



The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus

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Abstract: The novella is based on a Medieval legend whose narrative source is found in both Christian and Muslim religious texts. The legend and its evocation enacted by an Austrian woman and an American man combine Herbert Mason's scholarly knowledge of Near Eastern literatures and his literary retellings on the ancient theme of protest against death. The author is best known for his *Gilgamesh, A Verse Narrative*, a finalist for the National Book Award, and his *The Death of al-Hallaj*. The latter was drawn from his Bollingen Series XCVIII translation of Louis Massignon's four volume *The Passion of al-Hallaj*. The novella extends his profound grasp of ancient myth into the drama of a contemporary spiritual love story and pilgrimage. Copyrights reserved © 2013 Herbert W. Mason.

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Sources of the Seven Sleepers

The sources of the legend are the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus di Voragine (1230-1298) and the *Quran* in its chapter of the Cave. Its manifestations in Christian and Muslim Pardons and Pilgrimages are numerous in Europe and the Muslim world. Its account is of seven young Christian men who refused to worship Emperor Decius (re. 249-251) as self-proclaimed "god" and hid inside a cave in Ephesus to avoid death for their Christian worship. They slept, as the tale narrates, for 309 years and were awakened as witnesses of Resurrection. The legend, as it is ritualized in Christianity and Islam, is a text-based theme shared by both faiths. In the *Quran* account the seven are accompanied by their dog.

This novella is about the living of a legend by two friends, an Austrian woman and an American man,

who through their belief in the Medieval legend's spiritual power, weave a brief tale of spiritual love.

Foreword

Fiction is intended to embrace truth, not replace it. Matthew Albertson, when he was 25 and living as a young student in Paris, came upon a book of French mystical poetry. Perhaps the sailing experiences of his youth had aroused an unknown tendency toward mysticism. He was attracted to that book among all others displayed in a window on Rue de St. Sulpice, Paris 6. He was particularly seized by a French translation of an Arabic utterance by a Medieval poet known by his soubriquet as *The Reader of Hearts* which had to do with swimming, which Matthew transposed as having to do with sailing.

"I do not cease swimming (read *sailing*) in (read *on*) the seas of love, rising with the wave, then descending; now the wave sustains me, and then I sink beneath it; love bears me away to where there is no longer any shore."

Since his French was limited, and his Arabic at the time was nil, his rendition was far removed from the primary source. Still, he repeated his version over and over again as he walked with book in hand around the model sailboat pond in the Luxembourg Gardens.

What did it mean? Was it fiction? Was there a hidden truth of experience awaiting him within its distant utterance? He wanted to know.

"I do not cease sailing on the seas of love, rising with each swell, and then descending; now the wave sustains me, then I fall beneath it; my love bears me away to where there is no other shore."

Sailing, he thought, is the way into the great unknown, propelled by the wind, guided by the currents, sustained by the waves, armed with skills that carry one only so far, and then there is the rising and the falling, as one is drawn closer into the power of the unknown.

Helene and Malcius

Part One

Matthew Albertson and Helene Teile had known each other for two years, and had shared many facts needed for each to assume knowledge of the other. On July 26, 1966, however, something startling and beyond the realm of normal behavior occurred which shocked Matthew about his Austrian friend.

He appeared early in the morning at the house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she lived. In her defense his timing was unexpected. When no one came to the door, he let himself in, since the trusting owner of the house, Mrs. Louise Anderson, never locked her doors, and walked directly to Helene's room. He opened the door, and there standing in the middle of the room was Helene holding up before her body a most bizarre and archaic contraption.

She remained standing as she was without trying to conceal it from his stunned and frightened eyes.

"What are you doing?" he asked in alarm.

"I should ask you what you are doing here at seven-thirty in the morning. Weren't you fetching me at eight?"

"I was anxious to see you."

"Well yes, now you've seen me in my shame."

"What shame?"

"I don't mean my body, I mean my secret."

"What is that?"

"Dear Malcius (it was her name for him since the day they met), it's a hair shirt with fixed rods as stays. I wear it against my flesh, not every day, but on certain feast days when I honor our Lord's sacrifice and the sacrifice of His saints."

"But this isn't needed anymore for Christians, is it?"

"I never said I was a Christian. I'm a Catholic of the oldest pagan sort. I'm also not nice, as you know, like those Christians who think they have to be."

She proceeded to strap the contraption on her back and around in front, tightening its cords.

"Helene, I don't want you to punish yourself like this."

"It's my body, my vow to make on its behalf. If I didn't do this, it would punish me with all sorts of erroneous delights."

"Do you have to flatten yourself so much in front?"

"Especially in front. My breasts are happiest when I pay such special attention to them."

"Helene, Helene..."

"Malcius, dear Malcius. I thought you understood me."

He watched as she put a long sleeved shirt over the hair shirt and then walked across the room to her closet and withdrew a pair of blue linen slacks, which she stepped into and pulled up over her long legs. She then paused and seemed to him to be shivering, though it was hot in the room. It was late July under the full force of Cambridge's usual humidity for that time.

"Don't worry," she said. "The shaking stops when my torso gets used to pain as pleasure."

He could feel the raw bristles of the hair shirt on his own back and chest, and was conflicted feeling how close they had become and how horrified he was that she was inflicting herself in this or any way. As she was putting on her low heeled walking shoes, he wanted to rip the contraption off her body and hold her in his arms and soothe her obviously burning skin.

"I know what you are thinking," she said. "I know you care about me. But now we have to go to breakfast and begin the day as we had planned."

They left for their meeting with a fellow graduate student of Helene's, John Maalouf from Lebanon.

Their intention was to invite him to the dinner conversation or salon, so to say, Helene would hold

the next evening in Mrs. Anderson's house on Brattle Street. She had already invited four people, one of whom was an Arab Muslim, and she wanted to add an Arab Christian, who together with Mrs. Anderson, Matthew and herself would make a *sama'*, as it were, of eight. This was one in a series of such evenings that Helene created in her host family's house, based on her custom in Vienna of holding serious conversations among mostly civil, intelligent, and amenable people in the home.

John was expected to defend his dissertation at the end of the semester in time to receive a January 1967 degree. His intention was to leave shortly thereafter for Beirut. Helene had become acquainted with him in their graduate seminars that were conducted by certain prominent professors who shuttled back and forth between Cambridge and Washington advising and supporting as academic theorists the undeclared but expanding war in Southeast Asia. One of the masters, so to say, as they believed themselves to be, had suggested the development of concentration camps to relocate uncooperative Vietnamese populations. He spoke of these camps facetiously as occasions of "instant urbanization." Both Helene and John had found the seminars and masters morally objectionable and inhumanly detached respectively. Once when John spoke out on the subject of American development in Middle East countries as needing to begin by understanding the cultures and wishes of the countries involved, the same master remarked angrily "We haven't time to be humane." Such stance brought Helene and John together. In their conversations over coffees and in her case smokes (she was a chain smoker since her teens in Vienna), she discovered he was a Quaker, had attended one of the distinguished Friends Schools in Pennsylvania and graduated from Swarthmore College. He had spent two years on a Fulbright Fellowship in Lebanon prior to entering Harvard as a doctoral student. He was determined to play a part, even a small part, in the future economic and political development of the region of his birth. His dissertation was on the delicate representational balance of religious groups in Lebanon and its implications for the future of democracy in that country. Helene had shared with him her own personal story and dissertation subject of non-alignment and its positive implications for contemporary international politics. She had interviewed three celebrated practitioners—Nehru of India, Nasser of Egypt and Nkrumah of Ghana—who provided her with the substance of her

supporting argument. She and John became friends, though she recognized that he was personally shy and inclined to squirrel himself away in Widener Library and not to socialize.

John preceded them in the Brattle Tea and Pastry Shop where she had proposed they meet at 8:15 and have breakfast. He was sitting at a corner table sipping tea and reading a newspaper. She made the introductions and the two men shook hands, though John seemed surprised and uncomfortable that she hadn't come alone. Matthew, looking back and forth between them, wondered what their relationship had been. The tea and pastries were delicious, but the conversation was *fihima fihima*, so to say, or chitchat, to Matthew, who realized that he as the third one in had diminished the potential intimacy of the *rendez-vous*. When she came to the intended point of inviting John to her planned evening of conversation, he to her surprise and consternation asked who would be present. Though she considered his response uncharacteristically rude of him, she gave the list of persons expected. She stared, completely still, awaiting his answer. Upon supposed reflection, he said simply or not so simply, "No." She didn't press, finished her tea, as did the bewildered Matthew his, shook hands, and together with Matthew left John to his newspaper.

"What was that about?" Matthew asked, as they stood on the sidewalk momentarily uncertain of where to go next.

"He has the look of a martyr," she said.

Her response wasn't clarifying to him. He still felt the strain of the hair shirt and was amazed most of all at her apparent calm and self-control. "I want to get you back home to take that thing off your body."

"You are sweet, Malcius, but it is really nothing."

"Why did you put it on this day?"

"I told you, for the feast day."

"What feast day?"

"The feast of Saint Mary Magdalene and the Muslim-Christian Pardon in Brittany, which you attended six years ago."

"And this meeting with John Maalouf?"

"Everything fits in."

He didn't ask how. "Helene, I insist we go back to Mrs. Anderson's." He felt her pain and disappointment behind her sudden silence.

"All right, if you insist."

