Israel does not insist on stamping passports—it is possible to travel on to Israel proper with an unblemished passport. I think. I go to the Ministry of the Interior to enquire about passes, and meet two New Zealanders—Kiwis, they prefer—with Syrian visas gotten in Sydney. They are considering a sneaky visit to Israel before continuing. We are assured that passes are no longer required for the West Bank, and the Kiwis leave. I am not so easily assured. I want to ask the same question three different ways to three different officials. Official number three confirms what the other two have said: "A visitors pass is no longer necessary."

"Shoekran." I thank him and turn to leave.

"Unless…" I freeze. He notes this, and continues slowly, taking pleasure in his delivery. "Unless…you intend to visit Syria afterwards." His pause is generous. "If you have a pass, we will stamp that on your return to Jordan. If you have no pass, we will stamp your passport, and certain Jordanian entry stamps…"

"Are tantamount to having…"

"Israeli exit stamps." he concludes. Of course, I knew there was an unless, and I get it by the skin of my teeth. I race out to find the Kiwis, but they are pulling away in a taxi I cannot catch. I have the feeling that I could run a little faster, shout a little louder; but perhaps I'm being too hard on myself. What should I do? The opportunity to cross all these borders is perhaps unique, I tell myself. I could go as far as Jerusalem and see how I feel. There is also the question of Einat. I get the pass.

Now it rains. I step into a bookshop to seek shelter and pass some time. I find *Arabic for English Speakers,* and buy it on impulse. I find a restaurant, and sit down to learn some Arabic. It contains translations of *Useful Phrases,* such as:

I should care to see your oak parlour.
Is this the way to Peccadillo Square? and
This is surely the work of some old panter.

I find a Kiwi woman back at the hotel, and spend the rainy afternoon making friends. In way of reparation to this morning's Kiwis, I drag her out to visit Amman's Irish pub. It is a stodgy relic of home, full of all denominations of expats that don't fit their adoptive country. Guinness is on tap, but I stick to arak, which becomes free when I bend the barkeeper's ear with some appalling Arabic. Missing the hotel curfew by several hours does nothing to endear us to the night porter. He already disapproves of our slipping in and out of each other's rooms and visiting the toilet barefoot. The Kiwi's excuse that we had to phone our mothers in New Zealand is an embarrassment to us all.

Ruins

"Off to visit the sights today?" I ask the Kiwi this morning.

"Fuck that," she says. "I'm *ruined* out."

A little enfeebled by an arak hangover, I cross the road outside the hotel. Just off this main downtown street, a side alley bustles—the Hashim café, open twenty-four hours a day, is serving breakfast. In the twenty minutes I take to eat mine, I share my table with three groups, and now comes a fourth. It is early morning and people are rushing on to work. Each eats a bowl of hummos and a dollop of olive oil ladled up with flat bread, chews on a spicy little onion, and washes it down with mint tea. A ribbon of sunlight pasted across my back, I sit still-life as they swarm around me. My morning is not so pressing. I could get a bus to the Dead Sea, or I could just sit here. *"Willkommen im Jordan,"* says a man at my table.

"Ich spreche kein Deutsch," is a mistake. He bombards me with German. I tell him in Arabic that I don't speak German, but he continues with a friendly smile on his face. His friends tell him that I don't understand. They smile sheepishly at me and berate him, but such is his delight, that he rattles on, driving me from my lovely morning and into the day.

I understand the Kiwi's comment—there are ruins here. Amman was founded on the ruins of the Ancient Greek city of Philadelphia—Greek for *Brotherly Love*—which was named after its founder Ptolomy Philadelphus. I understand her sentiment too, but find myself tracking down a ruin from the city's Roman period, the Nymphaeum Fountain. It is a strange sight, but it has been destroyed and rebuilt a few times in the last eighteen hundred years. The original building was remodelled to form a Christian church, which in the 1920s was tumbled by an earthquake. One remaining wall is a jumbled mismatch of stones—broken columns lie horizontal among bits of broken frieze and undressed limestone. *"C'est les Chrétiens qu'ont fait ça,"* barks a lovely woman beside me.

I feel quite European today. *"Ah oui?"* I reply in my best French.

"Sorry, I didn't realise you were English." She continues, "I am the archaeologist for this site. I must rebuild this in two months. *C'est impossible,"* she emphasises in French. "When I leave, *they* will continue like the Christians did." She holds up a sepia photograph of a dreadful church and slaps it with the back of her hand. *"C'est insupportable,"* she emphasises again.

I picture a new version of the wall in front of us, with perhaps some cinder-blocks added to bring it up to date, and look for something positive to say. There is a pool of muddy water on the ground at our feet. "And the fountain?"

"That is the joke. It never was a *fooking foontain."* Her accent is as lovely as she. "It was nice to meet you, English." She nods and walks off, clasping her photograph of a ruin of a ruin.

I climb up to the Citadel, but the sight of a dozen tour coaches parked by a pile of stones has a poor effect on me. As one drives up, every face is pressed eagerly to the glass. I turn and descend into the city, passing a pet shop full of monkeys stuck in cages no bigger than themselves, their little faces pressed to steel bars, unwilling tourists holidaying in hell. People laugh and torment them, blow cigarette smoke in their eyes, and laugh again. One man sees my concern. "They don't mind!" he says to me. He is not a cruel man. Like the kids at Petra, he doesn't know what he does.

Back in the hotel, the Kiwi woman dozes in a settee in front of the television news. I sit beside her to see what is happening in the outside world. She rolls her head onto my shoulder and snores lightly in my ear. I close my eyes and open to the inside world instead. I feel her heat warming me. I open my eyes and turn to her, imagining that I am awaking beside this woman. Her hair hangs across her face. One strand lifts to her breath. I smell the sleep on her body. I miss this.

Across the street from the balcony of the Bar Helton, a man is welding a shop-front. He wears no goggles. I am dazzled by the flare of his torch, while he balances atop a ladder and grasps about him like a blind man. The thought flies into my head that he is blind, then flies out again, unbidden and unheeded, like a bird that has flown into a room by mistake. He will be blind soon, and it seems to matter as little as caged monkeys. I sit this night alone—not that I lack company in this friendly town. There is no shortage of agreeable conversation; every greeting is welcome and welcoming. It is just that I don't want anything more in my head than is here already. I have a decision to make—not my forte. Where should I go? To Israel—and risk my trip with an unwanted stamp in my passport? To Syria—and risk regret at never knowing Einat? I no longer know what to think; but to a man that has sunk to sniffing strangers, this comes as no surprise.

Hammamat Ma'in

I mean to catch the direct bus to Hammamat Ma'in—the Baths of the Spring—a hot spring sixty kilometres south west of Amman, but a long breakfast in the Hashim eats up the morning.

There is no mint in the tea today, so I refuse it in protest. On his third trip, the tea waiter sets a glass in front of me, smiles, reaches into his pocket and pulls put a sprig. I catch a local bus to Madaba—about half-way—and hitch-hike on from there. A minibus stops on the road, and the driver says "Hammamat Ma'in, 5 dinars." Much too expensive, the local bus cost twenty girsh, one fifth of a dinar.

"La shoekran," [No thanks,] I tell him. He races off, slightly offended. After half an hour, the only vehicle to come down the road is another minibus.

"Hammamat Ma'in, five dinars." I get in. The bus drives up and down lanes for an hour, dropping people off, picking people up. Each pays ten girsh. I feel that at five dinars, I should own shares. The first minibus returns and the two drivers stop for a long chat and a joke at my expense. I catch "siyagha" [tourist] and "hamsa dinar" [five dinars] followed by a hearty laugh. I flip. I throw ten girsh into the front seat and jump out, slamming the door. The driver flips and tries to run me down. I dodge him and continue walking down the road. He cuts me up again. I dodge around him, repeatedly. I am just losing the edge of my anger enough to begin to worry, when he gives up and drives away.

I walk on and a stark silence grows out of the air that rang with bilingual abuse a few moments before. The road ahead is well maintained, but has a barren look to it—as if never really used. I curse again my stubbornness. Into the silence comes the roar of an approaching vehicle. I wait, but though the roar increases, nothing comes. There is only another fifteen kilometres to go—if I walk, I should arrive just in time to catch the direct bus back. The roar becomes louder, still nothing appears. After fifteen minutes of brisk walking, the roar is so loud that its disembodiment is perplexing. With a bang and fart of oily smoke, a tractor comes around the corner behind me. With a seductive thumb wiggle, I coax the old Palestinian driver to stop. We share his sprung metal seat and bounce along the road, bottoming out painfully one moment and launching into the air the next, much to our mirth. This man can laugh. He opens his mouth and tips his head back in preparation; then comes the roar, like that of his tractor, from seemingly far away to rush out of his throat and rattle his teeth. Each laugh is followed by a smile that declares that moment to have been the finest. Just outstripping walking pace, we continue on till the land drops away and the Dead Sea comes into view below us. He falls silent, stops the tractor, and gestures at the profundity of desert below us. The Dead Sea is black today—a deeper hole in an already deep one. He smiles again, but not in mirth. He shakes his head. "Israel," he says, the only word he gives me.

Now an army truck stops. I share the cab with two young soldiers and a pea plant looted from a field. It fills the cab, tendrils flapping like a triffid. We strip its branches and devour its fruit, chucking the remains out of the window, but it fills the cab every bit as much. They stop and chuck me out too. "Mamnoua!" [Forbidden!] they declare, pointing to an army post by the side of the road ahead.

Now comes a lumpy BMW. The driver steps out to welcome me to the back seat. "I am Ahmet, he is Ayman." He swigs Amstel beer from a litre bottle. "We are Muslims. We only drink beer for our health." He finishes the bottle and smashes it on the ground by his sandaled feet. We are in Hammamat Ma'in in ten minutes.

We park the car at the side of the road where a small valley opens to a thirty metre hot waterfall. Above, the source is shrouded in steam, and the water bursts from its clouds to dash down over yellow-stained rocks to a stream. The reek of sulphur is, at first breath, unpleasant, but by the time we reach the valley bottom, we no longer smell it. The little stream, filled with litter I barely notice, is almost too hot to bear. We first dip startled toes, then race across to join men draped around every rock, dunked in every pool, more languid in their poses than any Western man can be. In the backwaters, the warmth is bearable, and we lie splashing and talking, the afternoon passing gently. As the extraordinary becomes familiar, and strangers become friends, I feel privileged to be the only tourist here. Accustomed now, I mount the fall and let the hotter weight pummel my shoulders. Ayman climbs to infernal regions, but a shift of eddies scoops him from a pool and casts him down, a confusion of arms and legs, to land unhurt in the stream. I desist from exploration, crouch under the fall where a curtain of water makes a sauna for one, and peer at the watery world beyond till my air is spent.

As the sun lowers, I share a pool with a schoolteacher. He has brought his class here for the day, and the kids run around with energy we can only admire as we redden like lobsters, heads lolling against the rocks. The languid poses seem less a question of culture now. "Here in Jordan, we are sheep. We know nothing. We think nothing. Maybe even the King knows nothing. I am Palestinian. I know even less. I work. I sleep. That is all," he tells me quietly. "If anyone hears me talk like this, I may go to prison. Even these children, they would tell their parents." He looks around smiling at the nearby children, knowing their ability to understand the English he teaches them. They look back at him with big trusting eyes. He, in turn, looks back at me, acknowledging his guilt of betraying that trust even so slightly. "I do not make enough money to support a wife. These are my children." His intelligence, his education, and his affability count for little. I am not shocked. I see this wastage everywhere—in Ireland too. Those that do the work of the heart are exploited by those that do not. The wallet covers the heart well. "You will visit Israel?" he asks.

"Maybe."

He misunderstands my uncertainty. "My friend, I am long used to knowing that I shall never return to my home. I do not mind that you visit it."

"You believe you shall never return?"

"Every Jew in the world, even if he has never been to Palestine, has the right to return. No Palestinian, even if he was *born* in Palestine, has that right."

"Is there no hope?"

"There is always hope. Ask some of these children where they are from, and they will speak the name of a village in Palestine that they have never seen, a village that perhaps no longer exists. I too have hope, the hope that I am wrong. But I believe I shall not live to see my home again."

Ahmed and Ayman drive me home. They take me to the Hashim and buy me dinner, the same as the breakfast I had and shall have again in the morning. They bring me to the hotel—though just across the road—by car. I have the front seat. Ahmed leaps out in his tee-shirt and colourful bathing shorts to open my door. "Shoekran," I say.

"La shoekran a la wajib." [There is no need for thanks, it is my duty.] "I am a Muslim. If I am good to you, my God is good to me." They pull away in their flash car clinking with beer bottles that they have neglected to throw out the window, and I reflect that I need to cut a new template in my library of stereotypes.

Dead Sea

Rather than pay for a service taxi to the Dead Sea, I catch another local bus. The driver is in no hurry, and even stops at the *Sea-Level* sign to encourage me to take a photograph. From here, there is such an ocean of land below that I wonder the sea never found it. He freewheels on and drops me at an unpromising junction in a salty desert. It is hot and dry down here, more than three hundred metres below sea level. There are no cars, no houses, and no people. I tuck myself into my own shade and await luck to deliver me once again from the folly of thrift. Now comes a well-dressed man carrying a cake. We chat about this and that, while he eyes the icing. "Is very hot!" he says. His dark suit is staining at the arms and back; his hands tire from holding the cake. "We take taxi?" he asks.

"Sure." I tell him, wondering how we shall manage that—no vehicle has passed for more than half an hour—but a taxi pops out of a heat haze beside us.

We arrive at the gates of a tourist enclave on the shores of the Dead Sea and pass without paying. "Here, you pay for nothing. You are my guest," he says, then instructs a waiter to take care of me. A group of French tourists is singing *Bon Anniversaire.* [Happy Birthday to You.] My host walks up with the cake and sets it down on cue. He winks at me and leaves. This is not as I had imagined my visit to the Dead Sea. A Mediterranean-style resort hotel fragments into a series of uncomfortable terraces strewn with white-plastic lawn furniture and rich tourists. A group beside me has a good comment on my appearance, before returning to its discussion of

the health benefits of a swim in *Das Totes Meer*. I sample it myself, but am let down. Not for me, the armchair pose in the buoyant sea. That works well for most of the others—pictures are taken of laughing, happy people reading newspapers. Germans do well, and Americans come out on top, but there is just not enough fat on my bones to make me float. I lift a proffered paper up to read, but sink below the water, getting a face full of salt. I return to the beach, eyes and nose streaming, a source of amusement to everyone but myself. A sign on the beach says *Schlamm,* and I wonder what it means. Up comes a man with a bucket of fresh, black mud. He points at the bucket and says *"Schlamm."*

"Schlamm," I reply, nodding and wondering does that mean *mud* in German, but he takes this as an invitation to pour the bucket over my head. I have no experience of what do in such an eventuality, so I stand dumb, pretending that I knew exactly this would happen, endeavouring to invite no more amusement. He smears me head to foot in a moment with his practised hand. The bits left unsmeared inside my trunks, he invites me to complete myself. The wet mud is, at first, refreshing; but the sun is intense, and it dries quickly. The heat becomes insupportable, and the tension of the drying mud feels like it will flay me. Finally, it cracks and flakes to the ground, taking my accumulated dirt and most of my suntan with it.

I doze the rest of the day in a hideous but comfortable lounge chair. As I drift off, Einat comes to kiss me. I startle and look for her, then sleep again. When I awake, the sky is ranged from violet behind to orange ahead, where the sun has set in the sea beyond Tel Aviv. The hills between are black and alluring against a refulgent sunset. I will cross them.

part 3

Walking on Glue

Palestine

A six o'clock cold shower does little to wake me from a night of half dreams. I rush my breakfast of hommous, and allow myself just the one tea before hurrying to the bus station. It is too far to walk, so I try to catch a service taxi. Each time one pulls up, I put my bag in the boot, but the car fills, so I take the bag out and await the next. No one in the queue grasps what I am doing. They sleepwalk past me, slip in, and close the doors. Car number four, I jump straight into, bag in hand; this is not popular, but I'm not sure of the alternative. I am in time to catch the bus to the West Bank frontier, but too late for a seat, so crouch on the gearbox between the driver and a policeman in the passenger seat. The driver seems to resent oncoming vehicles. He runs a number of them off the road. Even by Middle-Eastern standards, his driving is awful, and my place level with the windscreen feels like an ejector seat. The passengers are nervous, and even the policeman is stamping an imaginary brake pedal. "Shewea, shewea!" [Slowly, slowly!] he shouts to no effect. I barely glimpse the *Sea-Level* sign as we plunge like a stricken submarine into the depths of the Jordan Valley.

At the frontier, my West-Bank Pass is stamped. I have twenty-seven days to figure out what I am doing here. After some confusion, three other tourists and I are herded into an air-conditioned coach for the hundred metre border crossing, and charged twice what we paid for the three-hour drive before. The King Huissein/Allenby Bridge has the appearance of something that was thrown up in an afternoon by a corps of engineers, and perhaps it was. The River Jordan is a disappointing muddy stream. The Israeli border post is space-age—modern and efficient. To north and south stretches a ridge of sand-hills decorated with barbed wire and Israeli flags. Beyond stands a rank of Israeli minibuses. "Taxi here sir," says the lead driver.

"No thanks, I want to catch a bus."

"There are no busses, sir."

I walk one hundred metres, round a corner, and find the Palestinian bus station. The atmosphere is relaxed. Women walk with bare arms and open shirts. Palestinian soldiers, though dressed in careless uniform seem alert and professional. Behind the frontier, no one seems to know what is happening; but here everyone seems casually aware. I board a bus. "Salaam aleicum," [Peace be upon you,] I greet the passengers.

They reply with a rousing "Awaleicum salaam." [And upon you, peace.] I feel comfortable with these people, and they seem comfortable with me; but I shall leave them soon. I feel my heart grip. I am about to enter a country more modern than my own. I feel the loss of my journey. The bus's door closes, and we move off. I discuss politics with a group of men. I wonder if it is safe to raise the subject of the greeting we just shared. After all, one man that wandered around here talking about peace was nailed to a piece of wood for his trouble. "Is it possible to have peace between Israel and Palestine?" I ask.

"Yes it is. It is possible to have peace between Israel and all Arab countries."

"With Jordan certainly, but with Lebanon?"

"Of course!"

"And Syria?"

"Inshallah!" [God willing!]

"With Iraq?" They find this disturbingly funny.

"My friend, it is not possible for Iraq to have peace with Iraq."

At first, the landscape changes not at all from Jordan. Crumbly houses give to makeshift tents. Little boys shoo goats off the road. Arabia continues. But a major culture shock comes with an Israeli Border Guard entering the bus. He takes a Palestinian by the collar and lifts him to his feet, demanding his identity card. I feel I am witnessing an assault, but no one is concerned. The soldier drops him and comes to me. "Hi!" he says with a charming smile on his face. Like the kids in Petra, *It's alright, mister!* the man in the pet shop, *They don't mind!* and now the soldier, *Hi!* They say the same thing, *It is nothing.* The Palestinian picks up a newspaper and settles down to read it. I am shaking with anger, but it was nothing. Where is the victim? The donkey in Petra, the monkeys in Amman—I thought them victims too. I am no longer sure what to think.

A confusion of two busses and two taxis brings me from the frontier to Jerusalem, when the minibus would have brought me here cheaper and quicker. Just outside the old city walls at the Damascus Gate, I eat a few falafels, watch the Security Forces pick two Palestinians from the crowd, and handcuff and throw them face down into the back of a van. My mind clouds with doubt. I call Einat. "Hi, it's Chris."

"Chris? Where are you?"

"In Jerusalem!"

"Oh! I'd love to see you, but I'm really busy. Can you call me back in a few days?" My mind darkens.

I plunge into the old city and drift with a tide of people along a narrow street lined with stalls. We are packed shoulder to shoulder, and hobble along together; someone stops to shop, someone joins from an alley, but we move as one. I peel off at a hostel entrance, the Al Arab. The interior reminds me of Dahab. An Australian man greets me at the desk. "What facilities do you offer?" I ask him.

"We got videos," he replies.

I shuffle back out the Damascus Gate to another hostel—the Feisal. I find it calm and studious; the hallways and staircases have the quiet air of a cloister—perfect. Though I notice that one here, young or old, seems to walk without the aid of a stick, I pay and go to choose a bed. As I enter a dormitory, I hear a hollow, warbling voice. "It just goes to show what an imperfect world we live in." Three men are marooned in a conversation with nothing further to say. They stare at me. "Hello," comes the hollow voice. "Welcome to the Holy Land." My heckles rise. Jerusalem—of course. I court sleep as the hollow man strums *Amazing Grace* on an electric guitar. I drift off eventually, but am awakened by a man whispering in my face, "Give it to me straight. Is this place full of religious nutters?"

I walk across the old city alone at midnight. The alleyways, overhung to near closing, are empty and resonate to my steps. They are dark and glisten fresh from a hosing. I should be scared perhaps. I don't know what it is to be here alone at night; but I am untroubled, and the sureness of the cobblestones steadies me. At the Jaffa Gate is an American-style pizza parlour, still open. I enter reluctantly, out of hunger. I eat the pizza, wondering how I came to be here, to this country—hunger again. What if I get what I come for? What then? Do I stay? The thing I seek may hurt to find—but isn't hope more important than hurt? and won't I press on courting both regardless? The laminated maps of my schooldays were marked with other goals, other barriers. I don't know my way across this one.

Jerusalem

The enclosing streets of the Arab quarter narrow to a few metres where they skirt buildings or duck below them. In places, such light as finds its way to street level cannot compete with the brightly-lit shops that run from one end of the city to the other. Even today, Friday—the Muslim Holy Day—Jerusalem is busy. What is a short walk of less than a kilometre from the Damascus to the Jaffa Gate takes an hour in the crush of the day. The Jewish quarter is distinct. Armed police funnel pedestrians through metal detectors as they enter its portals, and inside exists a city like no other. Clean and well organised, the quarter exudes tranquillity matched by the pace of life, and the open plain facing the Temple Mount is a relief from the chaos of the Arab quarter. The First Temple, of Solomon, was built here three thousand years ago and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian four hundred years later. The Second Temple was built soon after, and stood until the Romans destroyed it nearly six centuries later, one generation after the crucifixion of Jesus. The only visible remains is a retaining wall built by Herod the Great in 40 BC, and it is to here, the Western Wall, that Jews come to mourn the destruction of their Temples. Coach-loads of tourists arrive at the nearby Dung Gate to make their hundred metre photographic pilgrimage, and above, unseen on the Mount, Muslims are making their way to mid-day prayers in the Al Aqsa Mosque. The Dome of the Rock—where almost five thousand years ago Abraham nearly murdered his son, from where more than

thirteen hundred years ago, Mohammed is said to have ascended into heaven—projects its golden dome skywards. Some Jews would like to reclaim the Mount, sweep it clean of Islam, and build the Third Temple. A model of how it might look is on display in a nearby museum; but thankfully, museums to the future are at least as unreliable as those to the past. I wander through immaculate streets, and sit in pristine squares drinking espresso and watching children play. I feel at ease; but when I bypass the metal detectors, and rejoin the press of bodies—the maelstrom of colour, smell, and sound—I feel at home.

Jerusalem has varieties of tourism. Along with the usual package tourists and stragglers like me, are the devout of many denominations. Today, as on a Friday long ago and most of the Fridays since, Christians tote wooden crosses through the streets. As on about two thirds of the Fridays since, Muslims push past them on their ways to and from prayer. Jews have stood watch over all these dissenters, and a few long-since vanished ones besides. Added to this are journalists of all denominations. Some of the best headlines of the last five thousand years have come from here, and it is not unreasonable to expect more. Like the religious, journalists are drawn to this epicentre of monotheism in search of a good story, or a good imitation of one; but the story is the same. Tension is a word often used to describe Middle-Eastern politics; but tension implies dynamics, and this old spring is rusted into a familiar shape.

I share a bottle of wine and the evening with Olivier, a young French photographer. We sit in a café in the Christian Quarter that is populated by such atheists and not-sures as wish to debauch the night. We are the only light in a darkened quarter. Candle flames from the terrace tables throw shadows the whole length of the street, and music from the café jukebox bounces around the cloisters of old churches late into the evening. No one is disturbed. Jews, Muslims, and Christians pass with unseeing eyes. "What do you think of the political situation here?" Olivier asks.

"It seems quiet enough, Olivier. People seem to get on with each other."

"Pfaf! They hate each other. The Jews want all the city. The Muslims want it all back. The Christians? The Christians let others fight it out, then take what is left. This is a city at war."

"It seems quite peaceful. Tolerant, even."

"You see only surface. Look at them. They share same streets without see each other. Below this *tolérance,* is hatred."

I watch the street closer. The world beyond our candle flame divides into three, and I wonder if the unseeing eyes are not just for us. I wonder if tolerance here means ignoring your enemy. In Hebrew and Arabic, the word for adversary is *Shaitan.* In Indo-European tongues, we drive this adversary away. The Israeli author, Amos Elon, writes: *The past seems to have lost little if any of its power to inspire, animate, and provoke. Where there is so much destructive memory, a little forgetfulness may be in order.* Here, Satan is present.