They walked quickly back to her room. She was breathing heavily. Her fingers became clumsy as she was struggling with her blouse. He handed her a dressing gown from her clothes closet. She was shivering.

"I won't let you do this again."

"She is especially joyous this day."

"Helene, you are suffering."

"Yes, Malcius."

"Could you lie on the bed? I'll pull the covers down."

"I need to stand. Malcius, you're the only one who has seen me in this state..."

"I don't understand why you do this to yourself."

"It's what I am. I'm happy when I can do what others can't do for someone suffering in exile."

"Your shivering is getting worse. Tell me what to do?"

"You do fine."

"Can I help you at all?"

"No."

There were tears in her eyes.

"I think I can lie down and close my eyes."

Late that afternoon Helene remembered that Mrs. Anderson would be returning from a long weekend at her cottage on Cape Cod. She would expect her Austrian resident, reliable companion, preparer of meals, sometime nurse, and sophisticated arranger of interesting dinner guests, to assist her upon her return.

She had allowed the morning to slip effortlessly into the afternoon without thinking of responsibilities.

She had sent him away and slowly regained her equilibrium. She showered, got dressed, and prepared for her hostess' return.

Mrs. Anderson's business executive son would be driving her home; and since he was suspicious of the Austrian woman's continuing and in his mind controlling presence in his mother's home, Helene had to be prepared for static in the air and be ready to present her most dignified but subservient side.

Mrs. Anderson was 78 years old, a widow with a substantial inheritance and a stately house on Cambridge's genteel Brattle Street near the Episcopal Divinity School, to which denomination she belonged. She gave money to a variety of charities and causes, and had been enticed by Helene and her foreign and graduate school friends to open her house for discussions with meals ranging on subjects from the Middle East Crisis, the War in Vietnam, the Continuation of McCarthyism in America, Human Rights Violations in China, Apartheid in South

Africa, to her own church's Asylum for conscientious objectors, among others. She tired easily and dozed often during the discussions but she never suggested to Helene that they stop. Both her son and daughter thought their mother was dotty and her guests were leftist subversives.

Now Helene had to make sure the house was tidy, a warm meal was prepared for the lady to be served soon after her return, and her son, who would leave a few minutes after he saw her safely in the house, was satisfied that her Austrian caretaker was planning nothing anarchical or bizarre for his mother to have to endure.

Walking away from Brattle Street, Matthew, for his part, was still unable to reconcile what Helene had done to herself with the person who had previously seemed so rational and in control. He wanted to soothe her body with some healing balm that would restore her to herself. Though they had known each other for two years, he now realized he had never truly understood her. Their background differences were perhaps irrelevant, but the fire she inflicted on her body remained incomprehensible.

His own digs were meager by contrast to hers. He had a small room with his own shower and a toilet down the hall shared by other residents of the boarding house on a side street off Brattle. The house was owned and lived in by an octogenarian landscape gardener who was a cousin of the poet Robert Frost. Would be young writers, graduate students, a few transient friends, and some persons unknown to Mr. Frost himself occupied the large semi-dilapidated colonial mansion set in the middle of a neglected garden of various trees, wandering bushes, and vines clinging and clawing at its wood and brick exteriors. A non-operating fountain and a masonry statue of a male nude added to the atmosphere of disorientation and disrepair.

Matthew could close his door, which like the other rooms had no lock on it, sit by its second floor window overlooking the garden, and write in his journal, listen to Bartok or Stravinsky on his record player, and not be too distracted each time someone mistook his door for the one to the bathroom. It was cheap, and Mr. Frost had always to be reminded of the rent, which some of the inhabitants failed to pay. Unlike Helene's situation there was no one he had to serve. He was a transient rent paying resident, back in Cambridge, but not for long. His plan after receiving his Master's degree in January, should he decide to stay that long, was to return to France and go to Morocco to meet someone

his College de France Professor Rochemont had known and whom he had referred to as "a genuine *shaykh*." It was a fanciful plan perhaps, but the kind that members of the professor's *equipe*, and perhaps Helene too, could understand. Besides, practically speaking, he was interested in deepening his knowledge of Arabic, on site, from his career standpoint as a translator. Suddenly his changing relationship with Helene made him realize he was no longer alone in Cambridge. Perhaps they would talk about implications and plans the next day before or after the evening dinner and conversation.

The guests began arriving at Mrs. Anderson's house at 6 o'clock.

Helene had placed a tray of non-alcoholic fruit drinks on the dining room sideboard, and the table itself was set for seven, including Mrs. Anderson at one end of the table, herself at the other, with Matthew at Mrs. Anderson's right, Cynthia Sternhagen, a fellow Political Science graduate student, on her left, and next to her Muhammad Jayusi, a visiting blind scholar from Lebanon whom Cynthia had brought to the house in her car. Across from them to the right of Matthew were Father Sean Burke, a Jesuit doctoral candidate in Philosophy and Assistant Chaplain at the Harvard Catholic Student Center, and to his right, at Helene's left was Salih al-Alawi, a member of the Moroccan Royal Family and a visiting scholar like Muhammad Jayusi at the Harvard Middle East Center.

When everyone was present and standing chatting in the living room, Matthew passed the tray of juices while Helene carried a tray of hors d'oeuvres including stuffed grape leaves, hummus, olives and toasted strips of pita bread.

She gauged the time for moving into the dining room by the ease of chatter and circulation in the living room. Muhammad drew the most attention from the Jesuit, Cynthia and Mrs. Anderson, while Matthew gravitated to the Moroccan prince. Helene moved freely about with her tray. At a lull when fruit juice glasses were empty and the hors d'oeuvres were nearly gone, she announced the dinner would be served. It was 6:45. She took Muhammad's left arm and guided him to his chair at the table, then she gestured to the others where she had arranged for each of them to sit. As they stood behind their assigned chairs and casual chatter resumed, she and Matthew withdrew into the kitchen. They reappeared shortly carrying large silver

platters of lamb, couscous, and steamed vegetables, and set them on the side table next to Mrs. Anderson's best china plates and two silver water pitchers.

Helene served Muhammad and Matthew served Mrs. Anderson, both of whom sat quietly while the other guests served themselves. After Matthew filled their crystal goblets with water, he served both Helene and himself their plates of food and sat down.

As they commenced to eat, Mrs. Anderson leaned to Matthew and whispered, "Shouldn't someone offer a toast?"

"Yes, of course," he said. "I'll make one." He raised his glass and said, "To all present on this happy occasion."

Muhammad found his glass and said in a loud voice, "In the Name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate, may He bless this house and all those present and absent."

"Here, here," the Moroccan prince said, to Matthew's and others' surprise, in crisp British English.

"And in Christ's name," Father Burke added quietly.

"Well, that should take care of it," Mrs. Anderson remarked. It was largely because of her presence that English, not Arabic, French, or German was the customary language of choice, on such occasions.

Helene and Matthew nodded to each other as everyone began to eat. It had become obvious to Mrs. Anderson that her virtually adopted Austrian housekeeper-hostess and her American companion-assistant were more than just good friends. Their ease with each other and almost daily activities together suggested to her aged but perceiving eyes more than friendship. It was most likely intimacy, which she enjoyed imagining and which she felt in part responsible for enabling. She found the guests diverse and unfamiliar in background, and sometimes even interesting, though her concentration waned following the dinners when they customarily withdrew to the living room and the conversation part commenced.

On this occasion, as usual, following dessert and coffee, the ladies and gentlemen found their ways by turn to the downstairs loo, and then settled down in apparent satisfaction on comfortable chairs and couches in the living room. Helene was astute at reading lapses and lulls as well as sensing when the time was right for easing into a current and hopefully controversial subject appropriate for such an assemblage of guests to discuss amicably.

She began by asking Muhammad what constituted the position in Islam toward suffering from a Shii

perspective. She knew he had recently published a book on the subject. She also knew that the Alawi family of Morocco was strictly Sunni, that the Jesuit was a missionary type whose learning was strict and whose mind was full of theory combined enthusiastically with inexperience. Also, from discussions in seminar situations she knew Cynthia considered herself an atheist. Helene anticipated some animating responses.

"It is very similar to your earliest Catholic belief, my dear lady." Muhammad began.

"Yes, please go on," Helene said.

"We live and share our passion with our beloved martyr Husayn ibn Ali, may God have mercy upon him. Our suffering has redemptive value. It is spiritually efficacious. In a sense, as the late Professor Henri Rochemont, a Catholic and Matthew's mentor, believed, it is substitutive by mystical transference. Some fanatics even try to force God's action through their extreme acts of self-immolation. God, however, does not call for forced or self-inflicted suffering, but only accepts suffering as testimony of His Compassion. Many people go to extremes. Excesses abound. There is suffering enough without seeking it."

"I would agree with that last statement," the Alawi prince retorted, "but suffering is not a substitute for prayers of the faithful nor a guarantee of Paradise."

"No, of course not," Muhammad said, turning his head in the direction of his challenger's voice. "But it shows by God's Compassion expressed through us for one another His cognizance of human beings' deepest desires for Him and not merely for themselves. It brings the Creator closer to his creation than some would have Him be."

"But never in union with His Being," the prince insisted.

"That is a point of mystery that only the greatest mystics can hope to fathom."

"Catholics," Helene said unhesitatingly, "believe that God shares our suffering fully through the suffering of His Only Son, Jesus Christ."

"The Prophet Jesus Christ," the prince corrected her.

"The Son of God," Muhammad said, "to our hostess and to Catholics, Orthodox and Church of England Christians."

"Yes, of course, to them indeed," the prince retrieved his educated prudence as a guest.

"No need to defend me," Helene said. "In many respects my fidelity is weak and indefensible, like that of my current civilization's."

There were snickers from Cynthia and the Jesuit but not from the others.

"Might we change the subject, Helene dear?" Mrs Anderson interjected. "I find that too much going on about suffering is stressful after such a delicious meal."

The company laughed gently in relief at the spontaneity of her intervention.

Father Burke, in a studentish gesture, raised his right forefinger to speak. "I agree with Mr. Alawi, sorry, that is, Dr. Alawi..."

"Only PhD, not a real Doctor," the prince said in an attempt at modesty or wit.

"Dr. Alawi argues for traditional doctrine and orthodoxy. I think he's right. We can meet in various venues such as this with good intentions, but we must have a firm sense of our own belief, theologically speaking, and not blur the differences between faiths out of mere emotion or ecumenical zeal."

"Indeed," the prince said.

"Ouch," Helene emitted.

"Further," Father Burke continued, "if I can just add a footnote to the subject of suffering. Suffering is an individual matter. There is no substitution. Our moral integrity requires us to bear our own suffering, not have others do it for us."

Helene remained silent but looked across the room to Matthew and shivered deliberately.

"Well," Muhammad said after a prolonged silence, "I think we can meet at any time anywhere as friends without needing first to construct walls around ourselves as if in battle gear before we meet the enemy, assuming he is one."

"I agree," Matthew said without elaborating.

"Matthew wants to visit Morocco," Helene interjected on her Malcius' behalf and to support him in changing the subject.

"Wonderful," the prince said. "I shall tell you how to find me. I can introduce you to some friends some evening at the Tour Hassan in Rabat. Have you a specific interest in visiting my country?"

"The mystic tradition, the Sufi orders," Matthew said shyly.

"Ah, there are a few left, I suppose. The few proponents are quite radical and decadent."

Mrs. Anderson had dozed off during the last remarks about suffering. It was after 9 o'clock. Helene rose to her feet.

"Louise, do you want me to get you your nightcap?" It was usually a bit of brandy, which helped her sleep.

"Yes, dear. That would be grand. Don't anyone get

up. This old lady's curfew has come."

"Thank you, Mrs. Anderson, for your hospitality," the prince led the others toward the appropriate cloture.

Muhammad held out his hand in her direction. She took it, grasped it, and said, "I'm always glad to see you." She believed at the moment that he was indeed familiar.

Everyone stood. The evening was ending on Mrs. Anderson's timetable. Helene herself looked tired, as Matthew could see.

Following the handshakes at the front door, the prince and Father Burke drove off together in the prince's black Mercedes. Cynthia grasped Muhammad's arm, and following Helene's and Matthew's embraces of the Shii scholar, they sped away in her blue Chevy coup.

Mrs. Anderson had already retired to her room. Helene said to Matthew, "Wait while I make sure she has everything she needs."

"I can help you with the clean up."

"No, I do that in the morning. Just wait. We can talk."

He disobeyed her order and carried the dessert dishes, coffee cups, and glasses out to the kitchen, scraping the leftovers into the garbage bin, rinsing all the plates off, and carefully putting them into the dishwasher, leaving the crystal glasses and fine silverware on towels to be dried by more careful hands. He nibbled at a leftover piece of baklava, and wished he had a drink of whisky or at least of Grand Marnier. He respected the Muslims' ban on any intoxicating drink or drug, but something was needed to loosen up the feeling of being straightjacketed by discussion.

When Helene returned, she came with a bottle of brandy in her hand.

"Thank you," he said.

"And two glasses, one for you, one for me. I love Muhammad, don't you?"

"Yes, he's a kindred person, not because of his belief, but his smile, his warmth. You shouldn't have told the prince about my wanting to go to Morocco."

"Why?"

"There are bad things that have happened there under King Hassan. I read in *Le Monde* about the disappearance of the opposition leader Mehdi Ben Barka. He was captured last year in a Paris café by two French policemen working for the king. They flew him to Morocco, where he died under torture and afterwards his body was taken to the Dar-el-Mokri torture center

in Casablanca and dissolved in the infamous acid-filled stainless steel tank. It's all come out. A CIA Colonel Martin recommended the procedure to his trainees in the kingdom, saying the Iranian Savak had used it with success. These are killing matters. And when the prince used the word "radical" I thought of the *shaykh* I want to meet."

"My God, I'm sorry, Malcius. You have scolded me twice now."

"How did you meet the prince?"

"In one of the seminars. He's a friend of one of the Washington advisers."

"Exactly."

"Do you think I'm naïve or stupid, dear?"

"I won't answer that. On principle I don't seek special contacts,"

"Follow me to my room."

"Isn't it late?"

"Yes. Follow me."

He followed her carrying the brandy bottle and the two snifters. She closed the door behind them.

He half filled the two glasses, and they sat on the bed sipping as she removed her blouse and showed her back.

"You see. I'm not quite as red. The little cross lines will be gone in a few days. I remembered your words, when Muhammad said we mustn't force our way to God." "There are deep lines and little cuts, still."

"I have shown myself to you and you alone. Just accept me as I am."

"Helene, I want you to promise me finally that you won't do this to yourself again."

"Friends don't ask each other to be different than they are, my Malcius."

Matthew slipped away an hour later after she had fallen asleep. She woke briefly hearing him opening and closing her bedroom door. She whispered "Malcius."

"Must you leave so soon?"

They were sitting in a booth across from each other in the German *Wursthaus* in Harvard Square, their favorite meeting place for lunch: Lager beers and liverwurst sandwiches with sauerkraut and pickles. They had begun their *rendez-vous* there two years before, thinking, as he at least did, that she would feel at home

there. She had tolerated his mistaking an Austrian for a German. They became used to the booths if not the food and often met there, especially each time he was feeling restless and complaining about academia.

"I need to meet actual living Muslim mystics, and see for myself what their way of life is today and if it is, as the prince said, "decadent", or a continuation of the old tradition."

"Malcius. I love your restraint and gentleness. I thought I wouldn't try to hold you back, but I can't help myself asking you to be careful. Friends worry about friends."

"Would you go with me?"

"I don't think you would want me with you, clinging to you like a silly girl."

"I do want you with me, Helene."

She drew her hands slowly back from across the table.

"We're in this together, you know."

"I'm trying to think clearly for us both," she said.

"Come with me. We can do everything together."

"You have to understand me now even more than before when you were shocked seeing me put on that shirt. I showed you for the first time my shame."

"What shame?"

"You have no idea what my life was like when I was 16, 17.... in post war Vienna."

"Helene, you don't need to confess anything to me. I know you as you are and as we are together now."

"Are you sure, my Malcius?"

"Yes. We can be as we have been with nothing else to distract us?"

"I have you with me always even if you go and I stay. You will be safer without me there, and you will come back to me and we will make new plans together, if that is God's will. You know I have a home that's mine, all mine, in Vienna. And you have your family home in Maryland."

"Those days for me are only in the past. I think we may go wandering together somewhere else."

"*Insha'llah.*"

They left the *Wursthaus* and walked through Brattle Square toward Mrs. Anderson's house. As they approached the house they heard voices inside.

"It's her bridge group day. We can't go inside. We can walk over to Longfellow Park, where we can do what...? How I would like to be outrageous."

Before making his flight arrangements to Paris he telephoned his closest friend there, Pierre LeCoste, and his only friend in Rabat, Samy Mohammed Ayachi, to make sure that they would be present to meet him and not away on their various assignments and invitations to speak as the busy journalist and prominent author respectively each was. They had been close friends in earlier years in Paris as members of Professor Rochemont's research *equipe*. They had shared their *maitre's* interest in Islamic history, religious philosophy and mysticism and been under his guidance and spell in varying degrees. After his death in 1962 they and others of the group of disciples, so to say, remained in touch though apart working in their native countries. Each was pleased to hear from their American colleague and would indeed be available to meet. It was an unusual continuing union of friends.

Upon arrival in the Paris Aerogare, he waited outside with his travel duffle in hand at the familiar bus stand. It had been an uneventful, crowded flight complete with drinks and a tray of mediocre microwave warmed food. Eventually at Place St. Michel in the 6th arrondissement he gazed across the Seine at Notre Dame, realized he was "home" again, caught his bearings in the crowd gathered near the fountain, and walked the narrow Rue St. Andre des Arts to the second cross street of Rue Git le Coeur. There at No. 14, his usual digs, the Residence des Arts, he embraced and asked his long time desk clerk friend, Olivier DuPont, if there was space for him. There was on the 3rd floor a large single with kitchenette and bath. He signed in and mounted the winding stairway, opened the door with the standard black handle key, and crashed on the bed.

In the afternoon he phoned Pierre LeCoste and fixed a time to meet for dinner at the Brasserie Balzar a few streets up the Boule Mich at the corner of Rue des Ecoles by the Sorbonne.

At 7:45 Pierre was already seated at a corner table with a *qir* in his hand when Matthew arrived. They embraced and the American waved to the busy waiter he knew from many such *rendez-vous* in years past who shortly brought him a *qir* and grasped his hands warmly.

"So, how are you and what has happily brought you back to us?" Pierre began the conversation.

"I'm escaping from academia."

"Good for you. But is that all?"