Shabbat

I breakfast in the same café. In daylight, the tribal ghosts are gone, and the Christian Quarter has the feel of a medieval European city. I dive back into the confusion of alleys and steps, determined to know this square kilometre of history, but find myself turned onto the same paths, led to the same squares. Every new way comes to a familiar place, as if the old city were guarding its secrets, or emphasising its story. Here: at the Western Wall, it is the seventh day—Shabbat—the Jewish holy day. Once past the metal detectors and the surly guards, the quarter becomes an image from utopia—streets free from litter, traffic, and graffiti. Contented people sit at street cafés, or just like at home, pursue their religious freedom to close them. Surrounded by the pathological disorganisation of the Arab world, the order here is deliberate, and perhaps able to exist only in antithesis to it. Here: at the Damascus gate, it is the first day of a new week, and the market is full. Orthodox Jews push past the stalls, through the bargaining people. On their holy day they will use no mechanical device. They must walk from their devotions at the Western Wall to their homes in the new city, and rather than detour around the walls, some brave the crowds of the Arab Quarter. One old Jew closes his eyes and allows a young boy to

lead him: he will see no evil today. Here: at the Holy Sepulchre, the streets are calm. The Christians bear smaller crosses today as they mill about in anticipating of the Sabbath—their seventh day.

At the edge of the Christian Quarter, I mount what look like steps leading to a building, but they open onto a small street. It bends quickly to an anticipated dead end; but as I turn to retrace my steps, a door opens. "Look in here," says an old man, "the best sight in all Jerusalem." I am dubious, but enter, and bend double to follow him down a twisting flight of steps cut from bare rock. It is cool. There is the sound of water, the ringing of a droplet into a still pool, but my eyes are slow. The outlines of a cave roof come, and now these steps curving down the wall. With another droplet, the water ripples and shows itself at my feet, walls and steps slithering in to melt in oily blackness. This is the Well of Saint Helena, built on the fourteenth, and last, station of the cross. Some coins shimmer on the steps below me. I put my hand into my pocket and my fingers close on the cup handle from Petra. This talisman has been with me too long to throw away, I think. I toss it quickly, but quiet as the cave is, I hear no splash.

Outside, in the forgotten heat, I am led to a courtyard that is the roof of the Holy Sepulchre. Ownership of the church is disputed by three Christian sects, and Ethiopians have made camp here on the roof. Priests with dreadlocks they can sit on, lounge around their shanty-town and boil tea. They seem unsure of what to do with me, so one unlocks a door and ushers me into his Church. He leads me through a series of rooms full of curious icons and wall-hangings that I only glimpse, and knocks another door. It is unlocked from the inside by a Coptic priest; he leads me through his church and dumps me in the courtyard of the Holy Sepulchre.

At a café near the Damascus Gate, I talk politics with a young Palestinian. "They steal our land. They come and take it. They drive us from our homes. They kill men, women, and children."

"People are killed on both sides."

"Of course."

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth leaves…"

"And a bullet for a stone," he interrupts my platitude.

"You believe there is no solution?"

"I believe they do not want it. I really believe. We want a Palestinian State. We share Jerusalem with them. But I believe this will never happen."

"Why not?"

"They will not allow it. In their hearts, they do not want it."

Back in the Feisal, I relate the discussion to two young American Jews, "That's the problem with the Arabs, they only ever see their side of the story," says one.

"And we Jews, how many sides do we see?" asks the second.

"At least we do not want to drive them into the sea."

"They do *not* wish to drive us into the sea."

"No, they want to blow us to pieces first, and then drive us into the sea."

"The Arabs have never persecuted Jews. All the pogroms against us have been Christian."

"But they want our land."

"It is not our land."

"Of course it is our land. Before we came and made the desert bloom, no Arabs lived here. It was almost empty. They came to our borders and made their refugee camps claiming that *we* drove them away. They were never here!"

"Yea, yea, *the people without land to the land without people*. That is bullshit Zionist propaganda, and you know it."

"It makes no difference. This land is *promised* to us."

"I may be a Jew, but I am not a Zionist. There is a difference."

"Every Jew is by definition a Zionist."

"Every Israeli, perhaps."

"Every Jew is an Israeli."

"Judaism is not a country."

"And you are a traitor to both."

"And you are not worth talking to. Excuse me," he says and walks off.

I leave the hostel and sit at the falafel shop opposite the Damascus gate trying to piece the discussion together, but it is not over: "Am I disturbing your writing?" comes the second American's voice.

"No. Have a seat."

He sits. "You must excuse him. He is a little *fresh.* Us American Jews do tend to be a bit radical at first."

"So it seems."

"Israel has serious problems," he continues, "and it is easy to blame the Palestinians for everything. But without them, we would have civil war."

"Why?"

"Why? This is a country of extremes. On one hand we have the Peaceniks, who would give back every inch of the Territories like that," he snaps his fingers. "On the other, we have the Religious Right, who would settle every inch of the Territories like that," he snaps again. "In between, we have a dozen other parties with a dozen other opinions. Can they agree? Of course not, and they hate each other for it."

"And what of the Territories? Do you think Palestine will ever exist as a state?"

"If the Ultra Orthodox do not accept the State of *Israel,* what hope has Palestine?"

"What do you mean?"

"They will not recognise the State of Israel, or speak Hebrew until the Messiah comes. In the meantime, they do not work—they are *supported* by the State of Israel—they are excused from army service, and they want everything closed on Shabbat. They are loathed by the left, who in turn, loathe them."

"Complicated."

"We have come from all over the world. The only thing we have in common is that we are Jews, and sometimes that is not very much."

"If there is so much difference already, why can there not be room for the Palestinians too? They are a Semitic people with a Semitic language. They recognise the State of Israel. From what you tell me, they are less radical than some Jews."

You miss my point. Remember: The last century tried to wipe us from the face of the earth. Can you imagine what that does to a people? We have to deal with that. We have to make sure it never happens again. The worst of it is that the kid you talked to at the Damascus Gate is probably right. We want this land. And whether it is right or it is wrong, in time we will take it all. The Palestinians are not our natural enemies, they are just the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Olivier and I drink beer in the Christian Quarter, where the candle-flame circle is a refuge from the ghosts of the night. We talk first of photography and women; but the candles flicker and the shadows of the night encroach. Our talk turns to this place, this conundrum, this triply-holy city, this Typhoid Mary of theology. The understanding I sought to augment in coming here is forfeited.

Shifting Sands

On a café terrace just inside the Damascus Gate, Olivier and I drink Arabic coffee and stare into the swirl of people by the gate. There are no market stalls today, and there is perhaps a celebration going on. I ask the waiter: "Is it The Prophet's birthday?"

"Yes, today is The Prophet's birthday." he replies. I am pleased to guess right, but Olivier is unconvinced.

"Is it the end of the Haj?" he asks.

"Yes, today is the end of the Haj."

"So the end of the Haj is the same day as The Prophet's birthday?" I ask.

"No, it is not."
"So when is Prophet's birthday?"
"Long time away." He flicks his hand as if throwing the words off the terrace.
"And the end of the Haj," asks Olivier, "when is that?"
"Before, before." He throws them over his shoulder.
"So what is this celebration?"
"Muslim holiday."
"To celebrate what?"
"How should I know, I am a Christian. Be thankful you are not a goat." He draws his hand across his throat. More disciplined minds than ours might have arrived at a closer approximation of the truth, but we are punch-drunk from Oriental paradigm shifts.

We leave the old city by the Damascus Gate, and walk west to the new city. It feels that we walk into *The West*—from the Middle East into Europe in the space of ten minutes. "It is too much," says Olivier, "I cannot continue." He is being melodramatic, but he has a point—it is unsettling. We might be in Paris or Rome.

"Let's stop for coffee."

"No more coffee. I drink a litre of Arab coffee. You are crazy, Fawcett. I go home." He returns to the Orient, as I settle into a cappuccino and croissant. With Egypt and Jordan behind me, and Syria and Lebanon ahead, I'm not sure what to do with this place—yet I have come less than one kilometre into it. Soon, I must go farther, to Tel Aviv to see Einat, if she wants to see me. I walk more, trying to adjust to the modern world. An old Jewish man asks if I am lost. I tell him no, but he sees I am. He sits me down on a low wall in a square, and talks to me a while about nothing much, smiles a lot, and pats me on the back. Three young Palestinians offer a drink of coke. I make to accept it, but one runs off to buy me a fresh can. Two decent peoples separated by religion, yet at war—just like home. Of course, the real reasons are deeper than religion: they are historical, political, financial—so we say—but I have come from a distrust of the rallying call to a dislike of it. I read in the Jerusalem Post that yesterday a young man was killed for riding his moped past a religious neighbourhood on Shabbat. Someone was expecting him, and had exercised his religious freedom to string a piece of wire across his path at the height of his neck. He was almost decapitated. At the time the Roman Empire was flattening the Second Temple and setting up problems that run to this day, it had problems at home. Romans were rioting and killing each other by in the names of two chariot teams, the Blues and the Greens. Blaming religion for violence may be no better than blaming a colour, but colours do not claim to enhance righteousness. There is no god but God—in one handy pack or split conveniently into three bite-size chunks—and the world over He is used as an excuse for people to beat the fuck out each other. Believe what I believe, or else. If the desire to discover the divine within us is our greatest virtue, the desire to instil our discoveries into others is our greatest vice.

Tel Aviv

I come to Tel Aviv to see a woman that says she wants to see me, but has no time. She arranges that I stay in Judith's house. Judith tries to cheer me up: "Einat really is busy," she says, and I believe her. She takes me for a walk along the sea front with her pit-bull-terrier puppy. We sit on the perfect palm-lined beach drinking coffee and listening to the most modern music I have heard in a couple of months. The waves roll in to break upon the shore, and I let my mind roll with them. Behind is a Western-style city I am not ready to look at. I remember the dream in Alexandria in which I caught the wrong train and returned home by mistake. That dream has come true. It is a dangerous thing when dreams come true. Judith's puppy dog forces her pointy snout between my legs and demands indulgence. I rub her little ears and her stubby tail whirrs. Between those beady eyes is a brain the size of a Ferrero Rocher, but she knows what she wants.

Home

I am perplexed. I sit in a country that resembles Europe, but feel anything but comfortable. Israelis do: they have carved, with Nabatæan arrogance, a European landscape from Asia, and made it their home. In Tel Aviv is little trace of the Palestine that persists in the living memory of a million Palestinians in refugee camps on Israel's borders, and millions more fled farther. Perhaps if those Palestinians did not exist, I could wish to live here. Perhaps to live here means to forget that they do. But I am always too quick to judge, too quick to leap to the conclusion. If I am to see this place, I must open my eyes to it. If I am to know it, I must open my mind to it—and more, I must open my heart. Einat's Star of David hangs heavy around my neck today. I feel its significance now: If you want me, accept this.

Coffee

While window-shopping in Tel Aviv, I see a lightweight fleece sweater that I should have had with me the whole trip. Though the February Alexandrine nights and the Jordanian mountains are behind me, and the temperature here is in the high twenties, I remember the hated feeling of cold. "Do you have it in black?" I ask, holding up a livid pink one.

"Yes, if you don't mind our logo on it," says the assistant.

"No, not at all." He fetches a black sweater with bold Hebrew writing. "There is one problem," I tell him "I am going to Syria and Lebanon."

"You are a war correspondent?"

"No, I'm on holiday."

"You are going to Lebanon on *holiday?"*

I sit in an evening café and burn myself on coffee. I have barely eaten since I came to Tel Aviv. Shisha in Egypt, arak in Jordan, coffee in Israel. I had hoped it to be sex. Tonight I meet Einat. I have not seen her since Dahab—five weeks ago. I don't know what to expect, but am full of expectation. I go to her apartment. She is showered and changed from work. Her hair is wet and smoothed to her forehead. She is as beautiful as a goddess. She sits across from me and we talk, mostly about my travels. I tell stories of Wadi Rum and Petra. Her blue eyes flash. She leans over to me and allows my gaze to fall into her blouse. Her nipples nod in agreement with her strong chin. I want her.

Now she is gone early to bed and I sit back in the café, staring into the empty chair across from me. On Valentine's Night, that chair had just been abandoned—it was still warm from an old love. Now it waits to see if a new one will fill it. I project her there, whether she wants it or not. I want, but what is it that I want? and if I get it, shall I still want it? or shall I roll over and disappear? What do I want here with this woman? To visit the Holy Land, find god, and fuck her—is this my little crusade?

Old Dog

My days have become places to eat in, to sit through, and to sleep off. My journeys, my voyages between dawn and dusk, are halted. I see my exit, my two-lane blacktop. All I need to do is sling my pack and walk free along it, but I can't. And how did this detour begin? With the shifting of one step, I remember. I remember also, one dirty Irish night, watching an old dog lie on a wet doorstep. All night he nosed the door, scenting out his love asleep and unawares of her suitor at the door. I awoke a few times and went to the window to see him still there. I looked, because each time I looked, I expected a revelation about male sexuality to strike me. When he ambled home at dawn, tail wagging contentedly, I judged his understanding superior to mine.

Hope

I struggle with the morning. I walk into a bank five minutes after closing time and am escorted out by the throat. I return a badly-cut key to a locksmith to have it thrown back at me. A two-asshole start bodes ill for the day. I drink coffee on the beach and join conversation with a young Israeli man. "I would love to make your trip. It would mean so much to me."

"Why?"

"I go to their countries as a soldier. I want to go as a friend."

"Perhaps it will soon be possible."

"What is it like? What do they think of us?"

"The people I spoke to want peace. They think peace is possible."

"But what do they really think?"

"I don't know. They seem genuine."

"Do you know what we really think? We hate them. And how is it possible to hate an entire people unless you are mad?"

"But *you* don't."

"No, but half my country does. We are half-mad—schizophrenic. Is that better?"

"Like my country."

"Like every country, maybe." He pauses again. "But I don't want to visit my neighbour's house with a gun." He inclines his head in the direction of his assault rifle, which as an off-duty soldier, he must carry at all times. When we part, he shakes my hand and says, "Shalom. Do you know what that means?"

"Peace."

"Do you believe it?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then tell them half of us are not mad."

I walk the few kilometres south to the port of Jaffa and sit on the pier, watching fishermen tend to their boats. The afternoon is peaceful, the sea glassy and undulating, the sky billowing with high clouds that do not encounter the sun. My struggle with the day subsides as my thoughts turn to it. What a place this is! I meet the best of people and the worst. Some regard Lebanon as a neighbour, others as a launch pad for Katusha rockets. Some regard Arabs as friends, others as potential suicide bombers. Between the best of them and peace stands the rest. To borrow from the political vernacular of my own country: *Not an inch!* Blood and tears, yes; widows and orphans, yes—but the inch? No. In my country, as in this one, politicians shrink from their most crucial task—that of talking to their enemy—because they find it distasteful. And without dialogue, language, our most important tool, is reduced to the role of foreplay in the masculine sex-rage of war. The sun sets beyond the pier and the moon rises full from behind the old town. Shabbat begins. It is time to meet Einat.

Judith and I join Einat and her friends for dinner, and the evening is fun, but I know now that I came here for the wrong reason. Einat looks at me, but she doesn't see me. She is charming, she likes me, that is all. This errand, hope has sent me on many times before. Did I expect this time to be different? I walk off into the night and find myself on the promenade leading to Jaffa. I left my peace there just hours ago, and I go in search of it. The moonlight washes over me, warm night air brushes my cheek—this is no evening for solitude. The sound of a noisy bar comes to me. Ahead in the promenade, half way to Jaffa, lights are burning and flashing. I make out a sign: *The Buzz Stop.* I go in. In the corner is Hazel's brother. He is delighted to see me, and I him. I look for Hazel. "When did you get here?" he shouts over the din.

"What?" I am not listening. "Monday, I got here Monday." I shout back, my eyes racing around the room.

"Hazel just left!"

"Yea? What direction?" I am primed to run like the wind.

"No!" he laughs. "She left on Monday!" Hope is a fine slap on the mouth, and I have a sore mouth.

Luck

Judith and I share a Shabbat breakfast Tel Aviv style—burning sun and loud music on a beach full of people taking showers or making mobile phone calls. The rattle of hard rubber balls against wooden bats—matkot, a kind of table tennis with no table—punctuates the clamour. Israelis have one day a week off, and Tel Avivis enjoy it feverishly. "I think it's time for me to go," I tell Judith. My feet are itchy and my wallet is light. I see my route like a motorway map ahead of me, only the possible exits and stops marked. Medieval pilgrims used the same maps stripped of superfluous detail, free from distractions. A town with a hostelry, then a day's travel away, another: Jerusalem, Amman, Damascus, Beirut.

"Will you see Einat before you leave?"

"Of course," I lie, but having said it, I know I shall. I take a cool swim neglecting to shower afterwards; I will bear this salt on my back today. I sling my pack, and thanking Judith for her kindness, I eye the road: just one more delay. Einat is fresh and more beautiful than ever. I was right to come. It is better to know disappointment than regret. I shall spend this last afternoon with her, and when night comes and Shabbat is over and the busses run again to Jerusalem, I shall leave her. I want to cry—but not here. This sadness is mine, not hers. We talk of future and past. I try to make those eyes flash again, but they are dark today. " Where will you go from here?" she asks.

"Syria, Lebanon, then Turkey."

"Then back to Ireland?"

I had forgotten Ireland. "Yes, Ireland."

"Why did you leave? There was a reason. You never said." I really had forgotten Ireland. I remember now.

"To forget a woman, Einat." I don't want these questions. I want my forgetfulness; it was hard won. I look from her balcony to the street. The street is my friend, it doesn't ask, it leads, as does every street, to where I wish to go. I wish to go there now.

"A woman?"

"Yes, Einat. We split up. She dumped me. You know. The usual thing."

"You are bisexual?" she asks.

"No."

"But you sleep with women? I mean, have sex with women as well?"

"As well as what?" I have the feeling that we sound equally obtuse.

"As well…as with men?"

"I don't have sex with men."

"You're not gay? We thought you were gay. Judith told me: *Einat, there's the perfect man for you, what a pity he's gay."* The street looks no longer so appealing. The night bus leaves in my imagination. Einat's eyes flash like a kingfisher coursing a river. She looks at me. She sees me. She takes my hand and smiles a crooked smile. The space between us closes, slowly, deliciously. We touch, we squeeze, we tug at each other's clothes. When night comes, we sleep together, just sleep. If I am cursed with hope, I am blessed at least with the luck to sustain it.

Guns and Moses

I drink coffee on the beach and wait for Einat to finish work at eight. *The Doors* plays today, and the mood is softer. The crashing of the waves is broken by helicopter gun-ships patrolling the coast. Crows scavenging the beach jump into the air at their approach, then eye them enviously as they chop overhead; but we are the only ones to notice. I turn more heads than they. A beautiful Yemenite woman with green eyes and red hair smiles at me. She is one of the most exotic women I have seen in the flesh, but perhaps to her, a pink Irishman is exotic too. I smile back. The emerald green of her string bikini clashes slightly with the olive-green butt of the M16 assault rifle leaning against her beach chair, but that is a detail. Young men with broad shoulders and hairy chests strut past with sub-machine guns balanced on their shoulders. This

miscegenic society throws up elegant mixes: Yemenite with Swedish, Moroccan with Indian. The men may be a little too masculine, and the women too feminine—despite their weaponry—but there is no denying their beauty. Israel is a society of extremes. A lifetime at war, military conscription, and one-day weekends does much to shape the national character. Ireland is nothing to this; our troubles are small in comparison. We do not suffer such intrusive reminders of conflict. A man sits down at the next table. "Hi!" he greets me. On his tee-shirt is a familiar pop logo, but with the words: *Guns and Moses.*

I spend a few quiet hours with Einat. We sit on her balcony and talk. I do a stupid thing: I take one of her cigarettes and begin to smoke. My lungs miss the shisha draughts of Arabia and welcome the thin, dirty puffs that substitute them. We sleep again. These evenings are too short for more.

Dreams

Einat is leaving early again for work. As I drift back to sleep, she comes to kiss me. I startle, just as I did by the Dead Sea. Another dream come true. I jump out of bed, reluctant to sleep more. I am not used to dreams coming true. I want them to stay in their place and not impinge upon my waking. I leave to spend some days in Jerusalem. The hours between Einat's work are dismally few; I shall return for Shabbat, when she is free.

I arrive in Jerusalem as the day yields to evening, and cross the few paces from the heat of Israel, through the Damascus Gate, and into the cool of the Arab Quarter. I walk the streets slowly—as if the crowds of the day were still here—to allow time to arrive in this familiar world. A few hundred metres along the Suq Khan ez-Zeit, just past the Al Arab, is Olivier's hostel, the Al Hashami. I go in to bargain a room. "Ten dollars," says the receptionist.

"Mish mumpkin! [Not possible!] I reply.

"OK, how much you want to pay?"

"Four dollars."

"Four dollars! For four dollars you can go sleep on the roof!"

"OK." I go to the roof. I understand now his look of surprise. *Sleep on the roof* was for him a figure of speech. The roof is a junkyard, but I have known worse. How much more pleasant it is than sharing a dorm with guitar-playing religious nutters, for example. I throw together a shelter of old bed-frames and doors. It is charming. I add a terrace.

I meet Olivier in the foyer. His eyes are glazed from a day's snapping. "Good, stupid photos!" he says hoisting one of his Leicas to his face and kissing it. "I nearly went home," he tells me. "I was worried that my photos were rotting in this heat. But I called my mummy, and she said, When I gave birth to you and gave you my milk to drink, I made a man not a little boy. You will stay and do your job and solve your problems. You will not come running home!' Look!" He fetches negatives that he has developed in an improvised darkroom. "Good stupid photos!" he shouts. "Look. This photo *is* Jerusalem." He twists the lens from his camera and hands it to me, nodding impatiently. I peer into the tiny white and black frame. At the Damascus Gate, two Israeli soldiers flank two Palestinian boys. The two boys hold between them two birdcages. Inside each cage sits a white dove. "I waited one, maybe two hours for this good stupid photo. Only when I develop negative I see birds."

An Argentinean man at the next table says: "God gave you this photograph, Olivier. Every day you go to the Dome of the Rock, the Western Wall, and the Holy Sepulchre, while others visit only one. God sees this and He likes it. This photograph is from Him" He accompanies this suggestion with a pious look and an upward pointed finger.

"Merde! C'est hasard! Viens Fawcett. En y va." [Shite! It's luck! Come Fawcett. Let's go.] We go and drink beer because it is cheap. "Not talk woman. I am here without woman. We talk photo," he warns me as we sit down. He grips his glass and talks about his girlfriend for an hour. I try to catch his attention, but he stares fixedly inwards.

At the end of the evening, I pump all my change into a phone box and call Wally. "We've got about ten seconds," I tell him. "I'm well and happy, how is everyone there?"

"Everyone's fine. Are we going to see you soon?"

"No." *Click.* Through this dislocation, I have a bit of home here in Jerusalem, and I hope he caught enough of me to pass around. I climb to my roof house. The old moon is rising by the glittering Dome of the Rock, her silver reflecting on the gold. I lie smelling and listening to the Old City, my head swimming with beer and thoughts, till at midnight, a thunder of Christian bells severs this day from me like a knife.

Photo

I awake with the call to prayer and the sound of footsteps coming roofward. Olivier brings a platter of tea, bread, and apricot jam. We breakfast with the city's pitch rising around us. "Coffee and photo, Fawcett. Coffee and photo." This is our mission. We drink a litre of Arabic coffee between us, and charge at the day. I lead him through the Ethiopian roof-village, through their church, through the Coptic Church, and into the courtyard of the Holy Sepulchre. The shutters of our three old Leicas cock and release with the speed of a motor winder. "No, Fawcett! You want to photo someone without they know? *Il faut d'être flagrant. Regard!"* [You must be bold. Watch!] He indicates a woman selling trinkets on the courtyard steps. I expect him to hang back and choose his moment, but he strides straight to his target, sticks the camera in her face, clicks, and strides on. He does not break step. She looks around, unsure of what has happened. I try it on a soldier. It works. We slip into the Holy Sepulchre like a pair of assassins, picking off the strange and the unlikely. On one possible site of Jesus' tomb is a marble slab. Dozens of pilgrims are competing to press their ears against it to hear their saviour's last torments. They are easy targets. A procession rolls in, and we part so we may catch them in crossfire. That is, I think, the unstated plan. But once parted from the guerrilla snapper, I join his victims. I press my ear to the marble, and it is true that you can hear the resound of the whips falling on that bloodied back, or perhaps a rushing of blood in the ears. Out of the corner of an eye, I catch a last glimpse of Olivier, a tiny face in the crowd, a film canister stuck in his mouth, fighting to his last breath. We come in search of coffee and photos, and despite loosing one another, find both.

I lunch alone in Ali's Green Door Pizza. Near the Damascus Gate, down some steps, and through a green door, Ali's baker's oven struggles to match the heat of midday. Ali stands in a trough in front of the oven, a basket of pizza bases and a row of open cans beside him. He holds up each can in turn, and a nod or a shake decides the filling. He finishes by cracking an egg on top—this is his speciality. He holds the pizza up for me to admire before tossing it to the flames. Ali's is a meeting place for young Palestinians with as much fire in their blood as is licking round my pizza. "Min wayn enta?" [Where are you from?] one demands from well inside my personal space.

"Irlanda Shamaliya," [Northern Ireland,] I bark. What a great place to be from sometimes. The pizza is delicious, the company reverential.

Olivier talks me into developing the films I've shot so far. He says it is on account of the heat, but I sense another motive. When I emerge from his darkroom, I feel like a cooked pizza; but in my hand, I have three hundred and sixty negatives for Olivier to devour. He twists the lens off his camera, puts it to his eye and races through the rolls. He stops from time to time, looks at me with a pursed face, and shouts, "Good stupid photo!" Tonight we drink beer for the pleasure of doing it together. Again, Olivier declares: "Not talk women," and proceeds at length to do so.

Dead End

Last night's beers put a premature end to today. Olivier and I wander through the Muslim Quarter, feeling the heat too much. We drink coffee, but it gushes out our pores as evil sweat. "I need a Niconos (an underwater camera)," says Olivier, wiping his Leicas dry. He doesn't bother to lift them to his eye today; they dangle, shutters poised against the unnoticed light-play. We explore the north-eastern corner of Jerusalem—the tip of the Muslim Quarter. In times of Intifada—Arab for *shaking off*—this is a no-go area for Israelis. Our way is barred by a young Palestinian. "This is a dead end," he says.

"No, it is not," says Olivier, brushing past.

"But very dangerous!" The street closes in. Blood-red Kalashnikovs—symbol the world over for frustration and rebellion—are painted on the walls. We hear the sound of kids playing ahead of us. I feel the weight of the Star of David around my neck, and my heart beats faster. When we round a corner to face them, they shout, "Shalom! Shalom! Shalom!"

We arrive at the Monastery of the Flagellation and the beginning of the Via Dolorosa, the Street of Sorrows. Though built six centuries after his death, it is along this Street of Sorrows that Jesus bore his cross. As we walk its length, past the Church of Our Lady of the Spasm, cynicism wells. The Jerusalem Syndrome is working in reverse. The religions this city is built on seem more improbable and perverse the more I see of them, and Christianity comes out looking like a messianic death-cult. The notions of god and divinity, of prophets and their scriptures: all means to create order, all excuses to destroy it; anachronistic legal systems at best, conceits of humanity at worst. Who dares to know the mind of god? quite a few, and each with a different account. At the end of the Street of Sorrows, near the entrance to our hostel, we flop down in an old man's café. We sip tea in the hope that it will succeed where coffee failed. Everyone in the café is exhausted; perhaps it is just the nature of the day. Only when an elderly Christian nun wearing a brutal crucifix walks past do the old men stir. "Ya Allah!" [My God!] exclaims one.

Whiskey

Olivier and I stalk the Old City, snapping and drinking coffee. In the late afternoon, I strap on my pack. I shall return one day early to Tel Aviv. Olivier comes to inspect me and kiss my cheeks. "Where is your camera?" he demands.

"Ah…it's in my pack, Olivier."

He shakes his head and pulls my pack from my shoulders. "This is for clothes, not for camera. You will miss your best pictures. Wear your camera—*always."*

As I board the local bus, I see one of those very pictures, and take it in Olivier's honour.

Now I sit in Einat's house, awaiting her return. I am nervous and tired from a three-bus day. How can we possibly make this work? Can we fall in love for a week, part, then live better for it? If we can manage that, it will be a miracle—but this is the Holy Land. She arrives, bearing a bottle of Irish whiskey. We get drunk and try to have sex, but the weight of expectation proves too much. We stumble around each other's bodies like adolescents before giving up. We sleep. We are getting good at sleeping together—too good.

Two Worlds

I get to know Tel Aviv a little better. In its bohemian centre, Sheinken, right outside of Einat's apartment, is a peace demonstration. Placards reading: *Two Nations One Future,* flood the street, and below the placards, trouble-worn faces shine with a desire for reconciliation. I realise that I have accepted Israel without really noticing. The Star of David sits lighter, but the realisation gives me little comfort: I feel racist whatever way I turn. If to accept this nation is to betray Palestine, to deny it is madness. These people live here. They are born here. It is as

much their land as it is anyone's. The demonstration ends, and Sheinken becomes quiet once again. The café terraces fill, and I join one to pass the afternoon. For all the confusion of the last days, I'm glad I came, though I still don't know why I came. The feelings that brought me here rest on nothing, but if two nations may share one future, so might two people. We must fill in the ground below the feelings and build up to support them—but our foundations are laid in different worlds, and we have not confronted this yet. A few days is too short for future-worrying—too short for regret.

Shabbat comes with the dusk, and so does Einat. The look is in her eyes, the look that brought me here. I move to it. She gives a sudden childish smile and jumps up and down. Her nipples graze the inside of her shirt then push against it. I push a hand up to find one. Her lips part a little, then her mouth just falls open. She takes my neck and pulls me to a kiss. Hot breath flares across my cheek. We pull back and look at each other. Her face is urgent and her eyes bright. She crosses her arms at her waist and pulls off her top—but too slowly for urgency. I have seen her naked, but not like this: Her chest is flushed with excitement, and her nipples point somewhere above my head. She slides her hand down my waist and grabs me. I follow with my hand and find her so hot and wet that there seems something akin to suction within her. There is no part of me I would not put inside her. Her eyes, her arms, her mouth, her legs, open endlessly to me. We slide our hands and our faces from one delight to another. She tastes of cider vinegar and cinnamon. She tastes of sex. "No condoms," she says.

"Is that safe?" says the deeply-repressed vestige of common sense.

"I can't have children."

The deeply-repressed vestige of common sense is about to reply that that doesn't make it *safe;* but is overruled. We take each other in every way we can imagine, and in the in-betweens find some that surprise us. We fuck to our last breaths, and come crashing into each other's arms, and into sleep—the sleep of lovers, the sleep of the smug.

History

I wake to a softly-snoring woman. I run to the kitchen to fetch tea and slam my right foot into the edge of the door—*snap.* Something is broken. I am sure. I know this feeling and that sound too well. I don't want to look down. I want one moment to consider how *quickly* god invoiced me this time. I look down. My little toe is sticking out at a funny angle. I feel sorry for it—it looks bewildered. I squat down and wrench it into place. It makes an odd, rasping sound—not a sound I want my body to make—and I experience an orgasm of pain. "What are you doing?" shouts Einat from the bedroom.

"Breaking my toe." She runs in to see.

"Thank goodness for that," she says. " I thought you were masturbating in the kitchen."

Another Shabbat on the beach, just the same as the last: loud music, loud people, the aroma of suntan lotion, and the incessant rattle of matkot. All of Jewish Israel is relaxing. The streets in secular Tel Aviv are full of cars, but road rage is at an all-time low. I become used to life here. Arabia recedes behind a cultural, political, and temporal border. Last week, I was in the best of health and miserable to be here.Today I can barely walk but am content. It goes to show what an imperfect world we live in—the hollow man had a point.

A whistle blows on the beach, and the sunbathers clear a thirty metre circle around a black shoulder bag—possibly a bomb. I am just outside the circle, but can see the bag—perhaps ten or fifteen kilos of explosive at most. Lying here on the ground, the boundary-layer effect should protect me from the worst of the blast and all of the shrapnel. As for the circle of curious people, I judge that I can improvise about a dozen field dressings from my belongings—enough to keep me busy as the emergency services deploy. "What is he doing, just lying there sunbathing as if nothing is going on?" says an angry man. "Can't he see that this is a serious situation?"

"He's from Belfast," counters Einat. "This is normal." I catch an attitude of respect in his nod. Far-off fields are greener, and far-off battlefields redder. Should I tell him that compared to the Arab–Israeli situation our troubles are as a spirited disagreement between friends? The worst of our history is written. The worst of our grievances will soon lie buried with the generations that harboured them. His history awaits him.

In bed, Einat's body is familiar. The exploration of last night becomes the ease of tonight. The length of her limbs, her shape and form are mapped within me. I reach and find without looking. Her weight, her balance, and her centre of gravity are fresh new facts for my mind.

Help

I taxi to the Ichilov hospital. At the entrance to the Casualty Department are an armed guard and a cashier. I hop in and hand the cashier my Passport and International Medical Insurance Certificate. "Two hundred and fifty Shekels," [One hundred US Dollars,] she says.

"I don't have two hundred and fifty Shekels on me, but I have insurance." I point to the certificate.

"Two hundred and fifty Shekels," she repeats.

"I have Travellers Cheques."

"In Shekels?"

"No, but…"

"There are other people waiting." She says loudly. The guard looks at me, adopting a bored expression. I hop out to lean against the wall by the entrance. It is a beautiful day. The sky is a pure blue untroubled by cloud. The air is warm against my cheek. The light of the morning is golden. I cry. A hospital porter asks, "What happened?"

"They wouldn't see me. I don't have enough money."

"Fucking Israel," she says. "You pay for everything. If you don't have money," she holds her fist to her eye and stares through the hole, "you are zero. Sit down. Smoke a cigarette with me." We smoke in silence.

Another porter joins us and takes one of her cigarettes. They talk in Hebrew. "Come," he says, and walks off without looking back at me.

"Go!" she encourages. I follow him to where he sits on a stone bench.

"What happened?"

"They wouldn't see me. I don't have enough…"

"What happened to your foot?"

"I kicked a door."

"Clever boy. Let me see. I can get into trouble for doing this—especially here." He shows a dashing smile as he wrenches an extra helping of pain from my foot. "You don't need those assholes in there. Strap it up like this," another wrench, more pain, "and take it easy."

I thank him profusely and hop out the gate, thankful also that those assholes are not wheeling me around on expensive trolleys and sticking me into expensive machines. After a hundred metres, I come to a baby bird sitting terrified on the pavement, big feet coming down all around him. Poor wee thing, I catch him easily. He is shivering, eyes popping from his head, his heart thrumming. Above on a branch is a small face staring down from a nest. I climb the tree, bad foot and all, and put him back in the nest. I hop down the road better now. If is possible to swagger with one leg, I swagger. I find a steel reinforcing rod to use as a stick. It makes a wonderful *stonk* each time I bring it down on the concrete. With it, I struggle onto the bus. As one woman pushes me aside, another grips my arm to steady me. She shouts, in a north-American voice, "Hey lady! It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice."

Gift

I lie on the beach, let the salt tug my skin, and talk to two South African journalists that live in London. "Don't meet too many Palestinians here," he says.

"No, perhaps not."

"Perhaps not? It's bloody apartheid."

"Just like home," says she.

He sits up. "Bishop Desmond Tutu, God bless him, once said, 'The Conservative Party and the National Party cannot agree. The Conservatives want to drive the blacks into the sea, and the Nationalists won't let them on the beach.'"

"Same here," she punctuates.

"London's a bitch," he continues. She wrinkles her mouth in agreement and distaste. "England's boring. Nice people, but crappy weather."

"Going back tomorrow," she says, crestfallen. The end of their trip marks the intended end of mine. Tomorrow is the fourteenth of May—three calendar months since I dodged out from under that low-lying cloud and into this ten-kilometre-high heaven. Tomorrow they will slip back under that cloud. They are not happy.

"Here's a little present," he says, slipping a cellophane wrap inside an overdone handshake. "I don't want to take it through customs."

"I don't smoke," I say, checking the beach for police. But he is a journalist from South Africa. He has already checked.

"It's not smoke. It's acid."

"LSD?" My fingers close around it. My hand trembles. It's been years since I bent my mind with this stuff, and I was given my first hit in much the same way. It changed my life. My personality exploded and reassembled within the space of a few hours. I remember it so clearly, that beautiful evening by the ocean. I swallowed the toxic gift and sat in awe of what I had done. At first, nothing happened. Then I felt good, happy. Then something fundamental altered. My vision skewed such that all movement became shorn of meaning, as if reflected in a shattered mirror. I lay stunned in long grass staring at what a few minutes before had been the world I lived in. Every moment of passage across my field of view persisted in vision. Trails interwove across the landscape; birds became lines scratched across the sky; my mind registered and held everything. I became cluttered with images that came but would not leave. They had forgotten where to go. I struggled up a big sand dune covered in thorn bushes and sat on its crest. The clutter faded as the sun set and a fog drifted in over the ocean. I remember a peculiar calm—the calm before a fearsome storm. The fog wafted in over the beach, and besieged my hill. I was cut off. Then the fog rose, winding up through the bushes towards me. I felt the drug besiege me, cutting me off, rising through me. As I crouched on all fours at the top and watched it course through the folds of my brain, I took a last breath, and held it. A wind came from far away. I watched its coming—a blast of embers that flayed the fog, then the bushes from the hill. It flayed the skin from my flesh and the flesh from my body. It thundered and ripped the hill from under me and scattered my bones. My last thimbleful of awareness tumbled through blackness meshed with xenon-green lines, a four-dimensional matrix of space and time that converged in a single point. Through this point, I passed long ago on a cool San Francisco evening, and in its singularity, my being was crushed to a mote hovering just above oblivion.

On the far side, I floated on an ageless void, and in that place, in the darkness and timelessness, I became aware of one thing: the bare fact of my existence. I thought myself alone, and was content with that. I was the void. Then I saw stars, and knew myself to be one of them. I understood that loneliness could not be suffered by one truly alone, but was glad instead to be one among many. I went to a sun, a fiery-white one, and saw planets ellipsing it. I knew then that I was a planet. A blue and white world spun beneath me, a bauble hung for my wonderment. I skimmed the clouds and saw a new colour—green. I understood then that I was life. I saw some life stationary, and some moving. I moved and became animal. My mind grasped for hold and took each revelation as purest truth. I followed Darwin's descent until I became human, and a long time's puzzling brought me to know that I had been born elsewhere and had crossed a blue ocean to be here. When the articles of my own humanity arrived, I saw them as for the first time. When I found something that I liked, I gave it a place of honour. When I found something disagreeable, I set it aside. In that immeasurable night, I read myself like a book, underlining many passages, but scoring out more.

I staggered down from the hill, clear now of fog, into a magnificent night. The stars at my head and the earth at my feet were kin; I remembered what it was to be them. I looked for the lonely void, but it did not know to look for me. I came upon a beach as white as bone and stopped at its edge, staring to the ocean beyond. Behind me, the moon rose, and I greeted her without turning. She projected her light across the sands, and I sat in the front row to watch. A round black stone in the middle of the beach shook and stood up on three spindly legs; one leg whipped up to become a long, bare neck with a head—an ostrich. He flicked the sand from his eyelashes, and turned to look at me. He walked over. "So, what are you going to do now?" he asked.

"I don't know," I answered.

"Not good enough."

"I'll take a few days off."

"No. I asked: What are you going to do *now?"*

"I don't know."

"Precisely my point. You never do anything *now.* You look forward to doing things, then fondly remember having done them. Where are you in the doing? Think on that."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't understand. To solve the puzzle, you must find the missing piece."

With this, he walked off and left me. The moon mounted the sky, and the sun followed her; he rose and washed away the night, and still I thought, as I think to this day about what he said to me on that beach so long ago.

"Have you taken it before?"

"Uh?"

"Have you taken acid before?" Another beach. Another inquisitor.

"Yes, I have."

"Then have fun."

"Fun, yes fun. Thank you." They are both staring at me. It is time to act normal. I loose my fingernails from the flesh of my palm and smile, but I'm still back there. I remember boarding the first bus into town, dirty and dishevelled, eyes burning like a demon. The driver did not bother to ask my fare. All those carefully-filed perceptions, all those points of order that are so familiar to me now were then so new, on what was essentially the first day of a new life. Old memories are hard to recapture, and old feelings even more so. Cosmic experiences are almost irretrievable. Perhaps I shall attempt a reshuffle someday, but until then, I reflect that I have done well enough so far—or have I?

"Well, we're off. Enjoy your trip!"

"I am…I shall."

Hasard

I spend a lot of time waiting for Einat. It was bothering me. I'm not used to such inactivity, but now the foot gives an excuse. As change from the beach, I sit drinking coffee on Sheinken and burn my brain instead of my skin. I try to figure out how I came to be here, to put all the pieces together and zip my reality around it. Olivier's definitive Jerusalem photograph of two soldiers, two boys, and two doves is the result, he says, of *hasard.* In one possible etymology, the word comes to French from the Arabic *az-zahr,* the gaming die. In French, *hasard* retains this sense of chance. Only in its journey through English, does hazard come to be associated with danger. Through the medium of other languages, a more personal meaning arises—the risk in embracing chance. Though I curse it, hope brought me here. Luck supplied the reason—retrospectively. Olivier hoped for the photo only luck could bring. I hoped for the woman that luck turned my way. What makes the connection and fills the space? The Argentinean Christian might say that my visiting so many holy sites in the last three months has disposed some unacknowledged god favourably to my cause. My explanation lies in the niche between two words where my thoughts wedge this caffeine-enhanced afternoon: the space between hope and luck.

Puzzle

If I am to continue the trip, I must return to Jordan this day week—I must leave Einat. I experience so many opposites of feeling, yet begrudge none. This is life and I want it in its difference—but I want it now. If memories are hard to recapture, and feelings even more so, why do I dwell on them? I still reference *everything.* Do I experience happiness? Some memories are stamped with it, yet I cannot vouch for them. I lie on this beautiful beach. As afternoon ends, Einat will come. We shall spend the evening and the night together. Instead of dwelling on this, I reference my feelings to those of old memories, or push ahead to imagine new ones. Even here in the middle of some future, bliss-stamped memory, I eat wormholes in it. Memory will plug the holes, retouch the blemishes, and attach the label. I know I must choose for happiness now—not for the twin eternities of past and future—but no matter how hard I try to live in the present, I miss it every time. From Ostrich Beach to this one, I have been rearranging a puzzle with a missing piece.

I take a swim to clear my head. When I reach the breakwaters, a man reaches out his hand to help me climb the stones. "Where are you from?" he asks.

"Ireland." I tell him.

"Catholic or Protestant?"

"Neither."

"That is nice. Here we cannot choose to be 'neither,'" he teases me. "I am Palestinian."

"You're the first Palestinian I've met in Tel Aviv."

"In Tel Aviv are many Palestinians!"

"I didn't know."

"You think we all dress like Arafat?"

"No, of course not."

"Tell me. In Ireland, you can tell Catholic from Protestant?"

"No."

"So it is the same."

Still Point

I call Wally. "How's the weather?"

"It's lovely. A soft day. Nice and fresh!" I know these euphemisms. When the sun shines for an hour, we call it *lovely.* When it rains only lightly, it is a *soft* day. When it's tolerably cold, it's *fresh.* In Ireland *wetter* is a bad spell of *weather.* "Still no sign of summer," he says, "but any day now." I miss my friends' cold backs and warm hearths, but I do not miss their weather. They suffer the soft rain and the hard going with Spartan enthusiasm, and await a summer that might forget to come, while I bask in perpetual sunshine. "Where are you?" he asks.

"In Tel Aviv. On the beach." There is no phone-box on any beach in Ireland.

"How's the weather there?" How can I tell him without breaking his heart?

"It's lovely here too, Wally.

"And when are you coming home?"

Home. I am becalmed. I have lost impetus. I am, I suppose, at home in this land of summer. Hibernia—land of winter—seems remote, and from this home to that is a wide plain of travellers' solitude to cross. The year rolls on to its half-way point. In one month, is a birthday I had expected to celebrate at home. Soon after, is summer solstice—the counterbalance to winter. On the ragged cliffs of my home town, where Europe gives up hope and drowns herself in the grey-blue ocean, we hold an all-night vigil on a night that barely falls. The sun skims the Atlantic horizon and slides under the islands a few hours. Sunset becomes sunrise without darkening of sky. We see it out with a fire, a bottle of poteen, and music. There's no more god-forsakenly beautiful sight on this earth that I've seen, and I've seen a fair whack—but perhaps it is as well to draw a line under all that. I wanted change. I have it. "Maybe soon."

"Then I'll expect you when I see you."

Mirror

And Friday is come again. At the setting of the sun, Shabbat begins. I sit in the Sheinken café and wait for Einat. The empty chair sits across from me. I projected her there and she appeared, just as I had imagined her. That was two weeks ago. How much better do I know her now? She is so much like me, I think. Perhaps I'm holding up the love mirror. How much of her is my projection, and how much of her is her? I see her, one hundred metres away, walking towards me. She hasn't seen me yet. She will look up and her eyes will flash. Her step will lift and quicken. She will tilt her head to the side and the corners of her mouth will crease into a smile. She will kiss me and sit in that chair. We shall sleep this moonless night in each other's arms. We shall spend Shabbat together. Then I shall leave without knowing who she is.

Fire

This last day together, this Shabbat, she reads from The Siddur. She bobs her head and mutters the words of prayer. This thing I don't have in my life, she has in hers—belief. I am fascinated and confused. If there were some sparkle of it in me, it would surely have ignited by now. Do I believe in nothing? That is belief of a kind. To be an atheist is at least to believe that there is no god; but I don't even believe that. She knows I am watching her, it is perhaps deliberate—like with the Star of David: if you want me, accept this. She accepts me. I must accept her.

The day is long and lovely. We spend it on the beach: nostalgia forbids that we change a thing. We dine, we love, we tangle our bodies and talk long into the night. "Do you remember Dahab?" she asks. "My last night? I couldn't sleep for fantasising about you, my unattainable gay friend next door. I wanted to burst into your room, but that would have been wrong. Except that it wouldn't, if you know what I mean. Wouldn't it? Would it, I mean?"

"No. Yes. Whatever, I wish you had,"

"Things might have been different. We would have had more time."

"One more night."

"Yes, one more night. Maybe more. Chris?"

"Yes Einat."

"We are walking on glue."

A good metaphor. My passage through the Middle-East has certainly been slowed. I have been stuck here for a month, and she…well, there the metaphor fails. "Glue?"

"Shit, *glut* is German. I mean fire, Chris. We are walking on fire."

Lies

I wake to Einat's voice on the phone. I don't understand the language, but I recognise the tone. She comes back into the bedroom, strips off her working clothes, and throws herself naked to the bed. "I am sick!" she cries, and laughs a very bad laugh. We push our sexual familiarity to the point of despair, and continue the day in the same vein, throwing too much energy at everything we do. We share the best and the worst. We bounce up and down with our emotions, missing, then crashing into each other. When we are done with the day, it hangs in tatters behind us. "We'll meet again," say I.

"We will," says she.

"Let's just sleep," say I.

"Let's just fuck," says she. We manage neither.

News

When I drag myself from her apartment, our moods are like thunder. We part without wishing it, and she hates me for it. I call her from the train station. "I don't like goodbyes," she says. This time, nor do I.

The train line, built in the decline of the Ottoman Empire as part of the Hejaz Railway, cuts through a wooded valley on its way to Jerusalem. I should be enraptured, noting every detail. Instead, I damn the passage that leads me farther from her. On arrival in Jerusalem, I catch up with the realities of my situation: I am a traveller that can barely walk. I board a bus full of Orthodox Jews to the Old City. I try to remove my pack, but stagger and fall in the aisle like a flipped turtle. No one helps me. I stand the rest of the ride, and though I am the only one standing, no face turns to me. My heart hardens a little, with regret, to the world. My shuffle through the Old City, from the Jaffa Gate to the Al Hashami, is as slow as the crowd. I feel at one with the older pilgrims passing, also with difficulty, along the same route. At the junction of the Via Dolorosa, I meet the hollow man; he eyes my metal stick, and I his wooden one. We might swap, I think, but it is too absurd. He casts his eyes down, and I mine. Olivier has been ejected from the hostel, and the owners seem glad to be rid of him. Luckily, I find him next door in the Al Arab, watching *The Life of Brian* in the foyer. *"Ca va ta fontaine, ta source?"* [How is your fountain, your spring?] he asks as I rub his big balding head. "Hey, Fawcett, bad news. Jordanian–Syrian border closed to all tourists." Contingencies flood my mind: a flight from Amman to Beirut, or Cyprus, then a boat—no, continue. All will be well. I know it. "Fawcett, good news. I have found the woman of my life."

"But Olivier, your girlfriend…"

"Pfaf!" he interrupts.

"Jesus, Olivier. Last week…"

"But Fawcett, she is the woman of my life!"

"Where is she?"

"She left on Friday."

"When did you meet her?"

"On Wednesday."

"You know her two days, and she is the woman of your life. Olivier, you are one mad fucker."

"Mad fucker you too!"