"You go right to the heart, don't you?"

"You look different, Matthew. You have an aura."

"I do?"

"You're on a mission."

"No, never. I carry nothing with me but curiosity."

"I don't believe you. I know the look. You and others told me I had that look when Audrey and I got together four years ago. You remember those days, just before our dear *maitre* died. You picked it up. You said, "You're in love. You've pulled away from us and all our actions." I said no, the demonstrations pulled away from me. The war ended. Le General returned *au pouvoir*. Henri Rochemont's great energy and spirit were spent on behalf of peace and reconciliation. Audrey and I discovered it wasn't the war that had brought us together. So, who is this woman in your life and why are you here, I assume, alone?"

"I'm alone."

"I was always half somewhere else and so was Audrey. Now she's pregnant and we're finally, definitively together."

"It's wonderful for you. Too scary to me."

"Why, is she pregnant?"

"No, of course not, she's a close, spiritual friend."

"Spiritual? Perhaps. Did you find a group back there like the one we had here with our spiritual *maitre*?"

"No, a little maybe. There was no Henri Rochemont to guide us, but she has been a hostess who held *sama'*, sort of, in the house where she lives. We became close friends and she collected various foreign visitors and graduate students, including Arabs, to discuss international issues."

"Who is she and what's her name?"

"She's an Austrian woman, Helene Teile. She's 6 feet tall, has long blond hair, deep blue eyes..."

"Is she snobbish or do I just associate such features with snobs?"

"She's self-assured. She has a doctorate in Archaeology from University of Vienna and is getting a second PhD in Political Science at Harvard."

"So, unlike you she likes academia. You're running away from both it and her."

"Do you think so?"

"I'm just responding to your aura. Maybe you want to be sure. You're on a testing mission. Among us all you were the one most hesitant at first to surrender to the spell of our *professeur*. You were suspicious of his power, but eventually you were the one who remained at his side when he became physically threatened. Remember the time he was attacked making a speech

for Abrahamic friendship between Christians, Jews, and Muslims? His head was bleeding. You were at his side and took some of the blows intended for him. I think you just take time with your "spiritual" attachments."

"Pierre, you are sounding like a cynic."

"Is she Catholic?"

"Very."

"You and I are Catholics, but not fanatic ones. Maybe you're reacting to that, too. You know, some of us wondered about you and women early on. Cecile, remember, was really attracted to you, but you acted indifferent. You were so tied to the professor. I was too in those troubled days, but I did notice Audrey now and then. Was Cecile too pushy? Maybe she was too short, now that you have a six footer as a girl friend."

"Pierre, let's order. I haven't had a good French meal in two years, not since the last time we sat together here in the Balzar."

After dinner they walked down the Boule Mich across the bridge and alongside Notre Dame to Ile de St. Louis and a favorite café near the Quai Bourbon. They sat outside under an awning and had Grand Marniers and enjoyed the haze of lights rising from the Bateaux Mouches.

"So, you're staying here a few days, then going to Morocco to find your Sufi *shaykh* and forget your Helene, who won't be forgetting you."

Matthew stared away at the Seine and the Paris he loved without answering. His friend was as fraternal as in earlier days but misperceiving about the girl friend.

"You take chances. Our professor knew that about you," he said. "He favored you, as you must know, because he saw himself in you but wanted to protect you against yourself. I hope Helene's spiritual love for you is strong enough to keep you safe."

"I'm going to phone Samy again after a few days here and ask him to help me."

"He's a celebrity now, you know. Some say he's become too close to the royal family. His radical days with us have given way to lofty recognition, thanks to Sartre's calling him the leading intellectual in the Arab world. Even the king can't resist showering him with praise."

"He'll be the same as before with me, I think."

"You still believe in the *equipe* and spiritual things, don't you?"

"Professor Rougemont gave me a taste for..."

"The forbidden, our colleague Cecile called it."

"Do you see her at all?"

"Not very often. You should give her a ring. As I

said, she had a thing for you once. Maybe she'd go off to Morocco with you. She's still single, a very pretty woman, as you may recall."

"We were all just pals. Father Charles, too. How is he?"

"Labib? He's okay. He's teaching Theology at the Institut Catholique. I rarely see him. Professor Rochemont considered him a priest to be trusted. He and Cecile are active together in the Palestinian cause."

"We were a good team," Matthew said. "I still feel at home here."

"You always will. You're an unusual American."

"What of the Dutchman and the woman from Berlin? I forget their names. Also, the Egyptian."

"The poet who wrote the play about Hallaj—he died after being in prison on charges of subversive actions against the state. That was almost two years ago. You must've heard."

"I didn't. I liked Abdullah very much." Matthew was shocked into a prolonged silence.

"He was poisoned in prison, then released to die at home: the favorite killing method in autocratic Arab states."

"But not the only one."

"I know. I suppose as an American you'll be safe as a visitor to Morocco."

Matthew didn't respond.

"Our Muslim friends know their countries are not always run by good people. Our dear professor believed in trust, in being a guest, in respecting the hospitality of the hosts."

"And we loved him, knowing he could sometimes be naïve."

"Is this trip about him or you?"

"I believe in his way as a guest."

"I think he looked upon you as the adopted son for the son he lost during World War II. We all thought that."

"This has been a grand evening, Pierre." He changed the subject abruptly. "Please give my greeting and warm wishes to Audrey and the child to come."

"I will, my friend. I'll walk you back to the Residence."

"No, you're a Marais, not a Left Bank, man. Let's say goodbye here."

"Be careful. No one is invincible. You have your Helene wanting you to return."

Pierre crossed the bridge to the Right Bank and disappeared into the nest of streets of the old Jewish quarter and the Marais.

Paris at night as viewed from the western tip of the Quai Bourbon was both home to him and a dreamlike play not exhausted by familiarity. The audience on their island seats were cast in the stage lights from the passing *bateaux mouches*. They were watched over by the municipal peaked towers on the Ile de la Cite as backdrops of history rising in lofty imitation of Babylonian citadels ruled once by mythological kings on the banks of the Tigris. The ancient kings had attempted to defy both nature and time by restoring the old protective ramparts in humanity's continuing war against death. It was a stage he had only seen surviving in Paris, though the imitation existed everywhere. Law and politics played their various rationalizing parts to protect the sacred citadel. The rest was in the viewer's eye to recognize in Rodin's phrase as "fugitive truth" and to create as art. Was all this just cold motionless meditation on an anchored island's stones that seemed to him still as pulsating as immediate life and almost credible enough to be believed as real?

He decided he wouldn't get in touch with Cecile, though he had liked her as a colleague, and had enjoyed numerous *demi-qarafs* of wine and *croques monsieurs* with her. Father Labib, the Dutchman whose name he couldn't remember and the German woman from Berlin who, in retrospect, was arrogant, busty and tall and more a counter to his type, and Abdullah, Samy and Pierre, altogether or in pairs, seemed now to be trying to regain their distance and separate equilibriums apart from their spell binding *Maitre*.

Helene, he imagined, might be a little surprised if he even kissed Cecile on either cheek, let alone journey with her to Morocco. He was alone; he was definitely traveling alone, guided by his own private reasons. He would remain in Paris for a few days, recovering his more familiar bearings and sense of himself, and then phone Samy again and tell him he had arrived in France.

Samy Mohammad Ayachi was pleased to hear Matthew's voice again. He said, "Of course, come on down. I'll meet you at Nouassir and drive you back to my house where we can catch up. Françoise will be happy to see you."

Samy, he remembered, was the only member of Professor Rochemont's *equipe* who was married. He was the eldest, too, the one with an established teaching and writing career. He and his wife must be in their fifties, Matthew thought. She was a Swiss woman with a professional career as an editor/publisher of classical and modern journals of Art. They spoke mostly French together, though their English was satisfactory; she spoke no Arabic. In Paris they had lived grandly European style; most probably, Matthew guessed, it would be the same in Rabat.

At Nouassir Airport he was struck by the change that a few years had made in his friend's appearance. His short curly hair was white; perhaps he had dyed it for years before; and he seemed hunched over behind the wheel of his elegant fast moving car, due to back problems acknowledged briefly. He wondered if his friend would notice any change in him. Apparently he didn't, as he spoke during the drive to his tree-lined suburb of Souissi only of himself and his latest book in progress. In any case, the reunion was convivial.

Francoise, on the other hand, held him tight in her embrace. "We are so happy to see you, Matthew. Let me take your duffle. I'll put it in your room."

"No, no," Matthew protested. "I checked in Paris about a Hotel Sheherazade here."

"We wouldn't think of it, would we Samy. Our son's away in Paris agonizing over his dissertation, so his room is empty – and it's yours."

"Yes," Samy said. "We decided instantly when you phoned from Cambridge."

Matthew sighed and entered their marvelously appointed home. It had never been his habit, as a traveler or even longtime resident unburdened by possessions he considered valuable, to notice other people's things, fineries, furnishings, leather bound books, vases, lamps, wall hangings, paintings, sculptures, and carpets, though all of that seemed present in abundance arranged sumptuously in a dazzling multicolored blur. When he was shown by Francoise their son's room, he saw a continuation of the same richness of choices with a large dazzling multi-colored and boldly designed carpet, "woven," she said, "by Touareg women in the Atlas Mountains. Make yourself comfortable," she gestured toward the large marble featured bathroom through a doorway in his room, "and then come down and we'll have drinks and good catch-up talk."