The Al Arab, which I had rejected out of hand on my first day, is the best hostel of all. We sit on its roof, drink bottles of wine, and take turns at talking to ourselves. As each talks, the other projects an intimate image over his shoulder and smiles at it. "Life is so beautiful," he comments on *everything* I say.

"But never easy," I counter.

This night, I dream myself back to an old dream. I stand at the parapet of a marble bridge, a silver stream whispering beneath. On one green bank, a baby on a picnic blanket plays with building blocks; on the other, an old man sits in a wheelchair, the same blanket over his knees. The last time I came to this dream, it was a happy place with blue skies and fluffy clouds. I left it happy, happy to know that I had this beautiful bridge to bear me from my past to my future. Tonight, the sky bleeds, the figures stare, and the stream hisses. The marble bridge is a cool and deathly pale. There is a dreadful wrongness. I know what I must do, and am terrified. I climb the parapet and jump into the stream. My arms lash at the banks; my fingers dig into mud; the water swirls over my head and into my mouth. I am choking, drowning, yet I still know what I must do—I have no choice now anyway. I loose my grasp and let the stream take me.

Shadows

I have one last day on my West-Bank Pass. Tomorrow, I must return to Jordan. Everything is ready—passport, visas, money—but me. A few weeks ago, I was the wanderer, wandering for the sake of it. Now I am heavy, and the dream of last night lies in the bottom of my mind like an open trapdoor: I glimpse the stream through it. It is still clear what I must do—I must vault the parapet. That stream is my present, and it is flowing untasted beneath me. But this is no dream world; there is no parapet. I am confused. The journey I created runs out of control, and I must run after it. Yet if I travel like this, I discover nothing. Desire sharpens the senses and fulfilment dulls them. I am dulled. I must gather my wits and go; but I have left a shadow life—a splintering—behind. I must set off, and hope to catch myself up.

Olivier is busy, so I walk the streets alone. I leave this city, as I have left no other, with so much of it unexplored. I make my way to the compound that dominates the Old City—the Temple Mount, Haram as Sherif, to the Arabs. The way is long at my pace. Streets close in above and capture the cool of flagstones laid on bare ground. I pass Israeli guards, and mount wide steps that open to a park dotted with trees. In front, is the shrine of the Dome of the Rock. There is an admission fee. Once again, I take dubious offence at being charged to see a house of god, but I pay. I am stopped at the door: my Leica and my notebook must wait unattended with my shoes. Finally, I am refused entry with the walking-stick, lest it damage the floor. I am deflected. The sun is falling west, and the golden dome stretches its shadow across the Mount. I walk its shade to the Golden Gate, where Jesus entered Jerusalem. It is walled up now: we have had enough of Messiahs. Beyond, the shadow reaches across Gethsemane, where Jesus was betrayed. As the afternoon ends, the shadow climbs the Mount of Olives, from where Jesus is said to have ascended into heaven. With the coming of night, the shadow floods over the East. Jerusalem casts a shadow like no other.

In the evening, I meet Anya, a friend of Einat. She says, "Only a few months ago, Einat told me she could not imagine having a *goy*friend."

"Well, we'll see."

"You'll probably get married have kids."

"I doubt it. For one thing, Einat is infertile."

"Ah, yes."

This night, I dream that Einat lies under me. She cries out in what I first take to be pleasure, but her eyes are red with pain. I warp the dream's perspective, and I am standing over her swollen belly. She gives birth. I catch the baby girl in my hands. "What is it?" she asks.

"It's a goy."

Pity

The dream runs on in my head. Einat cannot have children—so this dream cannot come true. If dreams are back in their place, perhaps I am too. Olivier kisses my cheeks goodbye. "We will meet again, I know it," he says with watery eyes.

"No we won't, Olivier, but have a nice life." I kiss his neck.

"You are right, Fawcett!" On my short walk to Damascus Gate, he shouts from the hostel roof. "Have a nice life, mad-fucker Irish!"

I drink coffee and eat falafels as morning gilds the street, then share an Israeli air-conditioned taxi to the frontier with an aid worker and a journalist that take a motherly interest in my foot. Between them, they organise everything, and the landscape slides by as I drift from one thought to the other. The crumbly houses give to makeshift tents once more. Arabia resumes. But this is not Arabia; this is a rich, Western-style democracy—for some. "No stamps, please!" I just remember to say when we reach the space-age frontier post. I made it. No Israeli stamps, no incriminating Jordanian ones. The journey goes on.

We board an Arab taxi now, and the heat of the valley pours through its open windows. Our clothes wilt like steamed lettuce and stick to us at once. When we gather speed, the wind is like a hair dryer in our faces. “It’s sixty degrees in Bahrain!” says the aid worker. “Now *that’s* hot!” he continues, *“Damn* hot!”

Amman is also hot. Summer has come to the Middle East. In my hotel, I court sleep, but must await exhaustion to carry me off. I stare at the broken ceiling fan in the hope that pity will animate it.

Philadelphia

I wake late but refreshed on this one-hundredth morning of travel. The heaviness of the past few days is gone, and the trip beckons. Einat is behind me, so I can enshrine her memory in a quiet corner of my mind. Displacement frees me from intrusive remembrance, but how sleeps she in the bed we shared?

At breakfast in the Hashim, I share a table with two men in their thirties. One strikes up a conversation with me. After the usual platitudes, he says, “I have been married for six years, but my husband is on holiday, so I am lonely.”

“Your *wife* is on holiday.”

“My *husband* is on holiday.”

“Your *husband* is on holiday?”

“Yes, my *husband*. So I take a lover.” He looks at his friend. “Is he not beautiful?”

“Yes, he is.”

“You are shocked?”

“No.” But I am. He speaks openly. It’s not a secret he withholds from other diners, but something of which he is proud.

“He is from Sudan.” He spans his hands a good salami on the table, and smiles. “We go to hotel. You like to join us?”

“No, thank you.”

“You are sure?” I *am* sure, but vaguely disappointed with myself for being so.

I decide to buy another stick—the steel rod draws too much attention. The first shop I visit has a good selection. I choose one with a hand-carved handle in the shape of a ram’s horn. The shopkeeper is decent about the disposing of my old one; he follows me into the street and drops it in the gutter. The ignominious rattle it makes is so far from the self-assured *stonk* of our hobblings, that I rescue it and carry it to the Nymphaeum. The French archaeologist is gone, so I stick it into the ground and wish it immortality in the rebuild. I won’t buy my onward ticket for a day or two. An unfamiliar city at this pace is too daunting. I walk, flourishing my new stick, to the ruins of Philadelphia. When I reach the amphitheatre, I sit alone on the top tier and curse my prejudice. If I were gay, as Einat had supposed, this trip would be different. For a straight man, visiting the Arabic Middle East is an exercise in celibacy. For a bisexual man, every moment is a gateway into an exotic world I am unmoved to explore.

Democracy

I move straight from the Hashim to The Central coffee shop, and sit on a narrow, shaded terrace. “You are a journalist?” says a well-dressed man appearing at my side.

“No.”

“We are journalists.” He introduces his younger friend. “May we join you?”

“Of course.”

“What are you writing?” he scans my notebooks, and attempts to read one.

“Poetry,” I lie. I leave them open on the table, content that my handwriting is as unintelligible to him as his is to me.

"You are our guest for coffee today." He snaps his fingers to summon the waiter and orders coffee; then he quizzes me about my travels, my plans, and my views. His friend says nothing. I make everything out to be as mundane as possible, and do not mention the detour. I ask him his views; but for a journalist, his opinions are bland. He bores eventually. He neglects to pay as they leave, and the waiter neglects to remind him.

"How much?" I ask him. He shakes his head, but says nothing. "Police?" I ask. He laughs.

Late in the afternoon, I walk the downtown streets in search of dinner. An old tailor sewing a new seat into a ragged pair of trousers gestures that I join him on the pavement. He is very polite. "You are welcome in Jordan."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome. Tea." He sends a boy to fetch two glasses, and spreads a bit of card for me to sit on.

"Thank you."

"You are welcome." I think this the extent of his English, but as another man passes, he shouts to him, "Hey, motherfucker!"

"You call me motherfucker? Asshole you!" says the other.

The tailor nods at his friend and says to me: "He deported from Israel. He want go back."

"Why?"

"Everyone want go back."

"To Palestine?"

"To Israel. Have democracy. No democracy here."

And what is democracy but the means by which we periodically depose our dictators? When, more than two thousand years ago, Ptolomy Philadelphus imposed Greek civilisation on this part of the world, democracy was a defeated ideology. Here, it still is.

Independence

Today, Jordan celebrates the anniversary of its independence from British rule. On the hotel television, the celebrations are impressive; but outside, the main downtown street is unaltered. In The Central, the television is switched off. So used have I become to its prevalence that I feel its absence acutely, though the air is filled with shisha smoke and the fluttering of playing cards. "May I join you?" comes another voice, but this is no secret policeman. He has shaggy red hair and goatee beard, torn jeans, and a big smile. On his tee-shirt is a drawing of a Soviet tank crashed into a no-left-turn sign. It reads: *1917–1992 The Party's Over.*

"Please."

"I am Neset. I saw you yesterday. You were entertaining some unpleasant gentlemen. You are from Ireland?"

"How did you know that?"

"I have ears. Do not worry. I am not a policeman."

"You are a communist."

"How do you know that? Ah…you have eyes."

"Do not worry, I am not a policeman."

"You are a poet."

"No, that was a lie," I tell him.

"Let us talk about William Butler Yeats."

"I must arise and go now…"

"I *will* arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, and a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made: nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee, and live alone in the bee-loud glade," he corrects me. "Wattels, what are wattels? Don't tell me. I like them the way they are. Do you like Seamus Heaney?"

"Yes," I answer, hoping I do not have to quote him. Neset quotes him at length. When the talk turns to politics, he tells me that he also is a Palestinian wishing to live in Israel. "You accept the State of Israel?"

"It is the reality," he replies. "And in Israel, we are at least second-class citizens. Here, we are nothing. Look over there." He points to a green sign on the other side of the street. "That is the office of the Islamic Party. Freedom?" he draws a finger across his throat. "Maybe I will live in Russia, if the communists win an election."

"Is that not rather a contradiction?"

"I am a contradiction," he answers. "Palestinians are walking contradictions. What of this talk of peace? We can have peace with Israel, peace with Jordan, peace with America, peace with everyone, but what else will we have? Nothing. Peace has a price, no less sometimes than the war it supplants. Look at my people: we live to return to a country that does not exist."

We go for a walk together. He wants to take me to into a mosque, but we are stopped at the gate. "Enta Musilman?" [You are Muslim?] he is asked.

"Aiwa, al hamdulilah," [Yes, thanks be to God,] he lies.

"Wacha. Enta?" [Alright. And you?]

"La." [No.] I say.

"Mish mumpkin," [Not possible,] replies the gatekeeper. As I stand barefoot, sandals in one hand, stick in the other, Neset argues with him. He first discusses the relationship of Christianity to Islam, but the gatekeeper shakes his head. Nesset points at my stick, then snatches it and brandishes it in front of him. I cannot grasp his words, but in the trying, the thought strikes me that religion is so like the stick: for the weak, a stick with which to walk; for the strong, a stick with which to beat the weak. Whatever Neset's point, I am refused entry. The gatekeeper fetches a cup of water from an ornamental drinking fountain in the courtyard, and hands it to me. "Mouta assef," [I am very sorry,] he says.

Back on the street, Neset says, "Amman is boring. We live like animals. We eat, sleep, work, go to the toilet, that is all. We do what we are told. Freedom?" he draws his finger again across his throat.

This evening, I dine alone on a rooftop courtyard, the young moon quartering above. From surrounding tables, come offerings: a beer, some soft cheese, a cigarette. People understand that I wish to be alone, but reassure me that I am not, and I enjoy their distant concern better than the mad political discussion I might otherwise endure and promote. "Your eyes are beautiful," says the waiter. A man accidentally kicks my stick and apologises as if he had kicked my wounded leg. I enjoy this prop, and shall not jettison it easily. In the street, it clears a path for me; even as it lies cocked across this aisle, it commands respect—no one will move it. Other tourists ask, *What happened to your leg?* They assume a temporary injury. Arabs never ask. Here in the less-fortunate Middle East, such things are accepted. Stick or not, it is time to move on. My red friend—red hair from some Crusader blood spilt in a more fertile place than a sun-baked battlement, red mind from a more recent impregnation—is right. Amman is boring.

The Great Impostor

My last breakfast in the Hashim is incomplete. There is bread, hoummos swimming in fragrant olive oil, a sharp onion quartered, tea—but no mint. I let the tea waiter pass three times, before accepting a glass. "Nana?" [Mint?] I ask.

"Mafi, habibi, mafi," [None, darling, none,] he replies, turning out his pocket. The heat is stifling even in this early morning. Mint may be suffering as much as we. I plan my escape. To north, lies the Roman city of Jerash, my final planned stop in Jordan; but I find the prospect of limping through the past uninspiring. To stimulate my interest, I visit a bookstore to look at photographs of the ruins. I fail. I buy a bus ticket direct to Damascus, eager to know if Syria will have me. I photocopy my notebooks and mail them and the photocopies separately, along with the Star of David, to myself in Ireland. I scribble some pro-Syrian bullshit on the first pages of a new notebook; then check and recheck my few belongings for traces of Israel. Paranoia mounts, and at the last moment, I remember the acid. I leave the hotel intending to dump it somewhere, but walk around with my hand clutched around it in my pocket. As with

the cup handle from Petra, I have carried this too long, and though it strikes me as insane not to, I cannot discard it.

On the way back to the hotel, I pass the King Huissein Mosque as the faithful are leaving early-afternoon prayer. A man spits copiously in my face. It feels unusual, out of place—nothing else. I turn to ask his why, but a businessman pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes me down. He apologises and almost bursts into tears, so incensed is he. "He is mad," he declares. "Forgive him."

"There is nothing to forgive." It is difficult to be angry when he does it so well for me.

"You are a good Christian," he says.

I dine again on the rooftop terrace. The moon has lost her sharpness. The terminator plumpens her, mirroring her natural curve in a first moment of conception. "I buy you a drink?" says a large, middle-aged man at the next table. I accept first an arak, then, at his urging, a beer to wash it down. "I am a cash register," he tells me. "You are here to see our hysterical sights?"

"Yes."

"I sit your table?" He stands, a drink in each hand, tablecloth tucked into his collar. The waiter frees him. He glides across and seats himself with grace beside me. "I am an Arab, and I am a Catholic." He leans his face to mine and murmurs, "We are the *Masserkeen,* the Messiah Worshipers. They call us *Mushrekeen,* believers in more than one god—liars! Their false prophet, Mohammed, had twenty-eight wives! He was illiterate. He wrote threatening letters to Christians." The incongruity of his statements escapes him. "Jesus made miracles: Mohammed made lies and children. *Allah u Akbar,* they say, God is Great. We say," he looks around him, then hisses, *"Dajal al Akbar*—the Great Impostor!"

part 4

Mint

Damascus

I rise extra early to enjoy another last breakfast in the cool of dawn. Fellow diners are too sleepy to notice that my tea is the only one with mint. I slip a Dinar into the tea waiter's shirt pocket, and on his next round, he slips a sprig of mint into mine. He points to my bag. "You go Israel?"

"Israel? Of course not. I go to Damascus." The cock has barely crowed, and I am denying Israel. I tell myself that it is travelling armour, but the ready denial disgusts me.

"Ma salamma," he says. With peace. Such is the Arab farewell. When I wish someone good-bye, I don't mean *god-be-with-you,* but he means what he says.

"Aiwa, habibi. Ma salamma," I tell him, meaning it.

The two hour bus ride to the frontier is taxing. I grimace and prepare myself for the worst. The bus pulls to a halt on the Jordanian side. My passport is stamped, and the bus pulls off again. No-man's land is a short traffic jam in both directions. Eventually, we disembark and enter immigration. "Passport." I hand it over. An official stamps it and hands it back. "Welcome to Syria," he says. Even when visiting Portrush Post Office, I expect some minor difficulty, or at least a delay, but no. I am in. No questions, no interrogation, no search, nothing. I am curiously disappointed. My carefully-prepared story unravels and is gone. I look at my passport, then at the official. If he could see into my mind, the hit of LSD in my pocket would feature prominently. "Is there a problem?" he asks.

"No," I say too loudly.

We cross a bleak desert that slopes down to Galilee and Lake Tiberias in the west, and rolls a thousand kilometres to Mesopotamia in the east. I see Lawrence racing north with his irregulars to take Damascus, the last prize in their two year campaign. The bus shifts down a gear and climbs gently. Bare sand becomes spotted with patches of scrub that tangle into dwarf forests. The colour of earth darkens to light ochre. Gritty sand dunes harden to knolls that parody, then become hills. I see Crusaders navigating south at the end of their four year campaign, climbing vantages, and weighing the dangers between them and their prize—Jerusalem. To the west, the Golan Heights float up over a heat haze. They ripple north to join snow-capped Mount Hermon in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. In the east, Jebel Druze, unseen this hazy day, draws the land up to it. I see Paul heat-struck by the idea to stop persecuting Christians, and capitalise instead on their growing popularity—but he just can't resist slipping in some of that old blood-sacrifice juju he's so into. Satellite towns break the desert spell and loop into suburbs that knot into city. The bus drops into the Barada Valley and Damascus—the oldest continuously-inhabited city in the world.

Finding the cheapest bed in town is easy. "Can I sleep on the roof?" works. On a corner of Martyr's Square in downtown Damascus, a modern hotel has one small room on its roof. The receptionist seems relieved when I assure him that this is exactly what I seek: a cell big enough to hold a bed, and a window. He looks around the room in a new light when he sees how happy I am with it. Damascus is the image of what I imagined the Middle-Eastern city to be—a riot of medieval stonework and reinforced concrete. Five thousand years of history is heaped up in a pile. The last seven hundred years lean against each other, bits of classical history sprout like weeds between, and antiquity gives support. On every wall is the face of President Assad; but omnipresent symbols of absolute power betray a titillating shimmer of impermanence that allows the unpainted wall behind to swim into future view. A short walk brings me to the Old City, and within its walls, behind the Ommayid Mosque, I find my old-man's coffee shop. The day's dust is just washed from the cobblestones at front, and they lustre in fading light. I take my chair in the evening's front row and order shisha—it's called nargila here, but it tastes the same. I puff in good company, hold my stick in formation with the others, and let the night be.

Here

On the now-dusty cobblestones of the coffee shop, in a sliver of imperturbable shade, I give the day rein. In Ireland, we greet the sun when he shows. Here, we hide. The bounty of our summer is the curse of this one: a sun to scorch the land and suck from every leaf and pore. At home, we dodge and curse the rain, then cry drought when none falls for a month. Here, each drop is a blessing. If I thrust my stick into this earth, it bleaches and cracks; thrust it into mine and it grows a tree. Such opposites should make for opposite peoples, but people are not sticks: we grow as we please.

"At sixteen, I joined the British Army," says an old man leaning on the stick next to mine. "I was an interpreter. My English was terrible, but they liked me. When it got better, I worked for Monty—Father, I called him. In Tobruk…" he pauses. "In Tobruk, I was hit by a German shell." His timing is deliberate: he bares his scarred neck to two passing tourists, unmistakably German. He smiles at them; there is mischief, but no badness, in him. "I woke two days later in hospital. Father was by my side." His story swallows him now. His eyes see things other than this day holds. He continues with the neatness of a tale so often told that the original is glimpsed among the recollections of a thousand coffee-shop renderings. "I messed with him from then until the end of the war. I have always been happy, but this was the happiest time of my life. He asked me to come to England and marry his daughter, but I could not. It would have been like marrying my own sister." He winks at me—story-mongering or regret? One of the two, perhaps. "Though I am Christian, I stayed here and married a Muslim. We have three children, all Muslim. That was the right thing to do." He holds his eyes open for me to plumb.

The right thing to do. I wonder what that is. A lot of me wants to see Einat again. The rest of me intends to avoid Israel until the State of Palestine is established alongside it. They are irreconcilable. He taps his stick on the ground, then turns to watch the theatre of the street: a shopkeeper appears in the shade of his lintel and hopes for trade; a woman garbed head to foot in black glances in envy or disrespect at another in Western dress; a little boy pulls a cart up steps with practised ease. I look back to the old soldier. I want him to turn to me and tell me the right thing to do, but he is elsewhere. He is unmoving, and I am unmoved to disturb him. I follow his gaze into the street and match it. Whatever it is I want to know is here.

Peace

I am welcomed into the prayer sanctuary of the Ommayid Mosque. Like most of the great Mosques of the region, it has been the site of many expressions of worship. Three millennia ago, Aramæans built a temple here to their god Hadad. Romans built another temple, now to Jupiter, more than a millennium after that. One hundred years later, it was converted to Christianity and dedicated to St. John the Baptist. A few hundred years after that, in 636AD, Muslims took half of it for themselves, and in 705AD flattened it to build this Romanesque structure. Since then, it has been reshaped by fire and fashion, whims of god and man, but stands, more or less as it was then, to this day. St. John is a long-term survivor. He becomes the Prophet Yahia to Islam, and the head that Salome demanded in payment for her dance, occupies a place of respect. Children play tag and dance around the twin rows of Corinthian columns that trisect the nave. People chat everywhere, squatting in groups, leaning against the shrine of Yahia, or gathering near the mihrab. In quiet corners of the hundred metre length, others sleep curled up neatly or spread-eagle on the rich carpets. The air is cool, and light courses down in a radiant diagonal that tames the linear space.

Now starts the call to prayer. The children play on, and the chatting men glance to the mihrab, awaiting the Muezzin. Some sleepers stir and lift first a head, then a hand to prop it on. The call continues from the minaret, and a crowd first drifts, then gushes through the broad doors that lead from the marble courtyard. The Muezzin mounts the mihrab and faces Mecca, turning his back to us. He lifts his hands, and the crowd—as when a flock of birds changes direction—becomes one. "Allah u Akbar," [God is Great,] he declares. They crease and fold to the floor, palms down, heads touched to the carpets. The Muezzin leads, and they follow. They rise, they

fold, they touch their heads. Each chanted line is answered by a massed monosyllable that reverberates in the body of the Mosque. Now the space stills, and a murmuring begins. The flock is a crowd again. It drifts, and its edges trail out the doors, drawing most after. Some stay, some chat, some lie down to sleep. The children play on.

On the street outside the bathhouse, the Hammam al Nurreidin, six young women cluster to look through the door. I excuse myself and pass through, down the steps, and into a marble-columned atrium. The old hammam is classically Ottoman. A vaulted ceiling leaps to a central glazed dome above a fountain. On carved wooden benches padded with red cushions, half-naked men sit in conversation; some wave at the women, and the women wave back. I am shown a confessional-chamber in which to change, and handed a towel and wooden-soled sandals. I wrap the towel around my waist and pass into a steam room shaped like a miniature Byzantine church: arches carrying arches up to another dome pierced by bottle-base windows through which light suffuses with the steam. Men lie in demure poses or clatter about in sandals, bent double. I wonder why until the steam hits me and I drop to evade a scalding. From taps in the wall, hot and cold water flows into marble basins; we mix it to our tastes, then scuttle it over our bodies. Bathers soap themselves and the backs of their friends, washing everything but the parts that need most to be washed. When I'm done, a young man with biceps like hams leads me to a recess, where he lies me on a slab and removes my outermost layer of skin with a loofah. The skin rolls off like black worms, but I sense neither his approval nor disgust. He slides me about the slab, sloshing me down with a hose and scraping me head to foot as if he were scaling a fish. When he is satisfied, he hits me a good slap on the shoulder and inspects his work. "Nai'man," [Suave,] he says.

The ninety-kilo masseur takes a liking to me, and spares no agony. He pummels and kneads my muscles, pushing so hard on my back that my limbs rise in the air like a corpse in rigor. He clicks each vertebra in turn, and rotates every joint till he hears it crack. If he judges click or crack to be insufficient, he *tsks* and tries again. My atlas joint gives him trouble. I ponder jumping up and asking him to stop; but my head, and my life is in his hands: jump, and I may never jump again. It pops with the resonance of an overheated light bulb—a sound that I hope one day to forget. I reach the stage where the only thought in my head is: *There will come a time when this is not happening.* As he works his way across the back of my ribcage, I snatch shallow breaths as he shifts his weight; I can barely breath now, never mind cry out. As consciousness becomes a pea, he slaps me. "Nai'man!"

The cold bath is a bubbling haven, and when I am assured of an end to surprise, I leave it and return to the atrium for tea. For a moment, all is still, then down the steps at a run comes a platoon of the Lebanese Army. They eschew changing rooms and hold the towels but loosely in front of them as they slip into sandals, then clatter and slide into the steam room. They take less than a minute. I drain the glass and join them for a second round. The sergeant tries to keep peace, but other customers are already leaving. I find the room transformed. Bodies lie in fallen-hero poses, legs cocked over the marble sinks, towels cast aside. Everything gets soaped. They are commandos on R&R from the front line. "Which front line?" I ask.