Samy had somehow acquired a taste for Irish whisky, especially 20 year old Bush Mills Malt. Francoise was drinking the more familiar *qir*, which

Matthew chose.

Conversation began instantaneously and pointedly without being consciously rude.

"So, my friend, why are you gracing us with your presence?"

"He means," Francoise interposed, "happily for us. Help yourself to the English hereng and crackers and the olives, as you like," she added.

"Hallaj," he said. "Hallaj in the minds and practices of the Sufis here. Our professor knew of one years ago, Shaykh Biladi. Would you know him, Samy?"

His host took a deep breath that ended with a look of distaste if not fear on his face. "I know of him. He's old. Let me say this much: he is tolerated by the king, but watched."

"In Cambridge I met at a soiree of a friend Dr. Salih al-Alawi, speaking of the king."

"He's an *ephebe*," Samy said, masking his distaste with Greek.

"By reputation here," Francoise interjected. "He's a play boy Maghribi style with English Public school pretensions. He always has a young boy or two around him."

"He's a nephew, not a son, just a would-be prince."

"He was very dogmatic in the salon conversation, very definite about the "decadence" of the Sufi orders here."

"He would know." Samy blurted sarcastically.

"We have to be prudent these days," Francoise said cryptically.

"Yes, always prudent ever since the Ben Barka case came to light," Samy said.

"Morocco is a beautiful country, rich in history, exotic in its old splendor and its scenery of desert, oases, olive groves, marabouts, and cultures, Berber, Arab, French colonial. But it also has its darker side, like most countries." Francoise savored both the spectrum and the texture of what her mind was extracting from the Moroccan reality.

"Be careful, Matthew," Samy leaned forward from his lush green couch. "Keep Hallaj to yourself, and Professor Rochemont too, before you meet Shaykh Biladi. Remember Hallaj was executed by the so-called orthodox, Caliph, Vizir, qadis, politicians all, against the support of him by the rioting populace of Baghdad. Take a warning from the would-be Alawai if not from us."

"It's wonderful to be with you both again," Matthew said, changing the subject.

"You seem energized, aglow," Francoise said surprisingly to him. "What is it? Something happened to you in America."

"No, not really. I have one close friend..."

"I knew it," she said, clapping her hands. "Who is she?"

"Helene."

"And?"

"Helene Teile."

"I know her! We met at a conference in Sweden of Archaeology professors and book and journal publishers. She's an amazing woman, a commanding presence, speaks many languages, was on digs in the Valley of the Kings. She must be six feet tall."

"Yes, Helene is, as you say, tall."

"We had dinner together, a few of us, and she and I and another woman took a sauna together. She's an amazon in figure, blond, clear white skin, intense blue eyes, very religious."

"Yes."

"I mean, very Catholic. And you fell in love with her."

"No, not exactly. We were studying Advanced Arabic in a small class; we got to talk after classes. I told her about the Seven Sleepers pilgrimage in Brittany. She told me about the Latin version of the legend and she called me Malcius. It's a spiritual friendship, just that."

"Ummm," Samy muttered.

"Our companion in the sauna, a German journalist from Hamburg said something sarcastic about Jesus Christ, and Dr. Teile, as she called herself formally, said boldly "I believe in the Immaculate Conception, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and the apostolic Roman Catholic Church." This Irena woman laughed and your Helene said with unflinching piety, "I believe in the intercession of saints and holy relics." She went on and on, finally wearing the poor woman down. It was marvelous." Francoise laughed recalling it. "I'm just surprised." She was momentarily incredulous of it being only spiritual. "Well, I suppose you know what you're doing. But she's quite a woman. I think she had some terrible experience under the Russians, from one or two things she said of her early life in Vienna. Well, amazing."

"Amazing that you knew her," Matthew said.

Samy remained silent, in a detached zone of his own writing in progress.

"Why are you here then, not in Cambridge with her?" Francoise asked her question again in a new franker light.

"Hallaj," he repeated.

"You know, Matthew," Samy reentered the conversation, "you must have realized in America that our dear Professor Rochemont was in some respects

quaint, idealistic, excessively religious, perhaps even a mystic, and almost obsessed in his devotion to and research of the teaching, life, and legacy of Hallaj in our Muslim world. I was enriched personally by knowing him and recognizing his sincere friendship with those of other faiths. But both he and his Hallaj are mostly forgotten today. Both, we must recognize, are dead. We move on. Religious and political realities change. Despite the old French saying, things do not remain the same. Hallaj was a risk taker. He pitted his personal love of God against the vast corruption of the various authorities of his time. You might imagine him as relevant to our times, as our professor did. But circumstances are different today. We have secular institutions, social services, developed infrastructures, emerging democratic parliaments, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, that make such testimonies as those of Professor Rochemont and Hallaj obsolete, however much they touched us personally once."

"You said I must be prudent."

"And what of your Helene," Francoise interjected quickly, sensing an argument rising to the surface; "wouldn't she want you to be safe so far away from her?"

Matthew suppressed his impulse to say: leave her out of this, remembering her own words in Cambridge of not wanting to be at all in his way.

"I imagine her concern for you, Matthew. May I represent her and appeal to you to be very careful here."

"Do what you think you must do, my friend," Samy said believing the discussion should be ended.

Matthew quoted a passage of one of Hallaj's ecstatic utterances: "*ra'aytu rabbi bi 'ayni qalbi fa qaltu min anta qala anta*. I speak to you with the eye of my heart and I ask who are You and He says you."

"Bala," Samy said.

"It is You who drive me mad with love, not my remembrance of You," Matthew translated another utterance for Francoise's ears.

"Yes, you are possessed, Matthew. God help you. It isn't by your studies, or even by Professor Rochemont, that you come here. As The Book says, No one can free us from God."

Francoise began to cry. She rose from her chair and disappeared through the adjacent dining room into a further room and closed its door. She had wanted to say, "And what of your Helene's or any woman's love. Isn't that powerful enough to free you from God?"

Later that evening, after a sumptuous meal of thin lamb slices cooked on spits, cous cous and egg plant, honey and nut desserts and brandy, Matthew asked Samy to help him reach Shaykh Biladi.

"He has his own *zawiya*, as he likes to call it, in the north countryside between Rabat and Meknes. I can get you a driver. It would not be appropriate for me to appear at his place."

When the hosts were alone together, Francoise said to her husband, "We can't let him do this."

"Our professor always worried that his "young American" friend had a predisposition for solitude, "even unto death." I don't know what we could do to stop him."

"Isn't there someone else than Shaykh Biladi he could meet, do his research with, and return home to his new love?"

"It isn't research he's interested in but truth—not even only about himself—but Truth itself."

"I feel sad," she said, "helpless. A woman who has loved him would want another woman to keep him safe in her absence."

"You are a romantic, my love, not a fatalist like me."

"I've made some calls, Matthew. It will take some time to make contact with Biladi. Let's spend today at least together in Rabat. I'll show you the university, the tomb of Mohammed V, the palace area; the main avenue's book stalls, shopping highlights, public baths, cafes... We can have lunch at Tour Hassan, a very smart, semi-private hotel, and afterwards we should have word back."

"Fine. Thanks, Samy."

"Francoise told me a little about your friend Helene. I'm afraid I was mentally elsewhere last night. She sounds, as she says, quite a woman."

It was Matthew's turn to tune out, anticipating hearing the word back.

The driver, Khalil Morawi, met them after lunch at the Tour Hassan in an older dust covered Mercedes sedan. After words with the driver, Samy embraced his American guest, cautioning him. "After meeting the *shaykh*, don't linger. Be careful."

They sped through narrow streets of the city into the outskirts and open country side. On a barren desert

hill stood a solitary stark white *marabout* tomb. Matthew asked Khalil whose tomb it was. "Shaykh Fulan," he said mockingly. His passenger assumed he meant either it was "nobody" of consequence or he didn't know and it was a stupid question. The two lapsed into silence.

At the gate of a walled cluster of small gray stone buildings, Khalil stopped the car. He didn't speak, but got out and opened the rear door, gesturing to his passenger to leave the car. They exchanged nods—no money was requested—and he drove off.

The apprehension and silence of Samy and Khalil seemed ridiculous now. It was just a place, a bunch of drab looking shed like buildings in the middle of sloping olive groves along side a dried up gullied stream. No one was guarding the gate. The silence wasn't eerie. 4 pm.

Francoise had insisted he leave his duffle at their house, thereby assuring his return. But Khalil had indicated nothing about the return.

Matthew waited at the gate, to all appearances he was unexpected and alone and possibly at the wrong place. He was composed, open to any eventuality, including waiting.

A tall man in a black robe opened the door of the nearest building about forty feet across a graveled courtyard inside the gate. He gestured to the visitor to push in the gate and enter.

Salaams were exchanged.

"You are English," the man said in British English.

"No, American."

"And you want to speak with Shaykh Abdullah," he said as a statement, not a question.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"No reason," Matthew said.

"Follow me."

Matthew followed the man into the building, down a white corridor whose walls were bare, stopping at the end before a double door, which the man opened into a small, enclosed garden. He pointed to a figure seated on a stone bench with his back turned. Then he withdrew, closing the doors behind him, and left Matthew to approach the allegedly dangerous *shaykh* on his own.

"I won't bite," the older, deeper voice responded in broken English without turning or rising to meet the curious visitor.