"*The* front line," the sergeant replies.

"The one with Israel!" shouts another. The sergeant laughs but shoots him a warning glance.

I remember the young Israelis on R&R in Tel Aviv; in gesture and countenance, these boys are identical. They are the infantry, from *infante,* child. Why do we send our children to fight our wars, I wonder. But the answer is obvious: they are too young to understand what they do, and we are too depraved to tell them. "Fee habibi?" [Have you a sweetheart?] asks the youngest. He laughs and deepens his voice, turning his eyes to meet approval. He hides his inexperience of life behind his enthusiasm for it.

"Aiwa," I tell him, hoping that he live to know the same.

"Fee Irlanda?" [In Ireland?]

"Aiwa, fee Irlanda," I lie.

They ask me about Northern Ireland: *Irlanda Shamalia* is on the nightly news, and comparisons are drawn between our situations. I tell them we have peace in Ireland, then gather the nerve to ask: "Is peace possible between Syria and Israel?"

"Of course it is possible," replies the sergeant.

"Yea, when we get our fucking land back!" shouts another.

The sergeant smiles and nods, "It is true," he says. "They can have peace any time they want."

"The question is, do they want it?" says the other.

"Half of them do." I realise my slip, and glance at the sergeant; but he is no secret policeman. He too might prefer to visit his neighbour's house without a gun in his hand.

"Then we will have to wait," he smiles.

I am towelled twice by an older attendant. He dries my hair and wraps it up in a fresh towel, which he knots as a turban on my head. He sets me down in the atrium and brings me a hot tea to slurp. He lifts a corner of the turban and whispers "Nai'man" in my ear. I wave to another group of women on the street, and they wave back. Had I been born to this culture, I might judge the expressions beneath the veils, but like most things in this world, they are unfathomable to me.

Surprise

I awake to an explosion. "Fuck me, a bomb," I shout, bolt upright in my rooftop cell. I replay the beginning in my head as the tail rumbles and resounds from every upright surface within kilometres. I know this sound. It is full and rounded like a fearful bell tolling. It is unmistakable. If there are people by it, the shock wave has sucked the clothes from their bodies, scorched the skin from their flesh, popped their eyes and eardrums, crushed their skulls, and parted their limbs. Windows are blades slicing through necks at the speed of sound. Now the shards will hit the ground and shatter, or stick into lumps of meat lying glazed and surprised from their brusque departure from life. *Crash…tinkle*.

"Oh thank God. Just a wee one," I say, as I make the roof parapet. Perhaps no one is hurt after all. A clump of smoke, hanging by a wisp to the ground, is making its way past me and out of Martyr's Square. As in an ant's nest disturbed, workers swarm in confusion until marshalled into a watching circle by a few soldiers. Army trucks dump more soldiers that widen the circle, then inquire into its centre. I muster detachment and scan the ground for crimson pools and rings of onlookers—but there are none. I thank god again, this time one with a small *g*. The soldiers inspect a crater in the ornamental gardens in the centre of the square. They stand and look around. They turn and look up. It is time to quit my vantage, time to crouch behind the parapet and shake, time for a cigarette.

I wander off to the National Museum and shuffle around the antiquities, but the best pieces, it seems, sit in the national museums of richer countries. In the courtyard, I talk to the curator. Predictably, the conversation turns to Israel. "Look at my feet," he says. "Left one, Labour Party. Right one, Likud. Both walk in same direction. Both want same thing."

"Is this what all Syrians think?"

"This is what our Foreign Minister think."

"Is that the same thing? What he thinks and what you think?"

"No," he replies. "What I say is what he thinks, but what I think is what I think. This is a democracy."

The War Museum is closed, but I walk its gardens. Unkempt, dusty trees camouflage fighter planes of all vintages. From canvas hulks to jets, the brief history of flight is betrayed as a paragraph in the history of war. At the far end of the garden, a Soviet Space capsule lies like a scorched old kettle tossed out to rust. It is so ponderous and rotund, that it is hard to imagine its essential quality—that of weightlessness. It is more a thing to fall to earth than to orbit it.

I walk back to town and cover most of the old city at a slow pace. The evening is warm, and the souks are busy. In contrast to my expectation, narrow alleys open to a wider ones, or dwindle away; I find no hidden places in their midst. My foot feels so much better that I shun the old-man's coffee shop and go in search of something more lively. I pick up my step and pass the line of old men, sticks poised against approaching night. I feel guilty to leave them in

my march back to youth, but they watch me pass without recognition; I am part of the theatre now. Down steps and around the corner, still under the enclosing walls of the Ommayid Mosque, I find a younger café. Inside, an old storyteller in turquoise robes recites from an ornate book spread across his knees. He wiggles a sword in the air, cutting and slicing his words as they appear. For punctuation, he slaps the book with the flat of his blade. I sit on the street terrace in company of men my own age, drink coffee, and discuss the day. "Who planted the bomb in Martyr's Square?" I ask.

"Not bomb, my friend," says a handsome man dressed entirely in black. He speaks his staccato English with precision. "We have no bombs here. Farmer make tea, cooker blow up."

"A *cooker?* Was he killed?"

"Who?"

"The farmer."

"The farmer is OK. Please, not speak of these things." With politics ruled out, he turns to religion. "Do you believe in God?" he asks, swallowing the *in* as he might swallow an olive.

"Existential being or anthropomorphic deity," I answer.

"I am sorry?"

"No, I am sorry. Excuse me, I do not believe in god."

"You believe there is no God?"

"No, that is different. I don't believe in god, and I don't believe that god minds that I don't believe."

"In what do you believe?"

"I don't believe in belief."

"Why not?"

"At best, it's a conceit, a presumption to know the mind of god. At worst, it is cause to discriminate."

"Christians discriminate. Want everyone believe Jesus God. Jews discriminate. Don't care what think others. Maybe is better. I don't know."

"Muslims don't discriminate against other religions?"

"Are many paths up mountain, but all lead same place. One God, my friend, one God for us all. We are brothers. God sent Moses book. People not keep. God send Jesus book. People not keep. Not Moses fault. Not Jesus fault. God send Mohammed. Look." He points to the nearest minaret of the Ommayid Mosque; it is just visible from our table far out in the narrow street.

"The Mosque," I say.

"You know what is name this minaret?"

"No."

"This, my friend, minaret of Jesus."

"Jesus?" I reply, as much in exclamation as in question.

"Forty years before end world, Jesus come here."

"Here?"

"He wait in heaven. Jesus alive."

"Alive?" I ask. He has reduced me from sophistry to monosyllables.

"Jesus not die. Not possible man die come back. God make Judas look Jesus. Judas crucify, Judas die, go to hell. Jesus wait. One day, come back. Here." He points again at the black minaret against a less-black sky. What deity would send so many conflicting, confused, and obscure messages? It beggars belief.

On the way home, I sneak over to check out the culinary accident. The moon is almost full, and a short stretch of the Barada River, traversing the square from culvert to culvert, sparkles in her glow. There is a foul reek from the pooling waters, but the wounded river is quickened by the singing of a thousand frogs. It must have been a big gas canister to blast a metre-deep hole in reinforced concrete. It must have been a very lucky farmer to survive; perhaps he was carried bodily to heaven. I watch the frogs cavort in the moonlit water awhile before leaving them in peace. Do they sing for love, I wonder, or in protest at my intrusion. I mount six flights of steps to my cell, where I hear them still—love is confirmed.

Earthly Delight

I wake to the sound of a steam-train whistle drifting out of the city. I had intended this morning to be aboard that relic of the Hejaz Railway; but pondering the nature of amphibian love spoilt my chance of an early start.

Another sleep invigorates me to explore. Leaving stick behind, I catch a bus to the base of Jebel al Qassion, a steep hill overlooking the city, and walk up flights of concrete steps to a road. What I take to be a café near the top is an army post, and farther progress is *mamnoua,* forbidden: the summit is crowned with things precious to the military mind. But the view over Damascus is striking. From the direction of snowy Mount Hermon above the Golan, the Barada River runs through leafy suburbs to weave past the Old City and continue east. The knot of the centre untangles into a lattice that hugs the riverbanks. Parks and ceremonial avenues break the grid-work of the outskirts and cut the arterial ways free to pursue their bearings across the dry, open countryside beyond. A light smog defines the sky and thins colours from the saturation of closeness to the pastel of distance. Damascus, for all its history, is as any other city.

An overlong, over-hot walk brings me snaking with the road back to town. The Souk al Hamidiyyeh, my gateway to the old city, is quiet for holy day. Without the distraction of humanity, I see, for the first time, the old, enclosing city walls hidden by buildings that shore them on both sides. At the far end of the souk, opposite the western gate of the Mosque, stands a Corinthian colonnade of the Temple of Jupiter. It is functional still: a bridge to electricity and telephone cables. The length of the covered souk is dark and still, but for the Bakdach Ice-Cream Parlour. Muscular young men pound club-sized pestles into vats of pistachio ice cream that is devoured the minute it is chilled. I take a seat and order—there is one variety. A man beside me ventures: "In Syria you sit down big," and I am inclined to ignore him until I understand him to be inquiring into the length of my stay. Fortunately, the dish arrives in time to spare me his curiosity. Ice cream is not a favourite, but I'm used to vat-spawned sludge. This is so astonishingly delicious that I order three in a row to determine just what makes it so, and what does, may be that it is impossible to determine such. The taste is cool and clear as ice on the lips; then cream swamps the tongue as pistachio rises through the back of the nose, stimulating a sense memory that confirms—yes—pistachio should always be so. A first exploratory thrust of the teeth is parried; but a second meets finds all resistance gone. A fragrant wash pervades the mouth and slicks the gullet, begging assimilation. Swallowing is a reflex beyond will.

The Christian quarter is busy. I wave to beautiful young women, and they wave back at me; I drink their smiles. Wooden balconies on the narrow streets crowd up on the sky and dismiss it. The afternoon heat is banished. I catch glimpses of tranquil courtyards beyond open doors and feel cool air spill onto my cheek as I pass. As the sun drops, I look for my friend Venus; but she is low in the sky and hidden from view. When I set off, so long ago, she was at her height. Now she speeds towards the morning, and I must speed after her before I forget that this wandering life is not mine. I return by the Via Recta, known as *Street Called Straight,* and arrive with the night at the young-man's coffee shop. I drink liquid insomnia with my peers and watch the rising moon lift the Minaret of Jesus from its starry frame. If he comes tonight, the problems of this life will seem small ones. Is belief not the safer option?

Zabadani Flyer

Engine #854 of the Société Suisse, Winterthur 1894, is having difficulty achieving a head of steam. The driver and the engineer smoke oily cigarettes, and discuss where to apply blows from an unusually large wrench. Finally, through a combination of diligence and luck, the machine is beaten into submission, and the Zabadani Flyer sets off, one and a half hours late for a one hour trip. Five hundred metres from the railway station, we career off the rails and into a busy intersection. I am suddenly nostalgic for Lawrence. He had a great liking for derailing these beasts and machine-gunning the passengers. I feel sure he would approve of the

first part of the tradition continuing without him; I hope he would consent to the sparing us of the second. An hour later, we negociate the intersection, and roll again through the Damascene suburbs, following the course of the Barada River to the mountains. Children run alongside the track shouting. Others stand and wave. One boy goes so far as to aim his air rifle at me from a grassy knoll. There is a tiny puff of dust from the muzzle, a little *pop,* then a *whiz-crack* as the pellet slams into the wooden slats one inch from my ear. An excellent shot indeed. I am glad that there is still a Lawrence spirit about, and I smoke a shaky cigarette in his honour. The cars rock on undamped suspension, and the wooden-slat seats clatter. Smoke, soot, and cinders rush through the carriages to rejoin the plume behind. The Zabadani Flyer becomes an adventure playground to the day-tripping children; they run wild and unchecked, their screaming only just audible over the whistle I was miffed to hear receding yesterday.

There is a commotion—one of the children is missing. We lurch to a stop, and I run back to find him lying on the rails with only a graze on his forehead to sober him. I check him over. He is fine. I pick him up and rush him back to his mother. She was expecting the worst, but quickly adapts to the situation and tells him how she feels about his fun. She hands him back to me and points to the graze. At first, I misunderstand: *No, of course I didn't thump the child,* I think; but she wants me to fix him up, make him good as new. Luckily, I have my entire expedition first-aid kit with me—a bottle of tea-tree oil and a roll of plasters, so I anoint and dress him. She lifts him to her nose and approves the smell. We count the children and roll again. Half an hour later, we stop to take on water, and I see that our day-trip will not transport us far, even though this spur once ran all the way to Beirut. Five hours after our scheduled start, we arrive at Ain Fidji, twenty kilometres from Damascus.

Here, for a desert dweller, is a little paradise. The foothills of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains close in; there is green grass and trees; the Barada River is an enthusiastic stream. The lucky boy is robustly enjoying his day out; he interrupts my walk by leading me back to join his family lunch—a picnic spread below a shade tree. His mother drops her veil and beams a lovely smile. She is twenty years younger than I had thought. I eat slowly and feign fullness with my share of their little meal, the whole of which I could swallow in two minutes. Tea is a welcome appetite suppressant, and we drink the usual three cups before I am allowed leave. I walk a short way up the narrow-gauge track. For July and August, the train will run all the way to Zabadani, near the Lebanese frontier; but until then, weeds can choke the rails and trees bend branches over them. On a quiet bend in the little stream, I watch azure dragonflies linger in patches of sunlight until the shrill whistle summons my return. Everyone awaits me by the steaming engine. Each has a smile now. The city-dweller cares are gone, and the crew is relaxed at the prospect of a downhill run. The lucky boy falls asleep in my lap as the train rolls through the suburbs, and the full moon rises over the Old City in greeting. This is my last night in this fabulous place, and I spend it as I spent the others.

Palmyra

The air-conditioned bus cuts two hundred kilometres north east across the Syrian desert then crests a rise bringing ancient Palmyra into view. Born five thousand years ago, an oasis town on a profitable caravan route, Tadmor—City of Dates—grew in influence until it reached its peak in the 3rd century AD. Its famed Queen Zenobia, who claimed descent from Cleopatra, had conquered the whole of Syria and part of Egypt, before dispatching her troops towards Rome. Rome responded, and Tadmor proved no match. With a siege of a few weeks, it fell, and Zenobia was paraded through Rome in golden chains. Tadmor was renamed Palmyra—City of Palms—and commandeered as the eastern outpost of the Roman Empire, along with which it began its slow decline. When one thousand years ago it was ravaged by earthquake, it disappeared off maps for six hundred years. Since, a new town has grown by the corpse of the old. We slice the ridge above an ocean of strewn masonry beyond which modern Palmyra sits squat and grey. The bus drops to the ruins, then speeds through their middle. We rumble a few metres from a delicate Roman arch, then under an ugly concrete one bearing the legend: *Wellcome to Palmyra, Bride of the Desert,* and I wonder is the *B* intentional.

Being the only tourist on the bus, I am besieged by hustlers at the stop, so sit at a café terrace and wait for them to desist. The modern town to north and east is unappealing; I have no wish to explore its streets. Above the café, is a small, family hotel, so I take a room overlooking the ruins and doze for a few minutes. When I awake and open the door, there are two women and a man in the hallway. I am surprised to see the women in revealing Western clothes, and I bid them a warm, "Massah al cher, kef halukum?" [Good afternoon, how are you?] Remembering, quite proudly, the correct conjugation for a group of mixed sex; but the man shouts at me, and another man arrives to join the abuse as the women wrap themselves from head to foot. It is unnerving, and I am in no mood to be unnerved after so successful an inflection. My pack is at hand. I lift it and leave. The hustlers are still waiting, so I let the youngest take my hand and lead me away.

I eat a light lunch in a tourist restaurant opposite the ruins. The waiter asks, "You have visited Israel?"

I have sickened of denying Israel. I look at him, and judge the worth of my deceit. "Yes, I have. You are Palestinian?"

"No. Palestinians are my brothers, my Arab brothers. They are all dogs. Mad dogs."

"Israelis are mad dogs?" I try to clarify.

"Yes! Yes!" he chuckles, and I wonder should I let the confusion stand. I pause to judge again, and contemplate that my culture too has mad dogs. In fact each half of my schizophrenic culture has mad dogs. Perhaps every culture does. I remember reading in a Belfast newspaper how one particular *Mad Dog's* wife was called *Mad Bitch,* and wondering, at the time, what his dog was called. That's one problem with this kind of name-calling, it leaves the lower mammalia little space for lingual manoeuvre—though what that might mean to a dog is beyond me. Is it possible that a canine pejorative might run *Mad Primate?* Or would they wish to enquire below them, as do we, perhaps to *Mad Monotreme*, the lowest order of mammalia, containing species that have just one opening for the genital, urinary, and digestive organs—something that dogs should find intriguing. Or might they push on to the limits of their understanding—*Mad Flea,* for example. Fleas might well be content with *Mad Dog*. Who knows? Perhaps they would unimaginatively stick with *Mad Flea,* having, as they do, smaller ones upon their backs; and the smallest probably having such a job holding on that he has no time for niceties. By the time I am done, so is the waiter's ire. He says, "Yes! Yes!" again and hurries off.

I race into the ruins while they are still bleached by the early-afternoon sun. In a one and a half square kilometre patch of desert, is a tapestry of ruins. From the massive Temple of Bel in the east, to the Camp of the Emperor Diocletian in the west, an ancient millennium is spanned. To the north, the land rises abruptly to a 17th century Arab castle. If this were my first ruin, I might lose myself for days, examining every stone and rebuilding the lost magnificence in my head; but I am content to stroll about and see it for what it is today, and today encroaches forcibly. Though surrounded by hundreds of kilometres of empty desert, Palmyra is sliced in two by the main Damascus road, overlooked by the modern town, dwarfed by a communications tower, and looped through by a racecourse. It is difficult to achieve a view of any of Palmyra's fifty centuries but this one. Nevertheless, there is a restfulness to be found among the stones, uncared for as they are. There are no guides, no guards, few hustlers, and no tourists visible but for a few far-off specks moving through their own historical re-animations.

By the late afternoon, I am suffering stomach cramps, cold sweats, and projectile vomiting. I broke one of my golden rules: I ate in a tourist restaurant. Never trust anywhere in this climate with a fridge. A man with a roadside stall will never reheat anything from yesterday; he would be finished within a week. The tourist restaurant can poison a fresh busload of clients every day and never know nor care. *They shall this time,* I vow as I vomit over a piece of world heritage. I sit marooned, too faint to bear the desert sun; but there is a golden light to it now as it tumbles more carelessly over the fallen columns, and I am content in my patch of shade. I awake to find a tourist taking a photograph of me passed out in the ruins, but she scampers off before I can reproach her. My attention is drawn to my bare feet. Resting most of its hairy legs on my left one is a spider twelve centimetres across. On the crown of my right is a hornet half its size. The hornet launches from my foot with a buzzing that begins with a *snap,* and goads the spider—

she scurries off my foot and sticks two legs in the air. I take the opportunity to lift my legs too, but the hornet is furious and does a low-level reconnaissance of my face. I freeze, and the hornet flies two turns around my head and dive-bombs the spider, stinging her three times on the back. The hornet settles, and the spider becomes still. The hornet walks over, gives her a careful prod, then bites off one of her eyes and eats it, cleans its mandibles, then bites off the other eye and eats it too. How long can this horror continue? I ask myself. On top of food poisoning, it is not fair. The hornet bites into the spider's back and begins to haul her off. I feel suddenly brave and steal a photo, but this goes down as well as the one just stolen of me.

By the time I smoke a cigarette, the sun has set and I feel recovered enough to climb a knoll near the town to watch the sky darken. I wait for Venus to appear, and she does as a pinprick on the horizon. It becomes suddenly cool. A dusty wind springs up. In an hour or so the moon will rise, and I decide to await her too. Just when I am about to give up, she lifts, ochre and heavy above the modern town. Doubly rewarded, I return to the hotel and meet a Danish woman called Signe. We dine and walk through the moonlit ruins, swapping traveller's tales and cigarettes. I tell her of my love behind and she of hers in front. A perfect evening is passed with the perfect stranger that I wish for at every destination. When we return to the hotel, it is locked and no one will answer the bell; but just as I am about to attack the hinges with a penknife, the owner arrives and opens up. He follows me to the door of my room and grabs my balls, giving them an affectionate squeeze. "La shoekran," [No thank you,] is all I can say as I squeeze past and double lock the door. Throughout the night, he returns to try the handle, pawing and whimpering like a poor dog to be let in.

Venus

Signe is gone this morning. I lift my pack again and wander out into the street, ending up in the café below the first hotel. Perhaps all we tourists look alike, for no one comments on yesterday's fracas. I sit in the shade and stare down the ruins, enjoying the perfect luxury of taking an hour and a few teas and a few cigarettes to decide on what to breakfast; the choice is meagre, but the pleasure in taking it enormous. At the point of launching myself into the desert day, Signe arrives. "Sleep well?" I ask.

"You must be fucking joking."

"He pester you too?"

"All fucking night."

"Obviously bisexual," I say with grudging admiration.

"Not bisexual," says Signe. "Insane."

Breakfast becomes a confusion of last cups of tea and coffee that drifts into lunch, and the hotter the day gets, the more reluctant we become to brave it. An Australian couple takes the next table to ours; they read aloud interesting passages from their guidebook. "It says here: *Travelling alone in Arabic countries is inadvisable for women."*

"That's bollocks," says Signe. "I've never felt safer in my life." I frown at her. "It's true, that idiot last night was harmless. I've travelled alone through Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. I never met such friendly people, and I never had one problem." I take a good look at her; she is twenty years old, a bit over one metre fifty, built like a twig, very blond, and very beautiful. Her eyes are blue as tempered steel.

"Wow! You speak English!" says the man.

"Yes, I speak English," says Signe, skewering him on her gaze.

"Then it's not such a lonely planet after all!"

"Let's go." Signe declares. We settle the bill, keen to be on our way.

"Wow! You speak Arabic," he continues.

"A very little," I reply, "but it helps."

"How do you count in Arabic?" he asks.

"Wahed, itneen, thellata…"

"Again?"

"Wahed…"

"Waiter," he says, "bring me *wahed* cheese and tomato sandwich…and anything diet."

The sky is stencilled with cotton-wool clouds moving south-westwards over Palmyra. We hitch a ride under one and match its pace across the ruins, halting now and again to let it quench the inferno before us. Shade trickles over the ancient stones and spills into the dust between them. We linger to inspect the odd carving until nudged on our way again. When we come to the rise west of the road, the cloud is keen to be off; it skips up the hill and away, abandoning us to the full of the sun. To the west and south, the land rises more steeply to the ridge of Umm al Quais, and here beyond the Old City walls, stands a series of funerary towers. Their heavy squareness has proved better protection from time and earthquake than the vaulting Roman structures that lie fallen before them. Inside each, are three or four levels of burial niches reached by spiralling cantilevered steps that lead to the blunt point of a roof. We pass decorated friezes and ornate ceilings to emerge into sunlight atop the highest, where we watch the passage of ragged cloud shadows across the plain below. The Old City is revealed as an incongruity of stone bounded by desert, but dwarfed by a wash of palmeries to the east. The funerary towers range across the rise, guarding the southern approaches to the city, a row of squat sentinels from a forgotten culture.

We skirt the ridge eastward, then cross the plain to the Temple of Bel. It is closed, but we climb the high wall surrounding the two hundred metre square courtyard. This outer wall was rebuilt in Arab times to serve as a fortification; but inside, the remains of colonnades and the outlines of halls are reminders of the Temple's Roman past. The shrine is most complete, its anti-chambers still roofed with stone, and their decoration enduring in sheltered places. One bears a ceiling rosette a metre across, blackened though it is from the smoke of countless bonfires.

We walk back through the sand-stopped colonnades, past deposed façades dreaming of their lost standing, through ranks of inconsolable stones. In the centre of Old Palmyra, one building is complete: the Tetrapylon. Four groups of four columns on a raised plinth support a burdensome cornice above the show of surrender; but there is no defiance here—these columns, bar one, are poured from cement. "Welcome!" comes a voice amid them. We walk over to find out what to. A group of young men are lying on the cool stones, drinking and smoking. "Welcome!" One pours arak into two glasses, then hands them to us; another reaches out a bottle and tops the glasses up with beer. "Drink, drink!" We drink, and try to smile through an aftertaste that would draw fillings from your teeth.

"Not even *one* problem?" I ask Signe.

She winks. "You've been dying to ask this last hour. It's like this. Where we come from, direct eye contact means: I'm tough—back off. Here it means: Why don't you come over here and we'll have a nice little chat. They should stamp it in these moron's passports."

Sunset approaches, and we decide to see it from the Qala'at Ibn Maan, the Arab castle overlooking all. We cross the ruins again and mount the flanking scree slopes. We arrive with minutes to spare, and are rewarded with the sight of a flesh-red sun melting into a crimson horizon. Unfortunately, the old caretaker is spoiled by the payments of richer tourists. He demands baksheesh from us both, and though I give him as much as would feed me for a day, he complains and shouts closing time the moment the sun is set. We are in and out in ten minutes. Fortunately, there is a way back in that leads from the moat to the lowermost floor through a crumbling window to the right of the drawbridge. So unlike a crusader castle, this old fort is organic and devoid of symmetry. It is built piecemeal, and has as its base the undressed mountain stone still peaked and hollowed as time left it. Chambers twist and choke between like the innards of a beast, and a gritty, desert wind blasts through, giving form to thin light stabbing through arrow slits. The floors rise above, with no purpose but to deny entry to any seeking it by force, to battlements that ring the summit at a daunting height. Unfortunates repelled from this crest would fall to death in the now-darkened depths. Darkness wells up from the plain and deepens the void more, until it is pierced by fingers of electric light from the new town. From the zenith of Qala'at Ibn Maan, I stare to the unsullied west and search her out, my companion, but she is gone. In one week, she has her tryst with the sun, then takes the morning as her lover. Though I cannot see her, I know she is there, lost in gloaming. I bid her well and blow a kiss. She brought me this far; I must find my own way onward.

Oasis

At the eastern edge of old Palmyra, a tall mud wall waves through the desert steadying another wall of green behind. On approach, the wall parts to disclose an opening to an earthen path wandering between lesser mud walls overhung by palms. Signe and I walk deep into the palmeries. The desert gives way to succulence, the air cools and moistens, the spite of the day lessens. There is the trickle of water beneath, the rustling of leaves above, and no other sound but what we add. At length, we come to a wall crumbled in disrepair, beyond which a garden lies abandoned: unkempt palms stoop to the ground and caress it, the windfalls of a generation matted at their roots. Old water channels are clogged now, and their patchwork unravels into neglect. We slip over the wall and in. On the mattress of this score of orphaned harvests, we lie on our backs and push the world aside.

"Why go on?" Signe asks.
"Um?" I answer, awaking to her voice.
"I've been thinking about it. How long have you been travelling now?
"Ah…sixteen weeks."
"Jesus, Chris, you make it sound like a pregnancy."
"Four months, nearly…"
"It doesn't matter. What matters is that you've had enough. Why go on?"
"Why not?"
"Because you're worn out."
"No I'm not…"
"Yes you are. You're stuffed. Where is it you want to go anyway? Istanbul, isn't it?"
"Yes."
"At this time of year? Crazy. Turkey is full of backpackers. You'd hate it. Go back. Go back to her. Listen, I've got it all worked out. You have a two-entry visa for Syria…"
"Yes."
"Shut up. You can use it to visit Lebanon, then to come back through Syria into Jordan."
"Yes?"
"Then Israel. It's obvious Chris. Go back to her."
"I can't go back to Israel."
"It's not about Israel, Chris. It's about her. Don't be a fool."
"But I am a fool, Signe. It's the one thing I'm good at."
"Chris."
"Yes, Signe."
"Go back."
So, turn it around. Why not? I'm worn out. My head is full of wheres in absence of whys. She's right. I can make a broad loop north through Syria, then drop down the coast into Lebanon. I can sneak through Syria and Jordan, then back into Israel. It's what I *want* to do. I remember the old soldier in Damascus; I wish he were here that I might ask him if it is the *right* thing to do.
"It's the right thing to do," says Signe, speaking my thought with her voice.

Hama

On the way to Palmyra bus station, Signe and I pass an old man resting on a low wall. My stick is surplus, so I hold it out to him and he takes it as if we had agreed long ago that it should be so; he nods his head and smiles. I pass and look back; he has the stick in front of him, both palms resting on the ram's-horn handle, his chin tucked into the stirrup of his two locked thumbs. It became him. We ride an air-conditioned bus with broken air conditioning and no windows to open, west across the desert. The voyage is stupefying. We catch glimpses of

inscrutability: a woman trains a hose over a stack of bricks; a man thrusts a reinforcing rod repeatedly into a pile of sand; a police car is parked in the fast lane while the officers picnic in the central reservation. Now we slow to walking speed and pass the twisted wreck of an oil tanker lying in the lake of its spill. A dozen or so cars have stopped. Their drivers stand and shake their heads, puffing excitedly on cigarettes. I close my eyes and hope to get no hotter. At the end of it all, at Homs Bus Station, parboiled and claustrophobic, I embrace the woman I have grown very fond of in two and a half days. "All set?" she says, straightening my clothes like my mother did on the morning of my first day at school.

"Yes, Signe."

"You know where you are going?" she continues in motherly vein.

"Back."

"Good boy." She kisses me and leaves for the coast to catch a breath of sea air. North to Hama, I ride the local bus—a shrine, inside and out, to Middle-Eastern kitsch. Above the windscreen, bead curtains and baubles swish and clatter against a photographic Scandinavian landscape. Though granite fjords are far from Signe's quiet Danish soil, they turn my mind back to her. Had things been different, I wonder where we might have journeyed.

Hama is a pleasant change from the depressing modernity of Palmyra. There is not much to see here other than the norias, the medieval waterwheels that once watered the arid land; but from the banks of the Orontes River, through Hama's gardens and tidy streets, calm flows. It is hard to imagine that less than a generation ago, Assad sent his army and his air force here to quash a rebellion of the Muslim Brotherhood. Wandering around the quiet streets, it is harder to imagine that the tank assaults and air raids killed *twenty five thousand people* and destroyed much of the town.

Two people on a BMW motorcycle stop beside me, and I recognise them from the young-man's coffee shop in Damascus. They introduce themselves as Carla and Bart, a Dutch couple celebrating the end of their relationship by taking a three-month motorcycle holiday together. I can't decide if this is remarkably civilised or insane, so join them to see if I can find out. We drink tea until midnight when a thirst for beer overtakes us—but Hama is still a religious town, and we walk the streets a long time. We follow the river west to a group of four enormous norias straddling a weir. Between ten and eighteen metres high, each feeding its own ruined aqueduct, the great wheels turn in pitch-blackened bastions as they have turned for the last six hundred years. As with George Washington's original axe, which has had a few new heads and a few new handles, these norias have survived the turning of the centuries, though every plank and post has been replaced. We take a seat at a restaurant below the races and order beer; but the waiter moves us to the alcoholics' terrace before serving us. The instruments of medieval ingenuity roll, each at its guarded pace, tired wooden bearings groaning under load like mournful beasts. We stare at them, as the three waiters stare at us—captivated by unfamiliarity—as golden-brown bats streak through the spray-charged night. What mind thought this, and did this? Only insanity is capable of such achievement.

Eucalyptus

I find the perfect coffee shop overlooking the Orontes River, its broad eucalyptus-shaded terrace trickling over the camber of the bank. Along with the familiar gaming noises that punctute the air is the lowing and splashing of a noria. It bears its load up ten metres to let it fall back to the river's indulgence. A little boy with a serving cloth on his arm and thick, black hair all over his face dashes up to me and asks in convincing French, *"Qu'est-ce que tu fait?"* [What are you doing?]

"Je veux prendre café," [I would like to have a coffee,] I tell him.

"Qu'est-ce que tu fait?" he replies.

"Café, mon pote."

"Qu'est-ce que tu fait?" he continues.

Carla, Bart, and I enjoy heat-stultified companionship on a walk upstream to the Al Mohammeiyyeh Noria—at more than twenty metres high, the largest of all. We walk to its base and watch the buckets slice the water to haul it up and throw it down again, casting a rainbow just beyond reach. But standing in its midst is not enough to better last night's impression, even though the wood bellows like the felling of a giant tree. We cross a footbridge to a smaller noria on the far bank. Though only five metres high, it fires its crystal load into the reservoir of an apricot garden. Its modest size ennobled by purpose, this noria seems to groan not mournfully, but with the resolution of an ox welcoming harness. Freshened with the fruit of its toil, we take the long, dusty path up to the citadel, where gardens and a café replace the lost fortress. We pass the afternoon under shade, drinking tea and picking out what we know of the town below until the sun falls to our backs and the afternoon becomes sufferable.

Bart, the male half of the slow-parting couple, and I visit the Hama Hammam, buried in the old souk. We clomp in, Bart faring better than I in the ill-fitting clogs perhaps due to national disposition, and find a chilly dungeon with only hot water to stave off shivers. Our price includes massage, and I regret this when I see that the masseur outweighs the one in Damascus by my own weight. I graciously invite Bart to go first, and when he returns without mishap—save for an imprint of the terrazzo floor on his face—I allow the flesh pounding, bone crushing procedure to proceed. Relieved, more than refreshed, we supplant ice cream for the day's treat, and consider the nature of cleanliness as our bodies succumb to heat and pump sweat through skin that is glad of a little dirt.

Rien

Today, it seems that every other Westerner in Hama has left. My hotel is empty. All the good tourists had early starts and are off touring. Carla and Bart continue their peripatetic break-up without having divulged any clue as to their sanity. I walk the streets and peer into a few hotel lobbies and some of the more popular cafés—nothing. How shall I spend this wonderful day? My plan to visit the crusader castle, Crac des Chevaliers, seems a reckless waste. *"Qu'est-ce que tu fait?"* asks the werewolf boy on the eucalyptus terrace.

"Rien," [Nothing,] I tell him. And for the whole hot day, I drink coffee till I shake, then tea till I stop. The norias groan and splash, and I do nothing but listen to them until the sun is sunk enough to spread shade over the path back to my hotel.

Crac

Like a good tourist, I manage an early start and reach the small town of Hosn by eleven. Straight, outlying streets coil and spring up around a volcanic plug to where its houses are dwarfed by the eight hundred year old Crusader castle capping the top. The limestone defences of Crac de Chevalliers have stood the time well; they reflect, from ramparts to parapet, the brightness of the day across the broad plain they dominate. Guarding the main pass between inner Syria and its Mediterranean coast, the original castle of Quala'at al-Hosn was a perfect perch for the marauding Crusaders. From its strengthened defences, they extorted levy from all passing trade for more than a hundred years before being forced out.

The castle swells to fill my gaze the closer I get to the top, and as the day becomes hotter, its very size becomes daunting; this is too much for a sunny afternoon's stroll. I need coffee, and a café at the gates sells it, but for an inflated price I cannot allow myself to pay. The waiter will not relent, and I burn the little bridge between him and me before backing down the hill. How dumb. On this, the one day of my life that I can visit a castle that has fired my imagination for decades, I waste time to save a pittance. The search is futile. There is one café in Hosn, and it no longer welcomes me. As I stand at a twisted crossroads, a woman walks over, and seeing that I am looking for something I cannot find, takes me by the hand. Her eyes too take mine and her free hand flicks from the wrist, ending palm up. Her eyes squint, and her head tilts to the side, an ear half-turned. Her hand flicks again, and a smile comes. "Ahrwa," [Coffee,] I say.

Her smile broadens. She puts two fingers in her mouth and whistles a man's head from a shop doorway. She tells him her plan, and he closes the shop to come with us to her house. As she plies me with coffee and cherries, he sits chaperone, too polite to turn his wrist as he glances at his watch. Hobbled by the curse of Babel, the talk is mostly coffee and cherries and Crac. But she makes sure that I notice, as if it were possible not to, the many representations of Jesus about her room. He is depicted suffering profoundly in a number of ingenious ways, yet her favourite is the most alarming. The charismatic young rabbi from Nazareth is parting his garments *and* his chest to reveal a heart-shaped heart that knows no sin but ours.

Crac is impressive, far more so than ruined Kerak, and so different from the magical warrens of the Arab desert castles. Europeans, as ever, impose a European vision of order. Relenting only somewhat to the terrain, Crac spirals defensively, wall and tower around moat and ramp up to the splendour of the crowning battlements from where I can still sense greedy eyes searching out caravans navigating the only breach of the coastal mountain ranges between Antioch and Beirut. Four thousand could be garrisoned here at a time within the network of halls and towers, and be unleashed on the local population at a whim. There are no caravans today, but snow far off on Quornet as-Saouda in Lebanon glints from north-facing ridges in defiance of summer. A café crowns the top of Crac des Chevaliers, and I make for its incongruence to steel myself further against the day. I pass a tourist, sitting, legs dangling over the precipitous drop, mumbling to herself. "Are you OK?" I ask.

She startles and wheels around. "Shhh! I am talking on my phone!" She points to a cell phone hidden in the fold of her sleeve. It used to be only mad people—with the notable exceptions of us all—that talked to themselves. But it's harder now to tell the mad from the sane; we must look for other signs. She finishes her call and buries the phone in her bag, turning to me. "Sorry. My name is Héléne. I was talking to Lebanon, just over there. Mobile phones in Syria are *interdit,* mostly. I thought you were a guard."

"No." I say, stupidly.

"No, of course," she replies, graciously lowering herself to my level before switching subject. "I live in Beirut. I work for France Telecom on contract to LibanCell. I work with mobile telephones. That is why I wanted…to see…if…" she flounders.

"Coffee?" I interject, steering the conversation to other grounds. Hélené takes the hint that I am intending to visit Beirut very well and hands me her address on the usual napkin—thankfully a Syrian one well-armoured against the ravages of time and impermeable to anything but ballpoint ink.

On the way back down through the castle, I explore every inch of the dusty halls and bright terraces, and poke my nose out every window to judge the impossibility of ascent from below; but the secret entrance, which I should never find but for the prompting of a bored guide, excites the little boy in me most. In the south-east corner of the outer battlements, below a penny-in-a-slot moon, an overgrown hole leads to a staircase that drops thirty metres into treacle blackness and an only-mildly-disappointing dead end.

I return to Hama via the town of Homs, but find it a chaotic Middle-Eastern modernity. The only temptation to linger is the Church of the Girdle of Our Lady, where the flimsy garment lay undiscovered and unknown until 1953; but this is not temptation enough. At Homs bus station, I am stopped by someone looking the B-movie secret-policeman epitome: he is dressed entirely in black and wears mirrored sunglasses, which he peers over as a prelude to every question. He softens me up with a few easy ones, "What is your name?" "Where are you from?" "Where have you been?" "What are you doing here?" Were are you going?" then pounces: "Have you ever visited, or do you ever intend to visit the State of Israel?" I speed on to Hama, to the eucalyptus terrace, where in one moment the werewolf boy will see me, and dash over to ask a friendlier question.

Aleppo

Tomorrow, I shall have been two weeks in Syria. I must renew my visa. The passport office in Hama is as friendly and efficient as I had expected. I am in and out in a few minutes with a month's extension.

Another bus station, another wait, another coffee and cigarette till the improvised departure time comes. These become my favourite moments: sitting disguised in stillness in the tourist-free zones of the local bus companies. Increasingly, I find myself the only Westerner aboard these mobile shrines to bad taste, and I become invisible to myself without the mirrored reminders of how I must look sitting around me. So, Aleppo in a few hours; a place dreamed of; a vague X on the travellers' map, crossing frontiers, mountain ranges, and deserts at whim, to plant itself in the road ahead. Aleppo has been with me since geography class, along with the great destinations of Timbuktu and Samarkand, the former visited, the latter drifting innocent and countryless in my imagination. Haleb to its inhabitants, but forever Aleppo to me. I hope mystery survives reality. Signe's plan to shorten the trip has put a spring in my step, and the road ahead, though long, no longer daunts. Just two stops left in Syria after Allepo: Latakia and Tartus. Latakia came to me later, when my adolescent palate jousted with pipe tobacco; and Tartus, just a few years ago, while reading murderous tales of the Crusaders. Lined up in front of me now, they await as did Karnak and Petra and Palmyra, and a dozen other magical names-become-places-become-memories. I tick them off with mind-mapped crosses, and possess the exotic, rendering it ordinary. The laminated maps of my mind fade as the mystery of the unrealised tarnishes on contact, and in consolation, I am left with experiences that scamper about and regroup themselves in envy of what they have overthrown. I do this without choice, for deathbed regrets are too heavy to bear throughout life, in the hope that time will rekindle the imaginings and stir the memories into fulfilment a lifetime coming.

And if anywhere can meld past and present, it is Aleppo. Long a forgotten crossroads, its grandeur is decayed just enough to be charming. Almost four thousand years ago, Aleppo was a powerful city-state. But since the coming of the Hittite invasions, which relieved it of statehood three thousand seven hundred years ago, its world-importance has been mostly on the decline. Less than two thousand years ago, Rome established it as a trading centre between Asia and the Mediterranean; but a few hundred years later, it was destroyed by Persian invasions. Since then, it has been besieged, with varying degrees of success, by Muslims, Byzantines, Crusaders, and Ottomans, and smashed by earthquakes. Its trading position weakened with the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope, and became insignificant with the opening of the Suez Canal. The Orient Express reanimated the town for a brief few decades, but today Aleppo is on a route to nowhere in particular. This does not make it nowhere in particular: Aleppo bustles with life, and a hint of the trade route returns with bus loads of ex-Soviets opening their commercial avenues into the Middle East.

My café is the same in each important detail: a balcony overlooking a busy junction, this time with the addition of a clock tower. The extras are the same too, down to the curve of their moustaches and their cries of fun. Maybe the life on the street is jollier. Smiles come easier and everyone has an ice cream today. Traffic drives in from each of the four roads and stops in the middle when it can go no further. Drivers lean out of their windows and shake their heads at each other, as if to say: *How could this happen?* Somehow, they pass and continue to the next junction, where perhaps the show is repeated. No one is worried or hurried, except for a motorcyclist that negotiates the snarl at speed. He carries a young boy on the front mudguard, a younger girl on the tank, and a woman with a bag of shopping and a baby, riding pillion, side-saddle.

In the late evening, I visit the Baron Hotel, *the* hotel in the times when Aleppo was the terminus for voyages beginning in every European city. It is perfectly decrepit, and seemingly unrefurbished since its opening in 1909. So many of the famous have stayed here: Theodore Roosevelt, Agatha Christie, Charles Lindberg, Amy Johnston, and of course, T.E. Lawrence. In a corner of the lounge, stands the only shrine to Lawrence's memory I have seen in the whole Middle East; but that is no surprise as most Arabs regard him as a spy—ungenerous, but true.

After helping to roll the Ottoman Empire up like a oriental carpet to Turkey's door, he halted here. A glass case contains an extract of a letter written by him during his stay, and a bill for *Monsieur Lawrence,* who had a liking for *Limonade*. At five to eleven, I sit in as good an armchair as has ever borne me, and sip a cold beer. At eleven, I am ejected to a terrace overlooking a busy street with my warming beer, but even here, the hotel's elegance prevails. One beer seems enough, but I am loath to move. I can hardly lift my legs, and my head is swimming. Only when the waiter brings me a second do I read that this Syrian beer is 12 % alcohol. I settle into a longer night. Across the street, slick men argue with glamorous women outside a *Nite Club.* One man turns to argue with another, and they lift their shirts to display the butts of automatic pistols stuffed into their belts. The street freezes in momentary tableau. "Russians bad people," whispers the waiter. "Bring AIDS to Syria." The tension breaks: the men tuck in their shirts and the women check their make up.

"But you don't catch AIDS from toilet seats," I reply, meaning to shift back some of his blame; but he looks at me strangely, and as he does, I wonder just when it was I last saw a toilet seat.

Conjunction

For an obscure reason, I scrutinise the handwritten Arabic scrawl of my visa extension, and notice that my stay has been extended from June the ninth until June the eighth. I find the Passport Office in Aleppo, and ask them to correct the mistake. "The Arab Republic of Syria does not make mistakes," an official tells me.

"But to extend a visa until the day before it runs out?"

"They must have their reasons. You must return to Hama—immediately." I go instead to the medieval centre, where I elude the day in cool, stone-vaulted souks. In the heart of each is a Khan, a caravanserai. Here, merchants gather, trade, and sleep until nothing is left to trade, then scatter, with bags stuffed, to the points of the compass. The Khan is a courtyard surrounded by warehouses with inward-facing loggias protected from the night's thieves by ancient steel-clad wooden doors. In the heart of each, a pile of goods is arriving or leaving, and on the galleries above and around, merchants of all descriptions haggle. Some goods are as old as the Khans themselves—sacks of pistachio nuts, bundles of wool, stacks of hides—and some, the mass-produced uniformities of our times. In the arched recess of his stall, I drink tea with Achmed. "Maybe can sell you something? Or not. Not problem. Maybe change money? Money Queen? Money President? Not matter. Maybe not. Not matter also. Maybe like have sex? Or maybe not. Not problem. Not gay? Not problem for me." Achmed shows me pictures of his boyfriends all around the world. Heart-warming messages in a dozen languages are written on their backs. "Come back tomorrow? Maybe change money? Maybe change mind? Very happy! Very nice! Very tea! Very love!" I leave him with a promise to return tomorrow with mint for our tea.

I squeeze through throngs of buyers and sellers, through cobbled alleyways and tiny, domed squares, past shafts of aromatic dust caught in down-pouring light, past donkeys overladen and swaying. There is an explosion just ahead of me. The shock wave is beyond sound. It whacks my eardrums, and presses them down as the blast resonates in the confined souk. The air is cloudy as if decompressed, and my eyes grit up with dust. Something warm and wet thumps into my thigh, and just as an awful thought is forming, I see it to be a corncob. A wheelbarrow corncob boiler has blown up and scattered itself about the souk. I look down again, just to check, but a donkey has the cob already in his mouth. Another culinary accident, and again—incredibly—no one is hurt.

I pass the evening in the Garden Restaurant, a wide, quiet terrace strung with coloured lights. Despite the canopy of trees and stars, I feel claustrophobic, and for some time have no idea why. Now I realise: women. There are no women here; no women here as there are no women practically anywhere, except those that hurry past on the street. The world I see is half a world, and I have become used to it being such—so used to it that I knew not the source of my discomfort for some hours. I had become accustomed. Now that I am aware of it, I feel the

separation keenly. The loss of half the people to my experience of this country is impoverishing and pathetic. I have tolerated it for months, and patience is gone. I find it fucked up. I am too long the traveller. As culture no longer shocks, my respect for it wanes. I swap cities and friends every few days, and I am jaded. I miss my life. I look up, but a sighting of Venus is beyond hope. She is at her closest to us now; but as today dawned, she began her pass before the sun. As today ends, she emerges into our morning hemisphere on course for her voyage beyond the sun. I miss her enchanting my evenings. Time is running. I feel my fingers scrape the bottom of the luck barrel. If I follow Signe's plan, this is as far North as I go. Momentum has carried me too far. My goal lies behind me. It is time to turn too.

Mint

Even the night is hot, and relief comes only as broken promise before dawn. The pseudo-breeze of the ceiling fan buffets me back to sleep a little longer, and I awake to a hard blue sliver of sky beyond the shutters, an amber shaft of sunlight before them. "A lovely day!" I yawn, in the moment before I remember that every day is like this. I never saw an Irish day without clouds, and I never imagined I could miss them; but the sight of a fluffy cloud hiding the sun would be fine. I move in shadows along the street. The forays of the first months are impossible. Cities are to be known by impression, and countryside is to be crossed sitting. Even the late-spring days of Wadi Rum and Petra are remembrances of cooler times. An early start in the chill of dawn, and a pair of stout boots are of the past. Today, in shade of this café terrace, I sweat as much as I did in the desert. Coffee, tea, and sugar power me from one moment to the next, and I drink as much water to sit still as I did in a day's climbing. I cross the road to buy a pack of cigarettes, and stop to share one with the first person that asks. We stare into the heat, as if it were visible, and strike it back with our hands, as if it would shrink to the threat. I run up the café stairs, and there is my table, the coveted one with the best view, empty still. I left my bag, my Leica, and my notebooks there, just to keep it. I would do this nowhere else. It is not a question of risk. There is no risk. I drink more tea, mintless, and set off to find some for my engagement with Achmed. I get the feeling that I might buy almost anything in Aleppo—but mint. Finally, my nose leads me to a cup of tea in an old man's hand. "Nana?" [Mint?] I ask.

"Aiwa, nana!" [Yes, mint!] He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a withered but pungent sprig.

"Nana?" Says Achmed, when I find him half-dozing at his stall.

"Nana!" I tell him, reaching into my pocket. I reach into my other pocket and pull out a pack of mint-flavoured condoms. "Nana!" I repeat, handing him both.

Latakia

I turn. I try to buy a train ticket for Latakia, but the conductor leads me by the hand from the ticket booth to set me in a first-class seat. "Guest!" he tells me. For hours, the train rolls through bleached cornfields, and now drops slowly west into the Orontes Valley. The land greens, and reed banks line watercourses traversed by spindly viaducts. The train stops a while in the small town of Jirash Shugur, and the conductor comes to say goodbye and to introduce me to his replacement. The train rises again by cuttings, embankments, and tunnels, to twine through sharp valleys wooded with pine and oak. We round a northern outpost of the coastal range, and begin a straight descent to the coast. The new conductor returns. "Ticket," he demands. There is no misunderstanding. I understood enough of what the first conductor told him, but what can I do? I look around the carriage, and though everyone is looking back, no one looks supportive. I count out fifty-five Syrian Pounds, the correct amount for a first-class ticket. "Dollars!" he barks. I shake my head and push the money into his open palm.