Matthew stood before the gray haired bearded *shaykh*, who smiled, and gestured for him to sit down beside him. His black robe was dusty. He looked anything but threatening, mostly poor and frail.

"Why have you come?"

"Do I need a reason?"

"No. Are you like my last *fata*, a Muslim by conversion or want to be?"

"Hallaj," Matthew blurted out.

"Ah, you are a disciple of my great friend Henri Rochemont, May God have mercy upon his soul."

"Yes, I knew him."

"Are you Catholic?"

"Yes."

"We spoke together on this very bench two, three times during his visits in the time of our late King, May God have mercy upon his soul. Professor Rochemont was a learned man. God urges us to seek knowledge and grow in understanding. He would quote the Gospel's In the beginning was the light, and I would speak of His Holy Name of Light, an-Nur. And we would say together like his great master Hallaj: 'If you are seized by the shadow, step out into the light of the heart's peace.' These are very dark times. Wars, the wickedness of our so-called leaders, the complicity of our religious authorities, the fearfulness and confusion of our people. What is your name?"

"Malcius," Matthew said.

"Ah yes, from Professor Rochemont's beloved Seven Sleepers. How he loved those friends of God who refused to pay homage to the Roman Emperor as god. *Wa kathalika ba'thna hum li yatasa'alu baynahum*. That questioning of one another, not war, is God's will for us. Our mutual friend was a true Christian in belief and a Sufi at heart."

"You believe that of him."

"Of you too, or you wouldn't dare visit me." He laughed over his certainty of such an unauthorized opinion. "Since you have come so far, stay a little while. You don't seem anxious or needing to be somewhere else."

"I'm not. I'm here with you."

They sat together for a few minutes without speaking, looking at the garden's varied flowers and small fountain bubbling upward in the center.

"Can you speak on Hallaj?" Matthew asked the older man, the no longer dangerous Shaykh Biladi.

"You know as much as I do, or more."

"But you are here, living the Sufi life."

"But Hallaj left his *shaykhs*, remember. He thought them too timid, too institutionalized, too frightened of worldly authorities, for his free mind and wandering spirit to bear. He had a taste for the forbidden, but no appetite for greed or hunger for power. He risked

solitude and yet became surrounded by disciples." He laughed heartily again. "But let's not talk of what he hated, but of what he loved. He loved our God, whom he called *Habibi* – what an affront to those pious experts who believe only in their own prayer, not in the One to whom they are praying. He was inseparable from his Beloved: 'I have no other self but Your Self.' And: 'only the state of madness permits me to proclaim You Holy.' Do you understand that last saying of his? Can any of us really understand that state? Not mental illness, as we think we know it from our modern psychologists, but sheer disengagement of our mind from our undisciplined and unperfected self to His Self Who loves us when we least expect and don't know why. 'Only the state of madness...'"

He trailed off in his awe at the thought. And then he said: "Of course, he loved others as he loved our God. When thinking of his friend Ibn Ata, he wrote a letter in which he said there is no separation between us, and thus he didn't need to send it, knowing it had been received. 'The way to union with God is through fraternal love,' Ibn Ata said. That's the friendship of the Friends of God, the *awliya'llah*. 'Your existence is my existence. Between the two of us, who is the lover?' How outrageous, scandalous, heretical and dangerous of him to be so bold, so mad, so fearless, so imprudent!" He laughed again. "It is You who drive me mad.' He received from the Beloved the gift of loving Him directly without needing the permission of the fearful *shaykhs* beforehand. So, he had to be killed, so say the old authorities on God and State. He was reckless, not irreverent. He threw off the Sufi robe and the *khirqah* itself and put on rags and patches and other masks, so to say, and disappeared: *talasha!* before he finally was made to disappear, after the public show on the gibbet. 'Your Spirit is my spirit, my spirit is Your Spirit.' 'It is enough for the lover to be alone with his Only One.' That is the solitude of love, the *infirad* of God and of your Hallaj."

He stopped talking and stared ahead at the enclosed garden and its seemingly carelessly arranged varieties of wildflowers and shrubs.

"And you, my *shaykh*," Matthew said, "Why are you considered dangerous?"

"Because Hallaj lives in me as he lived in Professor Rochemont and, my friend, in you or you wouldn't be here beside me with no fear in your face."

"And the authorities?"

"Let's not waste our time together speaking about such people."

At that moment Matthew feared for the *shaykh's*

own disappearance.

"How many Sufis are here in this *ribat*?" he asked.

"Just the two of us you have seen. Poor John, whom you saw, stayed behind, despite the threats, to keep me company. I hit a nerve in the King himself for allowing, if not dictating, the killing of several dissidents. We have much poverty here, and according to our faith kings and princes disobey the Law of God Himself when they misuse the public trust, ignore the poor, and violate the women who put their trust in them. His father, whom I knew well and respected, would never have given me cause for anger. I must ask you once again, why did you come?"

"To meet you. To hear you speak of Hallaj. No other reason."

"Then I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak again of him. My guardian, John, who came from England many years ago and stayed, thinks I am imprudent, if not completely mad. You must know that the kind of madness, yours and mine and dear Professor Rochemont's, brought our late king back from exile in Madagascar, and helped us gain our independence from France. Perhaps it's different in your country, where kingship can't become a right of power. You may have to argue on behalf of that truth when you are old like me. Let's hope not."

They sat again in silence. With the approach of dusk John returned and announced he had arranged for a driver to take their guest back to Rabat.

"Of course," the *shaykh* said, "he senses urgencies when I do not."

"I will stay with you," the young American said.

"You have attained *ikhlas wa sidq*, but no, neither Henri Rochemont nor I would allow it."

The visitor and the *shaykh* stood facing each other, then embraced. The *shaykh* placed his right hand on his heart and looked down at the ground, as John escorted the visitor out of the garden, down the white corridor, and out to the gate, where the driver and car were waiting.

Matthew remained silent for several minutes and then directed the driver named Ahmed to take him to Nouassir Airport. At the airport he phoned Samy and told him he would be catching the only plane leaving at such a late hour for Europe. It was a KLM plane stopping in Portugal and then flying on to Amsterdam. He had nothing of importance in his duffle and insisted

his friend not drive out at dusk with it.

"So, you will be seeing our colleague Frans Bildenburg."

It was the name he had forgotten. "Yes, thank you. And thank you both for the lovely dinner and evening."

"You're always welcome, Matthew. How did the meeting with Shaykh Biladi go?"

"Well."

"What did you talk about?"

"*Al-Haqq*, Truth."

"If he could keep his mouth shut about the king, he wouldn't be targeted as he is."

"He wouldn't be himself then."

"Be well."

"You, too."

In Holland, Matthew looked in the Amsterdam phone book and found the address and number of Frans Bildenburg. By good fortune Frans was home. It was late but not too late to receive the traveler. The Dutch member of the professor's *equipe* had a spare bed of sorts, a black horse hair couch that tilted downward on one end and was only 5 feet long, "but you are welcome to it," the bachelor colleague said. He gave Matthew the directions for a taxi driver to follow to his difficult to find flat and said there was a restaurant open late nearby where they could get something to eat. He said he hadn't eaten yet himself. It was 11 pm.

Reunited in his small book-filled barely furnished two-room flat they burst out laughing as Matthew tried out the slanting couch and slid onto the floor. Frans confessed that he kept only a little milk for tea in his half-size icebox, did sponge baths in his sink, and shared a toilet with four other renters down the hall, but he was happy to welcome his American colleague to "my home!"

"I left my duffle in Rabat," Matthew acknowledged.

"No matter, tomorrow I can lend you one of my button on collars so you'll look as if you've changed your shirt. Let's eat."

They laughed again at the stark all night diner's menu of spaghetti, French fries, hot dogs, bread and raisin cakes. "The beer is good."

"Good."

"So," Frans said at a pause in their eating, "Rabat. You saw Samy."

"Yes, I stayed a night with him and Françoise in their son's bedroom."

"Wow! grand opportunity, not a horse hair couch, I say humbly and with envy."

"It was elegant and they were very hostly."

"What took you there; in fact, what brings you here?"

"Hallaj."

"Ah yes, Our dear professor's spell is still upon you."

"I met a *shaykh*, Abdullah Biladi in his *zawiya* on the way to Meknes."

"A Hallajian?"

"Yes, and an outspoken critic of the king."

"You know of the Ben Barka case?"

"Yes. He knows the risk."

"Fantastic, isn't it, the way this story turns up over time. But you know, Matthew, Henri Rochemont was a mystic only in one part of himself. The other part, the most important, in my opinion, was the scholar. His reading of primary sources, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew was astounding. He contributed greatly to our wealth of humanistic learning. He brought to light a whole civilization, its many dimensions and flowerings, and its survival in the present and for the future. His studies of Hallaj were only part of his contribution to learning. He went overboard about Hallaj late in life, in my opinion, and it diminished his scientific credibility and personal standing in the academic community. Of course, we loved him, my friend, but we revered him because of his exceptional learning and the originality and brilliance of his mind."

"He was too much in love with God."

"Hallaj, yes."

"No, I mean, Henri Rochemont, through whom we first met Hallaj."

"Well, that needs critical reevaluation and some detachment on our parts to put it in proper perspective. Certainly the personal story of the professor and Hallaj, apart from his larger body of work, belongs to the Phenomenology of Religion along with the approaches of Baron Von Hügel, William James, etcetera, as Rochemont himself included with his hypotheses in the preface to his *magnum opus*."