"Ticket," I ask him, but he shakes his head—he plans to keep this money for himself. The train passes into a tunnel. It is suddenly black. I pull the money out of his hand and slip it into

my pocket just as the train bursts into the light. He shrieks in anger, but before he can form words, an army officer has him by the shoulder and is hissing in his ear. He protests, but a clipped Arabic sentence I cannot catch shuts him up. He is still angry, but paler. He writes a ticket and hands it over. His shoulder is gripped harder and given a little shake. He counts out fifty-five Syrian pounds and hands it to me. "La! Malesh!" [No! It's O.K.!] I say, but the officer silences me.

"Gift from the people of Syria," he says. I look around the carriage to see everyone smiling and nodding at me and gesturing that I sit down. A great travel lesson: never assume that *all* the natives are hostile, just because one is. I sit down, smiling and thanking everyone, wondering do they know, or don't they, that I have fifty-five pounds in each of my trouser pockets.

In Latakia, there is a nip in the early-evening air and salt in the breeze. I have a nostalgic twinge of arthritis in my old breaks. The town is messy and new, but quaint. I start to look for my café, but am sidetracked by a flashing neon sign: *Hamburger*. I have been eating hoummos for some indeterminate time just short of an eternity, and though I like hoummos, I am excited at the thought of a change. "Special for today we have no cheesebugger!" says the man behind the counter.

"Hamburger and coke, then please."

"You come Syria to shop?"

"To shop?"

"Yes, shop. Work shop"

"Ah, work, job?"

"Yes, to shop."

"No, tourist."

"Take this you bugger," he says, setting the burger on the counter. Now the coke. "You are drunk." His friends sitting behind me are suppressing such laughter that they are crying. He is taking the piss, and he's doing it very well. "Where from?"

"Irlanda Shamalia."

"Ooh!" he says with big round eyes, and shuts up. It is strange how such an unwarranted reputation follows us Northern Irish around—in much the same way as one might follow him around my country. The burger is everything a good burger should be. The meat slides down my throat, without invitation, to quiver in my belly. The bun dissolves to a starchy paste that lacquers my teeth. I remember why I never eat them at home.

Baklava

I awake concerned about my visa. It would be a pity to blow getting into Lebanon because of it, so I find the Latakia Passport Office. I am discovering that Latakia is liberal by Syrian standards. When I point out the mistake, everyone has a laugh at Hama's expense. A senior immigration official tells me, "No problem at all. I will fix this immediately. You will not have to wait." He is true to his word, I don't wait, but am busy for one and a half hours. *No problem* means returning with *five* photographs, and filling in *fourteen* forms. I visit four different offices, one four times, another three times. A total of around *thirty* signatures permits me another week in Syria. The senior official clicks the top onto his pen, tucks it into his breast pocket, and stands to shake my hand. "You are welcome," he tells me with the pride of a job well done.

Latakia would be a lovely seaside town, if it had a seaside. Where the sea should be, is a fenced-off railway and modern commercial port. The centre is little to look at, but has a good, lazy feel, and there is just enough chaos quarried from the brutalism of modern Middle-Eastern architecture to hold an interest. Cafés terraces, and their customers, scatter across pavements with abandon. Women walk around in Western clothes, many without headscarves. One flirts briefly with me, and for a moment, I am surprised. Everyone is at ease—like they own the town instead of the town owning them. Some city dwellers regard their doorsteps as part of the other, the not-home. Some see the city as an extension of their living rooms. Latakians are at home.

The city has a European feel; but Cyprus, where this trip began one hundred and twenty days ago, is just one hundred kilometres offshore—its north-eastern tip almost touches. My hotel is a dirty hole, but run by two very friendly Moroccans, and I realise how different are these Arabs from those I have lived among for the past months. There is no struggle to cement our two worlds: they are the same. We exchange ideas in stripped-down French with no cultural barriers to overcome. We share, to a point, the same sense of humour—theirs sharper than mine. "What do you call someone that speaks three languages?" they ask in a double act.

"Don't know."

"Multilingual. And someone that speaks two languages?"

"Bilingual?"

"And someone that speaks only one?"

"Monolingual?"

"English!" they yell. They cannot stop. "An elephant, a donkey, and an ant are sharing a hotel room. They go out, but leave the key inside. The door is locked. What will they do?"

"Ah…perhaps the ant could crawl through the key hole?"

"That's what the donkey said!" We laugh till it hurts and they slide from their chairs.

Next to the hotel, I find a restaurant more to my tastes. Farsi specialises in Greek cuisine; his baklava is so good, I order it again. He has a good music collection too. When he hears I'm from Ireland, he plays *Moving Hearts.* When he sees I enjoy it, he gifts me the cassette. "Hi Farsi! Baklava, please," comes a voice I know. "Well, Fawcett. Thought I'd find you here."

"Signe!"

"I heard you were in town. Not too many Irishmen in town today. None, really."

"What are you doing here?"

"Checking on you. Still on course?"

"Very much so. And you?"

"Cool. Off to Turkey soon."

"Yea, when?" Maybe the day after your birthday. You weren't planning to spend it alone, were you?" I kiss her. If ever anyone is due a kiss, it is Signe.

Tartus

On the minibus to Tartus, some women fall into chat with Signe about our travelling together as friends. They tell how they would like also to travel, but of how difficult that is—and to travel as we do would be impossible. I am an interested passive participant in the conversation until a young man, also listening, says to me: "Women talk about secondary things. Let us talk as men."

"No thanks. I'd rather listen to this."

"These women are too sensitive."

"You are too sensitive," Signe butts in.

"I think she is scared of me!" he says to me, indicating Signe.

"On the contrary," says Signe. "You are scared of me." And so he is; he sulks with a red face, but dares not speak. I love travelling with this woman, and so does every other woman on the bus. Signe continues her talk, but the mood is soured: the man has spoken, and the man is not pleased. He is in consuming need of asserting his superiority over these that are likely his betters. This partition of the sexes restrains these women and limits their lives; but how much worse does it affect this man? The absence of female balance in both his everyday life and within his character perhaps stunts him worse. He is a little boy that knows equals only in his male friends, and never within the most challenging and fulfilling relationships of his life. I look for signs of frustration in the faces of these women; but they are so beyond frustration that their lack of it makes it well up in my mind. All at once, I am sickened again. If I look for some benefit of dividing a society thus, I cannot find it. How might a country develop without enlisting half its people?

Tartus began life about three thousand years ago as a service port for the nearby island of Arwad. Seven centuries later, Alexander the Great took an interest in it, and seven centuries after that, Constantine the Great added it to the Roman Empire. Another seven centuries brought the Crusaders. When forced out of Crac de Chevaliers, and spared their lives under the condition that they left the country directly, some holed up here instead. The old town is a tamped fortress of overlying buildings, new on old, and within this warren, a few hundred metres across, the Knights Templar made one of their last redoubts. Even Saladin could not shift them. Another century passed until the Mameluks drove them offshore in 1291. Today, Tartus is growing around a working fishing harbour that's curving rough-stone sea wall puts me a touch in mind of Portrush. Just to the north, is a commercial port, and offshore, lie container ships at anchor, but they do not encroach. In my trip through Syria—with the exception of my days in Damascus—I have found no place to relax, but perhaps here I can rest a day. Tartus is more liberal even than Latakia. This evening, women frequent the cafés overlooking the promenade and men parade in shorts. There is even a beach, but a daylight inspection is in order: it has the whiff of sewage about it. Wandering the old city at night recaptures Crusader times, though the sacred spaces are divided and enclosed into living rooms. As it was then, it is tonight full of life, and the old walls, archways and vestigial staircases lit by a dozen televisions, should be recognisable still to a Templar.

Arwad

Signe and I rise early and take one of the many little boats leaving the fishing harbour of Tartus, for Syria's only island—Arwad. Three thousand years ago, in Phoenician times, Arwad was the hub of a seafaring empire, but its importance faded until a brief revival in 1291. When the dregs of the European Crusaders were ejected from the Middle East, most went home or across to Cyprus; a few recalcitrants stopped here. For eleven years, they stayed, desperate to keep one foothold in the Holy Land; but in 1302, the Mamelukes finally kicked them out, ending their Middle-Eastern adventure. To cross the three kilometres to Arwad is to take a living voyage. The dozens of people squeezed into our boat pass the twenty minutes smoking cigarettes, eating ice creams, and drinking coffee. Everything surplus to each pursuit, with some extras, is chucked overboard to float in a sea of plastic and sewage scattered with the hulks of coasters moored in the island's lee.

The jaws of Arwad's harbour widen at our turn into its mouth. Boats move within as barrows in a floating market, carrying people trading goods at distance and speed. We come among them with ease, as if we are all part of the same accustomed movement. We idle past ships in all states tied up along the great sea walls, some held together with a fresh coat of paint, some wallowing like rusty swimming pools. We bump, and our boat is emptied, boarded, and laden again with spry ease. The dock is piled with what could be junk or wares to be traded in this last outpost. We walk past shallow-keeled boats careened in rows as shipbuilders deliberate over which to salvage and which to gut. A man squats beside a six-cylinder diesel engine persuading it with a lump hammer. The beast is laid bare, its innards glinting through carbonised blood. He thumps it again a while—good solid whacks this time. I see the purpose and the function of each of its intricately interdependent parts: he sees a mule of thing that needs sense beaten into it. The difference between us is that he will coax the beast to work again. "Funny," says Signe, "We pride ourselves on recycling. You're shocked at the garbage dumped all over the place, but where you and I come from this engine would be dumped. Recycling's all right for toilet rolls, isn't it? But what about the shiny new car at the door?" She's right, but Signe's always right, right about my being shocked too. If this is the Sargasso Sea of garbage, it is all returned to breed. Plastic barbeques smoulder between coral tidal pools full of raw sewage.

From the gaping harbour, the island city shrinks back like a fish that has opened its mouth too far. More than one third of its area is sea, and what land clings to it is half-hidden behind a crumbling defensive wall enclosing less than half a square kilometre. Inside, wind narrow lanes between dwellings and fortresses, ancient and new mixing in an exhilarating clutter. Clutches

of buildings give to broadened passages and little squares housing tea-shop terraces and street vendors. The lanes mount gently, and vistas open to the sea and beyond to Tartus. Through all, people rush as if to destinations farther than Award's tiny girth will permit, passing as fluidly as boats pass in the harbour below. Cleaned, this island could rival any Mediterranean jewel, and stuff itself full of tourists and money; but then the life would be gone. It would exist for no purpose but to pleasure the tourist's eye. Here people live, work, and enjoy; they don't see the pollution, the sewage, the mess—only my tourist eye animates it.

Back in Tartus, we pass a restaurant displaying enormous sardines. "How much?" says Signe.
"Three sardines, Three hundred Syrian pounds," is the reply.
"Too much."
"Special price, two sardines, Two hundred pounds."
"That's the same price."
"OK, best price, one sardine, On hundred and fifty pounds."
"Good price," she says. "Now throw in an extra sardine."
"No problem, two sardines Three hundred pounds."

I have as much luck at a hotel. Exercising my woeful Arabic, I ask of a huge man overflowing an armchair, "Fee shakis?" [Have you a room?]

"Ana shakis," [I am a room,] he replies. It has ceased to be funny; the surreality is bewildering now: we are travel weary. We wander to a bar on the seafront and share a bottle of seven-year-old arak. The label mentions that the company has been *experimenting with production for 50 years, and in the course of this, has raised the alcohol content to 103%.*

Treat

Signe treats me to a birthday breakfast in a Tartus café, and our appearance attracts the customers' interest. An old man wearing a black square of cloth draped over his head and trousers with a gusset down to his knees designed—so I have been assured—to accommodate the Messiah in the event that he be born suddenly to a man, cannot take his eyes off us. Two mountain women move to our table to get a better view, but cannot make up their minds whether to gawk at Signe or at me. They are not uninteresting themselves in purple and green polyester skirts, red and orange acrylic sweaters, and blue and pink headscarves. "Home perms? Don't worry they'll grow out," says my sharp friend leaning over the table to give them a good wink. They lean back and open their mouths in a synchronisation they may never achieve with their clothing. The gruff owner ambles over and we order tea and hommous.

"Mafi shi. Mafi hommous," [No tea. No hommous,] he replies. "Bierra. Arak." [Beer. Arak.] The garish women raise their beer bottles to us and one swigs while the other shrieks; the man in the Messiah pants grunts and fingers a bottle of arak in front of him.

We move to a waterfront café, and the moment we sit down, are joined by two sunglassed agents of the secret police, who sit opposite each other and stare down the barrel of the table at us. They ignore Signe, but question me in Arabic for more than twenty minutes, and as my Arabic is about twenty seconds worth, their questioning yields little. One frisks me as the other reads my journal upside down, page by page, scrutinising the inverted scrawl over the top of his shades. The first takes an interest now in the writing, and turns the book around so he can get it good and upside down too. "Aji," [Come,] he says, taking me by the arm and indicating a black car parked in front.

"What do you think, Signe?"

"I don't know, Chris. I'll never figure out how they knew it was your birthday." As they are putting me into the car, another agent arrives and starts to question them. They hang their heads and speak quietly as he barks. One hands him my book open at an incriminating page, but he folds it shut and passes it to me. When they are thoroughly humiliated, he turns to us and says: "You are welcome in Syria." I am surprised to register just a *twinge* of disappointment. I was slightly anticipating the hundred-watt bulb. It might have been my birthday treat.

The afternoon is one of reflection, and we spend it in the waterfront café as the sun drifts across the day and draws up night in his wake. We break from the obligations of tourism, and let our thoughts roam ahead of us, mine to Lebanon, Signe's to Turkey. I am tired of Syria. I had intended this day to be in Lebanon, and I want tomorrow to find an Arabic country in which children may go each day to school, where women may walk as equals to men. Though a recent focus of Middle-Eastern conflict, and a recent battlefield for other powers, though gutted by civil war, Lebanon has promise shining from it. Because of its French colonial history, Beirut is known as the Paris of the Middle East, and its reputation for liberalism goes before it. In a region where conflict is king, whether it be over religion, land, oil, and now, over water, and where change comes only as the bastard son of war, I hope to be surprised. If an alternative exists to this mess, perhaps it is there.

This last night in Tartus, we walk through the black of the moon across the old centre, in a night-time shortcut to the hotel. We drift, eyes downcast; neither in confusion nor wonder, but with that fleet familiarity even brief acquaintance brings to a strange place. They are made of simple things, these moments to remain a lifetime. The narrow streets become a sound, smell, and feeling map that persists beyond the fading photographic memory of vision to rest tangled with the name Tartus, and inseparable from it.

Tripoli

This morning, I must say goodbye to Signe as she heads north to Turkey, and I south to Lebanon. Breakfast is quiet. My mind races belatedly with thoughts of this woman, as if I had never really considered her before. A fantasy forms to ask her to come with me to the mountain village of Safita. I picture us falling in love there and turning around and travelling through Turkey together. It flashes past me like the trailer for the film showing in the cinema next door. She looks at me, and I wonder what is showing in her mind. Can we be watching the same trailer? The fantasy fades. I cannot walk two paths. I stick to the one I am on. We part without swapping addresses, in that strange, hopeless gesture I shared also with Marcus; and right to the end I search her eyes with the question to which I shall never have answer.

At the border, I present my passport to a Syrian official. He declares it "Chalas." [Finished.] I cannot go to Lebanon. No one reads or speaks French, and the date of issue is taken as the start date of the visa's one-month validity. There is no arguing; he runs a ballpoint through it and repeats: "Chalas! Chalas!

A voice comes at my shoulder, "Hi I'm Bill from Ozland, what's the problem?"

I turn to tell him, but Bill—100% Lebanese with a *no-worries* Australian accent—is already assuring the official of the validity of my visa. We ride together under armed guard to the Lebanese side to have this verified.

The Lebanese official is happy to see me. *"Un touriste!"* he exclaims, and shakes my hand warmly. *"C'est quoi, ça?"* [What's that?] He points to the ballpoint mark.

"Les Syriens," whispers Bill, tipping his head back towards our escort.

"Ah oui, les Syriens," he sighs. He stamps my entrance visa, the guards are dismissed, and Bill wishes me well. Too late, I realise I have no Syrian exit stamp. This would look bad on my return. I taxi back to the Syrian side, where the official is also happy to see me, then disappointed when I show him my Lebanese entrance stamp. He curls his lip and drops his head, but lifts the exit stamp and reluctantly presses it to the page, seeming a little sad that there is just enough ink to make an impression. No amount of thanks will console him. I ride back with the taxi I had been optimistic enough to ask wait, and wonder if it is all a game. What will the Lebanese have to say to my now-endorsed visa? Nothing, as it turns out, except a reaffirmation of, *"Ah, les Syriens."*

Familiarity resumes with the white-knuckle taxi ride to Tripoli. As the road dips south, the Lebanese hills mount to the east, and the water they throw down cuts wooded valleys opening to a coastal plain. Palm-lined avenues lead to a clean shore, except by the Palestinian refugee

camps, where plastic-bag bushes sprout between anti-aircraft batteries. At first, Tripoli feels like any Middle-Eastern city, but soon, differences become apparent. French influence in the architecture, and French fluency in the locals conjures a new feel. Even directions are offered in a manner coherent with my convoluted western mind.

A long afternoon's walk bridges two sides of Tripoli, one of the two triple-cities of the ancient Greek world. In the swirl of the medieval medina, with its tea-shopped souks and squares, the streets ring from an old clock tower, and progress to the 21st century and the sea. At its temporal and geographical extreme, Tripoli resembles Tel Aviv. It displays the customary wealth-disposal systems of the rich. Young people in expensive cars cruise the broad avenues in eastern interpretation of western modernity. A black BMW convertible screeches showily to a halt. "So they let you in, Irishman. I gave 'em a pretty hard time!" boasts Bill from its hide interior.

"All thanks to you Bill."

"Jump in I'll run you to the beach." In a ride that is designed more to demonstrate his wealth, than to cut short my three-hour walk, Bill runs me the last hundred metres to the beach.

"Thanks very much, Bill."

"You're welcome, mate," he claims, brushing off the upholstery I darkened for a full minute.

I await sunset over the not-too-industrial shoreline, then head back to my familiar world of the old town; but at sudden night, the new city sheds its centuries. Though long past, the seventeen-year civil war has left this place a fragile infrastructure. The streets are profoundly dark, and to walk them is to risk electrocution from improvised power cables that hang to street level. By the time I circumvent the strangulating web, the old town is quiet. At only nine thirty in the evening, all the cafés are closed. If there is a third side to this once-triple city, I do not find it. I suddenly miss all-night Aswan, where a cup of tea never failed me, and though the new city's coffee shops may buzz all night, I must leave the sweater-wrapped evening to itself. My hotel curfews in half an hour, and I am stranded in premature insomnia.

Malesh

I should feel at home here, in this land of civil war, and I do. The hospitality of the people is incredible. I have yet to learn the price of a cup of tea or coffee, because no one has yet let me pay. This is much to do with my novelty value: I have not seen one other tourist for twenty four hours. Lebanon's reputation for kidnapping foreigners is not yet forgotten. In my morning walk through the Tripoli souk, a young man walks alongside me singing a tuneless little song in which the word *Hezbollah* features a lot. He shoots sidelong glances as he emphasises the featured word to check that I catch it. Fortunately, he keeps it up long enough for me to jumble together a sentence that with some luck just might be Arabic. I stop suddenly, grasping his wrist. "Enta Hezbollah, au mumpkin enta khazar?" [Are you Hezbollah, or are you perhaps a liar?] All heads have turned to us, and I read the bystanders' faces in my peripheral vision: they are blank, but attentive. I press on. "Ana b'fakir enta khazar." [I think you are a liar.] He stares wildly at me. "Andi mafi mishkela ma Hezbollah, bas andi kabir mishkela ma khazari." [I have no problem with Hezbollah, but I have a big problem with liars.] I am getting worried. What a stupid, stupid situation in which to try to string together my first sentences in Arabic. I still have him by the wrist, but the grip slicks with sweat. *What the fuck happens now,* I wonder. Suddenly, his face twitches, and a mad grin cracks it in two—but his eyes are in panic. I have him. I turn to the bystanders. "Entum b'fakir hua khazar?" [Do you think him a liar?] Please God, let this be Arabic.

"Aiwa! Aiwa!" [Yes! Yes!] comes my answer, mixed with laughter, from the crowd.

I release him and stick my hands into my pockets so no one can see them shake. The sweaty one finds mint, and closes around it. "Malesh. Ma Salamma," [All is forgiven. Go in peace,] I tell him. The crowd gently taunts him, and as he slinks off through their midst, I imagine I am the last tourist he will entertain with that song.

Paranoia plays no part here. Arabs are straightforward in moments of tension, and in my usual chats, I find little hostility of any kind towards anyone. Even towards their neighbour, Israel, they express mostly exasperation and disbelief. If you scratch a disagreement here, you find a *malesh* just under the surface. Conflict, unless stirred by demagogues and despots, seems more the refuge of the cornered—though there is no shortage of corners in this disputed region.

The vendors seem happy, and I am aware of their smiling at me. I lift my hands free of my pockets, and the aroma of squashed mint perfumes the air. I turn my hand open to see the mint bruised and limp. A leathery hand brushes it aside, and I watch it drift to the dust where I least want it. The hand returns to lay fresh mint in its place.

A siesta brings the close of the day, and I hurry to find a restaurant. Seeing me coming, the owner shouts, "Welcome! We have cheese, we have sparrow," but I dine on chicken, and from below the clock tower, I watch the sun fall, trailing a newborn crescent into the west. The last shops close, and the street merchants banter as they clear their stalls. All is quiet, all is peaceful tonight at the start of the new month. There is little sign that these people just tore themselves apart in a bloody civil war. Do we enjoy peace only after we have had full run of our aggression? I sip another gifted tea, and savour the day's mint.

Cedar

A dawn start leaves me, two hours later, just outside my hotel waiting for a service taxi to fill up. I'm the first customer, and the morning is slow. I don't mind the wait, but I want today to cross the mountains to Baalbek—a town once dedicated to the Phoenician God, Baal—and public transport brings me only the first leg. Traffic over the pass is by all accounts slow, and I dread a repeat of the King's Highway experience; but the thought of a little adventure keeps me going, as does another coffee and cigarette.

We rise quickly into the Lebanon Mountains. The Nahr Abou Aali valley yawns at the edge of the mountain range, cleaving an impassable chasm, up the southern edge of which the road labours. On each crumbling cliff edge, hangs a wing of the mountain town of Bcherre, which meet on a stunning hanging valley run through by a waterfall. Bcherre is the birthplace of Khalil Gibran, artist and author of *The Prophet.* I had looked forward to visiting his house become shrine, but find little of his spirit resonating between the walls; what inspiration was there is become history with the rest. The paintings hung around the flowing spaces of the house are reminiscent of Gustav Klimpt, but coyer, with soft-focus pubic regions; though the ten minutes I devote to this observation is meagre. My mind is too much on the day's journey to appreciate his work, and rather than pay it scant regard, I leave.

I stand at the edge of town, whisper as close as I come to a prayer, and stick out my thumb. The first car stops. It is a converted Volkswagen Beetle, and I use the word advisedly, since *convertible* would suggest that the roof could at some stage be replaced. "Chainsaw?" I enquire.

"Hachette," he replies, fingering his handiwork. *"Je trouve le chaleur insupportable."* [I can't take the heat.] His driving is equally eccentric, and I am glad that the roads are traffic-free. He drops me off after a few kilometres in a out-of-season ski resort, whose forlorn lifts traverse sun-kissed meadows, and whose hotels are shuttered and empty. I find a café, but on asking the price of a sandwich, am told, "Too much, Englishman. Everything *expensive* here. One moment." He returns with a sandwich in a paper bag and shoos me away.

I walk the next few kilometres to the Cedars of Lebanon. Famous for its durability and its reputation never to rot, cedar wood is forever prized in the Mediterranean. It has both supported and perfumed history's most famous buildings, from the Pyramids to the Temple of Solomon. On approach, a patch of raw green lying beyond the road rises on muscular boughs to float like sylvan clouds on the blue sky. Below, quiet light tickles quiet earth. Two thousand metres up, in this inaccessible oxter of the Nahr Abou Aali, the noble trees had a last-minute reprieve. When the oldest of them sprouted from his cone to gap a hole in the sky one and a half thousand years ago—as Europe fell into its Dark Age—his forests covered a land. When

he was young, and Europe was rising to threaten the East once more, his forests were only just being breached. As he falters today in old age, the toll of more than five thousand years usefulness to our race shows on his: of an endless forest that once supplied the ancient world, all that remains is a clump of a few hundred trees. Now I see the fence, the signs, and the gatekeeper's hut; but before I have time to be upset about having to pay, a man steps out of the hut and shouts, *"Bienvenu!"* [Welcome!]

"Ah, merci."

"You speak French. I am impressed."

"No, I am impressed. You know my language from two words."

"And your country, Irishman, from eleven more." He says nothing more until my less agile mind has had time to count to eleven. When he sees I am done, his eyebrows shoot up. "I am Johnnie!" When we are well introduced, he brings me into his hut, and as he brews us each a coffee, we smoke cigarettes and talk. He talks. Up here in the woods, he might not get much opportunity, and I half-listen with my thoughts rolling along the road ahead. At the end of our coffee, he tips up his cup and says, "A cup is most useful when empty, is it not?" He looks at me and smiles when I catch his meaning. "Go on. I know you wish to be on your way. There is still so much of the world to see. I felt the same when I was your age."

"What changed?"

"You will know when it changes."

"You can't tell me?"

"Some things cannot be told. Some things you must find out for yourself."

"But…"

"Patience, Chris."

He lifts a printed page from a drawer, and folds it into a small triangular purse. "The Book of Saint Antoine." He hands it to me. "It will protect you on your voyage." He sees my mind again. "Don't worry. It does not matter that you do not believe. It matters only that I do. Take it then, for me."

Now keen to pay, I open my wallet. "How much is a ticket to see the trees?"

He shakes his head. "Ticket? Please, you are my guest." There is a contribution box, but he places his hand over it even as the thought is forming. "My guest," he stresses.

I put faith in the new charm, and let a couple of cars pass on the near-deserted road, while I sip a roadside coffee. A vintage chocolate-brown Mercedes is chugging up towards me as I drain the cup. I should be sporting my pack. I should be standing up, at least. I put faith again, and stick out my thumb as the car levels with my chair. It stops with the reassuring screech of healthy brakes. Two children in the front tumble back, making five smiling faces in a row. I take my seat, and the car's old diesel engine picks up its fourth cylinder and accelerates into the rise. Lazy switchbacks bring us to the col overlooking the great valley. Tucked under its shoulder is the raw-green cedar, and on the crook of its elbow, perches Bcherre; far beyond lies Tripoli, its fingers spread out into the sea that slumbers below a coastal cloud belt. We pass, only just, through the snow line—a metre of gritty ice crouched in the road's lee, awaiting its season to cut the pass and seed the valley again. Now the Bekaa Valley, an ocean of green-tinged dust, opens to us, as the last ambitions of the Great African Rift divide the Lebanon from the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. Beyond Bekaa's far wall, is Syria, and nestled below in an ancient corner, awaits Baalbek. We switch down through checkpoints of lazy Syrian and lazier Lebanese soldiers, who have nothing more to do to than practice an indifferent flick of the wrist within whose subtlety lies the difference between driving on, and driving on and being shot.

In the foothills, in the small town of Deir al Ahmar, we stop to meet mother to the five, who treats me like her long-lost son. She stops smiling at me only to rush about in the kitchen and prepare one delicacy after another. Plates of chicken and potatoes, bowls of lebneh and hommous, and piles of cherries picked this morning below the cedars, she lays before me, delighting in my uncouth appetite. I see my bag carried from the car to the house, and half an hour later, I see my freshly-washed clothes strung on a line. I am led inside and shown my room. I am offered no choice: hospitality is compulsory. Men in black leather jackets arrive

from the town and question me about nationality, politics, money—how much I have, and where I keep it—and whether anyone knows where I am going, and if anyone is expecting me back. They offer to take me for a four-wheel drive in the mountains, and again refusal is impossible. I would rather sit in the back than have two men behind me, but choice is not offered. We bump violently up a back road and stop to look down on the village. There is nothing to do but go along with it, and I carry on with the self-sustaining lies of their innocence and my naivety. They complain that they once had a good livelihood from making hash until the Syrians/Americans (on this point, they cannot agree) discouraged them, and punctuate this by offering a joint. It would be so easy to take it casually, to have a good pull and a cough and a raspy voice at the end of it. A shared fit of giggles at this point might help us bond, but I feel that a bottomless well of paranoia is best not fallen into this afternoon. They smoke. Their faces soften, and the conversation stops. I relax. I see a field of marijuana, the livid green subdued under a layer of valley dust, and a pile of uprooted males: evidently cultivation is not entirely ended. When the joint is smoked to the roach, a reek of cardboard brings them back to the day, and to me. The driver focuses his entire being on the road for the return trip, remaining in first gear, until I am returned safely to mother. I thank them, trying to probe their intentions, but there is nothing left to probe in their glazed eyes.

Mother is so happy to see me that I feel like falling into her arms for a good weep. The evening settles, as do we to a feast of Middle-Eastern proportions. And in the night, we gather as a family to watch *Xena the Warrior Princess* dubbed into Arabic, and marred only by my laughing at the wrong bits.

Baalbek

Only by morning light do I see the upheaval my stay has caused. On a pre-dawn stagger, I find half the family sleeping on the balcony; but two hours later, lest it embarrass us, all evidence is gone. I am treated to freshly-baked Lebanese bread, and a bowl of goat-milk coffee. Mother extracts a promise of return, but we both know I shall never be here again. One of my leather-jacketed interrogators stops the first car he sees and tells the driver that he is to take me to Baalbek, then waves me happily off. The Bekaa knows happier days that it has for years. The storm of war is blown: no longer do Israeli warplanes soar over Galilee to pummel the Hezbollah, and no longer does Hezbollah kidnap Westerners; though I get the impression they are not quite sure what to do with us. On the way to Baalbek are signs stating: *Welcome American Tourist,* which is hopeful, since Lebanon is still out-of-bounds for 'Americans,' and has few tourists at all. But at least unremitting hospitality has shifted focus from the unwelcome to the welcome. The poor man charged with driving me is trying also to be hospitable, if not for my sake, for the sake of the men in the black leather jackets, but I can see he is in a hurry to be elsewhere. When we reach the city limit, I tell him to drop me anywhere. He stops immediately.

It is a long walk in stupefying heat, but I break it at a well-stocked sweetie shop on the outskirts of town. The owner is startled. He jumps up and says, "You are my guest. Everything here is for you." I take a cool cola and a chocolate bar, and try to pay him, but his offer is true. He keeps me in the shop a while to enjoy his air conditioning, before letting me back to the empty streets. Baalbek is a tourist town hungering for tourists. A sightseeing coach stands outside the famous ruins with its engine running—it will not linger. The only storm clouds gathering at the valley's edge are real ones, but the memory of war is still too blood-red fresh. I visit the ruins, now empty—the coach revs up and is gone. Even though stuck in the centre of a drab town with the obligatory road running through it, the main site generates its own enclosure, and shrugs off easily the modern world. The Temple of Jupiter is spectacular. Only its plinth and six columns remain—but standing twenty two metres high, they well display the arrogance of Roman colonialism. The Temple of Bacchus has stood the time better. Though roofless, it is almost complete, as befits the tribute to a deity more in tune with the Bekaa's cash crop. The storm clouds pass, and welcome shadow-scapes dapple the parched valley. A few dirty raindrops fall; but the clouds, like the tourists, quest for cooler heights.

The downmarket hotel is barely open; the receptionist takes my money, and instead of suggesting a room, simply hands me a key to the front door. I shower and venture out to see the town, but it is almost entirely closed. Once the sun sets, Baalbek is unnavigable. Major road works compete with sewage, electricity, and telephone repairs to rend the streets to unlit depths. I find the upmarket hotel and ask to take a beer, but the bartender has forgotten his trade, and tells me it is cheaper to buy beer in the shop across the road. I heed him, and return to the balcony of my private hotel. With a toast to Bacchus, I watch a young moon set over my last pile of stones.

Solstice

"Beirut! Beirut!" shouts the service-taxi driver in an attempt to attract the two more passengers that will fill his big blue Dodge and make the trip worthwhile. As always, I enjoy the pause, the nothing space that is this undemanding moment between moments. My *here* is here, but my *now* has skipped off to wait for me somewhere up the road. The one small impendence is the shadow on my mental map above which the *You Were Here* stamp awaits to commit this once-visited place to memory. Outside the dishevelled office, drivers click prayer beads with familiarity devoid of devotion, marking the micro-pauses that eat the bigger pauses that fill their sweltering day. Taxi business is not brisk in Lebanon.

Next door, telephone engineers shake their heads at a connection box that has the appearance of being parasitized by jungle vines. Thigh-thick bundles of non-colour-coded wires thrust up and around a resigned electricity pylon to explode horizontally and cling to every upright surface in the street. One man, in a touching display of optimism, dons rubber gloves and climbs the pylon, avoiding the thicker wires, which he seems to guess, carry the electricity. Another engineer plugs a Bakelite telephone receiver into the heart of the box, and shouts, "Hallo! Hallo!" as if English might better penetrate the confusion. He looks up to his colleague and shakes his head. The colleague pulls a pair of wire cutters from his pocket, and takes a wire at random, parting it. "Hallo! Hallo!" comes the shout, then the shaking of the head; another wire is parted, then another. It seems that no amount of pruning will establish a connection. Four assistants are on hand to catch the wires and subject the shiny severed ends to a visual inspection, but even this is of no use. The infrastructure remodelling of Lebanon may take some time.

I get the mad idea to try to call Einat. I'd never have attempted this in Syria, and doubt that it will work here. I reflect that the planning of the last two weeks has been theoretical, and brace myself. I walk to the telephone box across the road. The line first seems unsure of what to do with the dial tones; there is a long clean silence, which now becomes muddied and distant. The telephone engineer ponders another wire. *Wait,* I whisper at him. I hear dial tones again, and echoing static. I am being connected to a multiple satellite relay, or the Syrian Intelligence Service. "Shalom?"

"Einat! It's Chris. I've only got a minute."

"Chris!"

"Shall I come, Einat?"

"Yes! When?"

"Next week?"

"Yes! Yes, come." My heart thumps, and I realise that it wasn't just impracticality that had stopped me calling. It is decided. My escape hatch is closed. I am going to Israel. And the big blue Dodge is full.

In Northern Ireland, we killed ten times as many people in our cars as we ever managed to blow up and shoot. In Lebanon, they used to blow up and shoot ten times more than even that. Perhaps the roads are jealous and want to up their toll, or perhaps it's *National Overtaking Day.* Everyone wants to pass, and nobody's picky when. It's a two-lane blacktop, long and straight; but these drivers don't need a blind corner to pretend that nothing's coming, they pull out and overtake no matter what. The pull out and overtake cars that are overtaking other cars, as cars

that are overtaking other cars bear down. We have the perfect driver–car combination: who knows how many bucket cylinders measured in cubic inches, a speedometer up to one hundred and twenty miles per hour—a big hairy car with a big hairy man at the wheel. Both are past their sell-by dates, and for them, speed is more important than mortality; and relative speed, more important still. If other cars are doing forty, we cruise past at fifty; if they are clocking a steady ninety—and we're talking *miles per hour* here—the big blue Dodge bounces past, shockless, at a hundred.

Down the Bekaa Valley we cruise, through checkpoint after checkpoint to Zahleh, where the Beirut road swings west to find the pass. We join the Damascus–Beirut branch of the Hejaz Railway, and I would just love to see the Zabadani Flyer puffing along beside us, but every inch of track is gone. It is sad to see a dismantled railway, and this one especially so. The marauding road has bitten irreplaceable chunks from its gentler gradient, and only scars remain to point out the occasional tunnel. But these are not the only scars on this landscape. Every building built before the civil war is horribly pockmarked, by *thousands* of bullet holes in its walls—those that have walls. It is a testament to reinforced concrete that some stand at all with everything but their floors blown out by rockets and shells, hanging blankets and cardboard screens sufficing now to conceal the life inside. In contrast, all of the buildings built or renovated since the civil war—for surely none were built during it—are pristine. Styles changed in those seventeen years, so the contrast between old and new is exaggerated, as if an army of post-modernist architects has moved across the land strafing everything that does not conform to its tastes. We traverse the mountains by a lower col, and the coastal strip opens before us. Beirut commences immediately, and thickens over the next twenty kilometres. The buildings congest and stifle each other, the same war-and-peace theme checkering the conglomeration, right up to downtown, where all that remains of the city centre is a dust-filled space.

The Hotel Lorenzo has the distinction of being my most expensive by a factor of three, and my smelliest by an order of magnitude, but is the best I can find. I call Héléne, "Héléne! Remember me? Chris, from Crac…"

"Of course I remember you. Where are you?"

"In Beirut. In the Hotel Lorenzo."

"*Impossible,"* she insists, the French pronunciation lending weight. "You are my guest. I collect you in ten minutes. I take you to a party. OK?" We visit a solstice party in the Place Cessine in new Beirut, and it could be a square in Paris. The square is thronged with young people bouncing up and down to modern Lebanese music. The energy is palpable and contagious. Later we go to a music evening at the French Cultural Centre, but pop music is never France's forte: a dreadful rock and roll band is playing air guitar with real guitars, and guldering miserably. I wander outside to savour the short night. At home, I would have spent this long day gathering wood and hauling it to the cliffs at the northern edge of town. Soon, the sun would set, the fire would be lit. The vigil would pass warmly, our faces to the flames, our bellies to the poteen, our hearts to the song. The calendar has run out of dates to tempt me home. The sun swings south now, abandoning, first by the minute, then by the hour, my home to winter. With this last deadline passed, I am free.

Beirut

Héléne's luxury apartment is mine for the morning. I enjoy washing her stack of dishes. I enjoy wiping her surfaces before settling into a pot of coffee on the balcony. The view is not as I expected. I could be gazing at Rio. No sugar loaf, but a mountain of landfill waiting to rob the sea gives focus, if an industrial one, to the scene. I see no pockmarked buildings, and the empty centre could be a park or plaza. Beirut is a beautiful, modern city rolling patchily from its surrounding hills to hug a small bay. Not so long ago, this view would be backdrop to a live news report. Smoke would spool into the air and the sound of automatic gunfire rattle off the mountains. Mortars and RPGs would curve lazy trajectories in the air. An F16, bored with the

Bekaa, might break the sound barrier with one boom, then pulverise a housing project with another. From up here in the rich suburbs, Beirut hides this destruction well. Her only blemish is the disgraceful Holiday Inn, soaring so far above any other building that it seems to belong to another city. Apparently, it was completed just as the civil war was brewing, and within weeks of its opening, it became everyone's favourite target. Even hardened war correspondents could not put up with being the centre of such attention, and it closed soon afterwards to reopen as a multi-story killing field for whatever faction coveted its high ground. Barring this pimple, Beirut is pretty.

A long walk confirms my image of a centreless city. With downtown gone, what is left of Beirut feels like an intensive-care ward serving a dead patient. I find no *place*—no languid café, no bustling souk, no plastic-bag park—in which to settle. Walking the infamous *Green Line,* is curiously unmoving. The buildings that marked the front didn't last long after people started hanging out their windows to empty Kalashnikov magazines into their neighbours' living rooms. Perhaps the contact was just too close. Grenades and rockets levelled the first rows, and the people that had lived in each other's pockets all their lives settled into their inverted trenches to shoot and kill from a distance more comfortably impersonal. The figure caught in your crosshairs, you recognise as the baddie from all your favourite movies, not as the little girl whose chin you used to tickle. Breath in, hold, now squeeze—gently, don't jerk. See? It's done. The next is easier. The respected old man who once differed from you only by the day on which he chose to pray is yours to reduce to meat. The long line snaking through the city follows this pathetic logic that is our overriding stupidity. For all our cherished civilisation, murder is still one of the things that we do best, and never better than when we do it in the name of god. Sun beats down on the pulverised centre, on the ghosts of war and the memories of peace. Hope will rebuild it one day, as hope has rebuilt it before, and may rebuild it again.

This evening, Héléne's friend Henri drives us to a trendy bar. Though there is plenty of room between the Porches out front, the valet parks his lumpy old Mercedes out of sight. The fake Arabic interior works well, but for the hospitality of the Turkish-trousered waiters, who dismiss us to a small table at the back of the half-empty room. At eleven, more Porches and newer Mercedes arrive with the young rich. Men in expensive jeans chaperone women in designer dresses to their tables, as they would anywhere in Europe; except that the chaperoning is literal, for even in Westernised Beirut, women are diminished in this way. None walks in without a man to accompany her. If Beirut was ever the Paris of the Middle East, it has slipped. Over costly beers, Henri and I fall into travel tales, and soon I miss my hearth and my friends. I am impatient to substitute the telling for the weary doing, but I have just a little way to go, and tonight, Henri's company is a welcome foretaste. We have visited many of the same countries, and it turns out that we even walked across the same minefield in Western Sahara. "We have much in common," he lies, as I remember musing over the significance of the small wooden pegs sticking out of the sand on that idiotic stroll.

"Yes," I reply, marking that Henri is not the sort to of man to press home that he knew it was a minefield before he walked across it.

Middle Ground

Though the civil war is over, Beirut has still the feel of a divided city. Though once the divisions were other, the line is etched today between rich and poor. The older cafés sell Arabic coffee for a pittance; the newer ones sell cappuccino for twenty times that. Between a cheap plate of hommous and an exorbitant baguette, there is nothing. The buildings are modern and immaculate, or ravaged. There seems no middle ground. At Pigeon Rocks, just south of the Corniche, new-build condominiums press up against squatter cafés clinging to the white limestone cliffs. In one ramshackle nest of flotsam, I enjoy a day of free coffee, and share packs of American cigarettes among the customers and hangers on. On the headland opposite, off rickety platforms fashioned from oil drums and sheets of crumbling plywood, daredevils

high-dive twenty metres into a filthy ocean. Each splash parts a pea-soup crust. On another day, I might have joined them, if only to baulk at the brink; but today I can sit and watch. Wherever I look, I see the end now, of this trip, and am glad. A last hammam in Damascus, a last breakfast in Amman, and Einat; these tempt thought, but little else does. I wonder how my travel spirit might have sustained me to Istanbul had I not changed direction, whatever that was. Forward, sideways, backward, what does it matter as long as it is onward—the only direction really worth a follow.

A walk north along the Corniche sees the shoreline disappear behind fences. A row of towering hotels on the city side of the road claims the sea on the other. At the occasional gap, we the passers by, stop to stare into a moneyed world of beach and cocktail umbrellas. I have a rendezvous on one of these terraces with Héléne, and a little guiltily, I leave the staring faces at the fence to slip across the road and into the Hotel Riviera. The doorman gives me an *Are you sure you have the right hotel?* look, and lets me in gracelessly. I am intercepted at reception. "What can I do for you, Sir?"

"I have an appointment on your terrace."

"Very well." He hesitates perceptibly before indicating the elevator. I wonder if the Holiday Inn staff had time to luxuriate in such smugness before rockets began traversing their lobby. Below the road, runs a tunnel that would look well in a James Bond movie; it rises similarly onto the set complete with extras. There is no filth on this shoreline. The coast is manicured, and before it, lies a turquoise swimming pool. White beach chairs sit in a nervous line alongside, apricot towels folded on their arms. Between them and the fence, tables are scattered among shade trees, and set for dinner with linen and crystal. Happy people laugh out a little too loud, and lounge a little too stylishly. They pointedly laud their friends as they pointedly ignore the staff. This is how rich people live in movies, surely, not in real life; but here in Beirut they do. From the squalor of the city's ruined quarters to this enclave is a quantum leap not many will manage. Héléne introduces me gravely to her friends, putting the best possible spin on my trip, but I am in the wrong movie, and everyone knows it. The evening is fun, and the conversation sparkles, but over Héléne's shoulder, I glimpse enquiring faces at the hole in the fence. How long will a glimpse content them?

Rosary

In the grounds of the American University Campus of Beirut, I am drawn to an old man sitting on a bench under a tree. He stares out to where the sea is, and clicks a string of worry beads in his right hand. In his left he holds a stick driven straight into the ground in front of him. "May I sit here?" I ask.

"I am an Arab, and I am a Christian. More than fifty years ago, I left Palestine," he answers. "The massacres began. Our leaders told us we must leave, we would return in some weeks." I sit at his right hand. The beads click on, but the stick and the gaze hold. "They told us—our leaders, our *Arab* leaders—that we would return in some weeks, just some weeks when the problem was finished. They said: *Allah karem,* God will provide. You understand?" I nod my head. "I left, my family left, my friends left, we all left. When we tried to return, they would not let us. They would not let us return." I wonder who *they* are, but I am loath to interrupt the narrative that old age and infirmity have stuck in a well-worn groove. "When we were gone, our leaders sold our land, our houses, our possessions—our leaders sold *everything,* to the Israelis. They say they had no choice. We never returned. My father died. My mother, she could not be without him. Her heart stopped to beat. My family is dead. My friends are dead. All dead. I was a good student. I studied hard. I played sports. I was a promising young man. I alone had a future. One day after sport, I had a stroke."

He looks at me now, interested to see to whom he tells his story today. His right side animates, his left strains to follow. I search for something to say. "And then?"

"Then? You see. I come to this tree every day. Every day." He holds up the beads. "I make this." His hand drops, and I see the ground peppered with the same round red fruit with which he clicks away the slow time between tellings. "I wait."

"For what?" I guess the answer too late to stop the question.

"For God," he says simply. He turns back to the sea. The beads click on. "Whatever you ask of God, you will get it."

He waits, with his stick and his faith to steady him, for the burden of life to leave. This request his god will grant. I marvel at his patience. This is not my *I shall be patient* sort of patience, but genuine—the calm abiding of the issue of time free from expectation and regret.

The Missing Piece

I miscalculate my dash for the Damascus service taxi, and instead of ending up with a rear window seat, am squashed between two fat, sweaty men. For the first hundred metres, I hold my breath till I realise that the dead-donkey smell is not coming, as I had imagined, from a dead donkey at the side of the road. I gasp another nauseating lungful and hold that, hoping that it is coming from a dead donkey in the garbage truck in front. But no: it is com ing from the man that got my seat. I try another gulp. It is insufferable; but four hours is too long to stop breathing—if I want to start again at the end of it. I recalibrate my definition of *insufferable,* and breathe, and just as I am resolved to the ordeal, the smelly one falls asleep and into my lap. It is boiling hot, and I am quickly drenched in sweat, only partly my own. I have had horrific journeys, but nothing can touch this. Even oncoming truck radiators promise deliverance of a sort.

In the Hammam al Nurreidin, I throw off my travelling clothes and leave them there with the outermost layer of my skin. I am steamed, washed, scraped, pummelled, and cracked. In the swaddle room, afternoon sun slants through the windows of the central dome, the little fountain tinkles its music into to air, and all is well in the world. A silk-trousered attendant knots my turban and sets a hot cup of tea in my hand. He lifts a corner of the turban and whispers "Nai'man" in my ear. The drama is replayed perfectly: every expectation is fulfilled. I buy a bottle of pure musk in the perfume souk and dab a little onto my fresh sweat. The donkey is gone.

Two voices in unison call the faithful to prayer tonight as I sit at my place below the Minaret of Jesus, guzzling coffee and chain-smoking *Gitanes.* Nostalgia bites. It is over—*chalas*. The maps are striped with Xs, the shelves stacked with memories, and the mysteries grubby with my fingerprints. It is over, and I am numbed. I light another *Gitane* and draw the raw smoke in to numb me more. I wonder where this journey led. With my last step set, it should be so clear, yet it is obscure, and I know that though I may wonder all this night, I shall see into not one second of it. Future and past are fantasies for the now, they serve no purpose but to enlighten the present, outside of which nothing exists—future and past are for fantasy, not for expectation and regret. But expectation and regret are too-ready excuses not to be present, and for all my wandering, I am stranded still on Ostrich Beach—stuck behind the parapet of the marble bridge, the silver stream flowing untasted beneath me.

In my pocket, my hand finds the LSD from Tel Aviv. I pull it from its wrap and think to swallow it right now under this enigmatic minaret. I am impatient to solve this puzzle, and the dot between my finger and thumb may be the missing piece. But my hand drops even as it reaches my mouth. I already know where to go. I need no cosmic signpost to show the way. I shall find the way myself. I let the gift fall to the cobbles, where it is beset by a giant cockroach. If Jesus does not stampede the faithful, beetles may have a messiah by morning.

I go to the night, but a walk through the souk, darkened yet full of life, brings me no closer to it. Voices call for my attention, but they call as if from a memory. I have no answer for them. I pass by Martyr's Square, and press my fingers into the jagged edge of the bomb crater, but feeling will not pass from it to me.

Chalas

I race to Amman. Nostalgia died of a sleepless night, and not even a final breakfast in the Hashim tempts me. I forgo the sub-marine bus ride, and buy a plane ticket directly to Tel Aviv, leaving in one hour. I hail a taxi. “Queen Noor Airport, please.”

“Aha, you go to Israel.”

“No, of course not. Why should I go to Israel?”

“Because all planes from Queen Noor Airport go to Israel.”

“Aha.”

He stops the taxi and scrutinises me in the rear-view mirror. “Change direction, or maybe change mind?”

Letter to Sinai

One year and one week later, you were born, and not long after, I solved the puzzle. The missing piece? Patience, Sinai. It comes.