"I suppose."

"You have taken something else from that *shaykh*, haven't you?"

"I have to learn how to live with it in the world where I am."

"Find a flat with a bigger couch, so I can visit you sometime, especially in America. I like it there. More room. Less jaded students than I teach here. I enjoyed

my brief visits to Boston and Chicago. I accept all invitations to speak on Phenomenology of Religion at your universities."

"I'll keep my eyes open. But you know, I'm not an academic. I'm just a 35 year old translator and still fledgling writer."

"That's better, fewer books to collect, maybe royalties to earn, comfortable furniture to buy. Maybe one day you could afford a wife, have children. I want to get married, but not to a Dutch girl, a foreigner, one who knows good food. Do you have any interest in women, Matthew?"

"I do."

"Wait for the pastor or priest to ask you for that response. Let's walk around a little pond nearby. There are swans floating in it. I like to see them gliding in the dark hours. We have our beautiful things here I will miss one day when my life turns about for the better."

It was KLM that took him back to Boston. Upon arrival the next day at Logan Airport he phoned Mrs. Anderson's house. There was no answer. He took the bus from the airport to North Station in the city, then took the T to Park Street and, staying underground, changed to the Cambridge line. In Harvard Square he realized he had brought nothing back to Helene as a gift. He walked to the Brattle Street house. There was no one there. He crossed the street into Longfellow Park, imagining her presence there. There were children playing ball and moms chatting together on a bench.

He left the park and crossed Memorial Drive and walked along the Charles River. He felt a terrible displacement walking under the Linden trees.

At dusk he returned to the Brattle Street house. There were lights on inside. He had a sense of foreboding, but no expectation of what had happened within the house during the nearly two weeks of his absence.

Inside he was greeted, so to say, by a man and a woman, middle aged, which is to say, in their fifties. They were unfamiliar to him, and he unknown to them.

"You are?" the man, attired in a navy pinstriped business suit, asked.

"Matthew Albertson, a friend of Helene...."

"Yes, well, our mother died a week ago. My sister and I are here this evening to look over our mother's things and to determine, as happens on such occasions, who wants what."

"I'm sorry to hear about your mother's death. I met her in this house several times."

"She was nearly 80," the woman interjected. "She died in her sleep."

"And Helene?"

"She's gone," the man said. "Our attorney thought it best she leave, since we have to negotiate the sale of the house."

"We always believed it was inappropriate," the woman said, "for our mother to have given so much of her house over to that Viennese witch and her strange assortment of friends, who came and went as they pleased." "It was very tiring for her towards the end," the man said less violently in word and tone. "She was very easily used by people she barely knew."

"She was so naïve."

The man, the woman, to Matthew, were ghoulish characters in dark suit and dark dress respectively, nameless, with interchangeable dead voices. He interrupted them emphatically, "Where is Helene?!"

"She took a room in Boston," the man said.

"We don't know where," the woman said. "We just wanted her to take her things and leave."

Hateful offspring for such a woman to have had, Matthew thought. "You must have some idea of where she might be." He was feeling increasingly desperate and contemptuous of civility.

"You might contact Harvard," the man said. "She was pursuing some sort of degree."

He at least had a suggestion, at which the woman groaned. Matthew didn't want to know their names or remember their appearances. They were dressed in black perfunctorily and exuded little evidence of grief, some anger, and no hint of natural affinity to the deceased.

He withdrew from the house and walked back toward Harvard Square. As he passed Hawthorne Street he hesitated, remembering that he hadn't left his own boarding house any note or mention of where he was going or if he intended to return. There were probably a few of his clothes left in his room, along with some books, records and record player, unless snatched by the other boarders.

He went to the house and walked up the three flights to the landlord Mr. Frost's room. It wasn't a scholar's or a poet's room but a habitat for flora of many species and their eclectic selector. Mr. Frost was leaning back with his eyes closed and a Red Sox cap on his head on a dilapidated green and yellow couch by a window.

"Mr. Frost," Matthew called loudly out to him.

His head jerked forward in response. "I'm here. What happened. Has the world come to an end?"

"No. It's Matthew, one of your roomers. I've been away."

"Are you back?"

"Yes."

"I don't remember you."

"In the second floor, the room with the shower."

"Is it working?"

"It was when I left."

"There's so much to fix. I don't know what I can do about it all."

"Did I get any messages?"

"From whom?"

"From a woman. Helene Teile."

"A curious name. Did she meet me?"

"You would remember her. She's very tall, blond, mid-thirties, Austrian..."

"There are so many messages and checks on the table somewhere here. Can you look around for it yourself? I don't think I can get up just yet."

Matthew felt his way through the plants and potted trees in the steamy room. On a dirt-covered potting table he found a pile of unopened mail and notes. Thumbing quickly through them he found an envelope "for Matthew Albertson." He tore it open. It was in her hand. "Mrs. Anderson is dead. I've been given the boot. Find me please in Boston at the Beacon Hotel on Walnut Street, Beacon Hill. Love, Helene."

"Will you be staying or leaving?" Mr. Frost asked. "Someone might be coming by looking for space."

"Leaving," he said. "Whoever comes can use what is left." He felt suddenly liberated.

He ran to Harvard Square and, rather than take the underground T, he hailed a taxi, and gave directions anxiously to Beacon Hotel wherever it might be.

Inside the small lobby he asked for Helene Teile's room.

"You mean Dr. Tiele," the desk clerk said.

"Yes, Dr. Tiele. Is she in?"

The clerk checked the key boxes behind him and said. "The key's not there. She must be in. Room 325, third floor, to the right of the stairs."

He ran up the stairs. The third floor corridor was narrow, needing paint, at the dreary end of which was 325.

He banged on the door and heard hurried footsteps inside. The door swung in, and he was suddenly in her presence.

"Malcius."

There was much to discuss, but nothing all at once.

The single room was filled with boxes of books, scrambled together personal possessions, clothes stuffed in the closet, nightgowns and underwear hanging on clothes pins from the shower curtain, shoes scattered about the floor, leaving little space for walking, and with the one chair draped with dresses, no place other than the bed to sit. It was nearly five years of accumulated stuff. At one point about 8 pm she broke down crying. When she regained her composure she said, "I am so happy that you're here."

"What happened?"

"I brought my essentials... my clothes, jewelry, make up, medications, my thesis, and..."

"I met the Anderson children."

"Real brutes, aren't they. Poor Louise. But she died peacefully in her sleep. I found her one morning. She had a heart condition. Her children wished it had happened sooner."

"How did you get here?"

"Cynthia and a friend of hers helped me pack and Muhammad suggested this place. He had stayed here once and said it was nice. He's a dear, but of course he's blind. They seem to tolerate Arabs, so why not an Austrian gypsy?"

"They just threw you out."

"Well yes, in a manner of speaking. But Louise had been very generous earlier in the year to me, perhaps anticipating what would happen after her death. She established an account for me in the Cambridge Savings Bank rather than leave me something in her will that might be contested by her children claiming she wasn't sound of mind. She was both sound and in her kind and frail way kindred to me and many others. Robert and Alice hate her for not bestowing all her wealth on them."

"We can't stay here of course," he said. "I have a little money each month from my father's trust. My sister is married and has three children and is independent, like me. I manage to live modestly, travel and write or not write. It gives me time, it could get us an apartment in Boston until we figure out what we want to do." He omitted mention of France.

"Figure things out? You think of us together now?"

"Spiritually, yes. You didn't bring that shirt with you, did you?"

"No, look for yourself. What do you see?"

She lay on her back, turned over, then sat up with

her blouse raised. "No cuts, no marks on my skin. I trusted that your disapproval was also God's. I'm still a sinner, and this doesn't mean I'm any less a Catholic, and I'm still not nice."

"Francoise, my friend Samy's wife, said she met you in Stockholm at a conference. She and another woman had a sauna with you."

"Possibly. I don't remember now."

"She said you were 'quite a woman'."

"That's because she and her little atheist friend stared at me as if I were a freak. I sensed the other wanted to fondle my tits, not just ridicule my faith. I haven't eaten in two days. Can we go out? There's a restaurant on Charles Street called *Le Bistro* that's not too bad."

Le Bistro was not quite French, but not a wannabe either, having its own random American twist of hamburgers capped with melted Vermont cheddar in hollowed out crusts of homemade garlic bread lined with spinach leaves, complemented by a pottery jug filled with a 1965 California *Cabernet*.

The checkered tablecloths, the wooden tables, and the basement brick together with the food provided in their own haphazard way the aura of *allegresse*.

"What shall we do?" he asked after a toast.

"Figure it out together," she said, wanting to postpone the discussion still further.

For some reason, she thought, he wants to get things all settled quickly.

He was still thinking of Frans and his desire to have enough money to get married and live the life of establishment, calm and mutual support like that found in the Ayachi home in Rabat.

If he was to both translate books from French and Arabic and write his own, there must be security and calm. For Helene, he suspected, there were further conversations to be hosted, an academic career to be pursued. He hadn't forgotten Shaykh Biladi, Professor Rochemont or Hallaj, about whom he was destined to write, but he was also, he thought, thinking about them both and what she most of all wanted to do.

"We need to find an apartment first," he said, "then finish the thesis, and afterwards move on."

"Must we tonight?"

He touched her cheek with his left hand gently.

"Okay, truth," she said. "My thesis is virtually done and has been for some time. Just the final typing

in the proper institutional form on the right paper and the defense before three mostly indifferent narcissistic professors. I'm not bound to Harvard or Boston. I own all by myself my family's large apartment in Vienna. There is ample space with studies for us each. I could become a lecturer in Political Science at my old university. The old boys there would relish all those murderous theories from the advisors to Johnson that expanded the vicious war in Vietnam. We can live there if you like."

"What would you most like?"

"To provide you with a place where you can complete your story of the Seven Sleepers."

"Truth?"

"Truth. Anywhere."

"You would feel at home there again, and with me?"

"Truth. There are times when a woman wants to go home, to the home she remembers, the home she knows."

"I suppose that's normal. I don't know much about women, yet."

"What was your mother like?"

"Well, she was 37 when I was born. My father was 14 years older than she. They had a baby boy who died a crib death, then a daughter, and finally me. My father died following an automobile accident when she was 44, my sister was 12 and I was 7. She was devastated, hospitalized for a month, and then returned to us. She was a strong woman with a positive outlook but a melancholy heart."

"You just made my point."

He didn't see the point of his talking about his family or of her drawing any singular conclusion. "How much money do we have together?" He wanted to put only the basic facts forward.

She anticipated the question, however, and after three glasses of Cabernet, she said, "Mrs. Anderson added periodically to my savings account, which now has \$45,000 in it."

"Wow!"

"There was \$50,000 in it, but I spent \$5,000 on various things like this year's tuition, and I helped out two of Muhammad's friends who were in tight straights here and then needed passages home to Syria."

"My trust gives me a little over \$3,000 a month, which is plenty for me to live on and travel as needed. Also, I do get paid for translations I agree to do."

"Truth. We can do this together, Malcius, we can, as friends."

The garcon, as he called himself, put a check on the table when it appeared to him they had concluded their meal and drinks.

She snatched it and put cash on the table. Then they walked out down Charles Street, crossed Storrow Drive by the overpass, and walked leisurely along the Charles River.

"The Danube is very beautiful too, you know," she remarked.

Part Two

"Malcius, treat this as a place, nothing more, where you can finish your work."

"That sounds so final, Helene."

"No, that's not my meaning. Rather it's a beginning, wherever it takes you. You're free, with no encumbrances or memories to hold you back, yours or mine."

"But this is where you were a child, where you grew up, in all these high-ceilinged rooms among historic collections of paintings and tapestries."

"And all this old stuffy furniture, yes; but pretend it's not real anymore. It's just the fittings of a place to hang our hats, if we wore hats."

"You're not haunted by anything here?"

"It's not about me as I was, but about us as we are. and above all, about Malcius who was awakened in the cave and walked out into Ephesus with the old coins that showed the world in turmoil and confusion that he once opposed idolatry to Decius, and lived again according to the will of God."

"And what is the will of God?" he asked.

"The story will tell. It's not an abstraction."

"But who to tell it?"

"You mustn't wonder why it fell to you to tell it."

"And then, there's the two of us."

"Another story for another time. Ours to live, that one to tell."

"Are you sure you're comfortable with us both living in a past unknown to me? I'm an intruder here."

"Shhh. You're my spiritual companion. That's enough to make this place unreal; I mean, just a backdrop. Let's not think about the furniture or drapes. They're pulled aside. The view's outside... the gardens and the river winding around us. This must be anywhere, not merely here. I'm the cook."

"We can *faire la commission* together."

"That's French, not German. No matter. You're

writing in English. It doesn't matter."

"You'll start your lectures in September..."

"And that's just to offset *la crise de biftek*."

"French, not German."

"Yes. I know your love of France. Can't we be playful and pretend?"

"I wonder if I can write such a story without a team of seven and a *maitre*: an *equipe*. I'm just an ordinary guy who was invited to an extra-ordinary banquet: an evening in a cave that lasted unbeknown to us 309 years of sleep."

"Of consciousness reordered and watched over by our God, whom we surrendered to, could not escape, and had no reason to fear. We felt no alarm in His presence, and we looked around at each other in our circle."

"In the earth. Have you inside you a conception of our life, as you imagined when I left to meet the *shaykh*?"

"You know I have. It may be too soon to leave my imagining for a reality I don't want to only imagine."

"Do we need a fantasy between ourselves to tell a story or be together here?"

"Perhaps not."

"There are two stories, the cave's and ours."

"Do you believe in both as I do?"

I believe that Hallaj and the *shaykh* knew it is God who drives one mad, not one's belief or remembrance of God."

"My belief compared to theirs is simple, physical, and perhaps earthly pagan; but I'm happy to be hopeful in my way."

"I'm here with you, not somewhere else."

"You didn't know when you went on that Seven Sleepers pilgrimage in Brittany that a stranger would one day give you a name. That's how we get our other names: from pilgrimage and strangers."

"What is yours?"

"That same Feast day's, Magdalena, though at my confirmation when I was 12, I chose the name Catherine, for Sainte Catherine of Siena."

"So I call you Magdalena, Madeleine, or Magdalen?"

"That would be a great honor to myself. She was the first to witness our Lord's resurrection."

"Can we just be, without these names? I'm used to solitude and silence, not names and words."

"You're doing well with both."

"Don't you have friends you want to see here?"

"You mean, you miss your solitude?"

"No, that's not what I mean."

"Yes, I have old friends, from the university. I don't want to enter that world again before I have to."

"You phoned one from the States about the job."

"Yes, Stefan Beurline. He's a kind of friend, supportive as much as a man can afford to be in a European university. Things are rather different for an academic woman here."

"You were self-assured when I met you in Cambridge."

"We were visitors, guests, transients, conversationalists, curiosities, which was our way to freedom. Here I'm an *Abseiter*, as Goethe felt he was, though it's my home. But I'll call him and others. I realize you're worried about me, wondering if I'm too much in a state of dreams?"

He suggested she invite Stefan to the apartment to meet him, to see her as she had become years after they had said goodbye. Stefan was not a former lover. Matthew had no suspicions of that. He wanted her to feel at home again, to be assured in person that she would be given a lectureship, as a woman, and would thus be distracted from her excesses of fantasy and legend. He was in love with her though not in the usual sense. He wanted her to create in her own home what had ended for her with Mrs. Anderson's death. This idea of his was from his need, not hers anymore. He wanted to recreate a salon of diverse minds to discuss and confront creatively the major problems of the world. In actuality he was less of a romantic than she. He knew he wasn't literally or even spiritually one of the sleepers in the cave. His moment had been realized with the targeted *shaykh*. He had been ready to die with him if the king's agents had arrived when they were together.

The Truth, separate from myth and legend, illusion, and spiritual presumption, was realized there fraternally, and then returned him to a more mundane time. It wasn't fiction. In any case, even fiction is meant to embrace truth, not replace it.

Now a circle of discussion was needed, desperately. What if Helene as a passionate person of extremes of self-affliction despairs?

For Matthew there had been a recovery of balance and detachment, followed by contact with members of his old *equipe*, on one of whose slanting horse hair couch in Amsterdam he had attempted to sleep after

some laughs about it, and afterwards he returned to Boston to find his *spiritual* friend had been cast away.

Now he was frightened. Could he live anywhere with a legendary story to tell and a woman who believes she is a witness of resurrection and new life? Is he a lover or a person adrift with love, not ordinary or comprehensible human love?

He was trying to assemble pieces of old ideas washed up on a mythic spiritual beach: create again a symposium, a *sama'*, an evening of conversation, struggling to begin again in a world which for both of them was in fact no longer the same.

He wanted to accelerate their consciousness of real not literary time. She parried that. He was caring, or was he? He was with her, but he needed to know how long their fantasy life was to be extended. He was panicking that he couldn't write any story that he only spiritually had to tell. Such writing was beyond his grasp of reality, extension, and balance. This was one story, two stories, three stories.... Was this his gift or someone else's imagination? He was a translator, not a storyteller, after all.

Old tales were plentiful, but was this his to tell? Now there was Helene's story too and they could barely speak of it.

"I have phoned Stefan. He will be here for tea. I have to go out and get some proper pastries and fresh berries in season, so he won't think I've lost not only my mind but also, most importantly, my touch. He is very Viennese—sophisticated, anecdotal, observant, critical, snobby, sponging, and garrulous beyond anyone you've ever met, apart from me. You continue writing. He'll arrive at 4:15. I'll be back well before he comes. I wouldn't leave you alone with him. He tells too much."

Matthew sat down at the grand leather inlaid desk in the study of her late father and made some notes on the legend of the Seven Sleepers and on Hallaj, seeing both the seven and the one as lovers of God and witnesses against Decius and tyrannies of any time and any place. Any suggestion of balance graspable between good and evil was beyond his notations. Both the sleepers and Hallaj surrendered all such matters to God.

The door chime rang. He looked at the grandfather clock standing by the double doors of the study. It was just past 3 pm. Helene must've forgotten her purse as well as her key. She has said she is losing her mind.

The chime persisted. He walked from the study across the oval foyer to the front door, opened it inward, and there stood presumably Stefan with another, younger man.

"Matthew, I believe," the taller one with the slightly graying hair said in British English.

"Yes. Stefan?" Matthew was startled and irritated at the early arrival of two, not one.

"Yes. I brought my friend Adelbert, whom Helene doesn't know but who is my friend as you are Helene's."

"I see," Matthew said without choosing to see. The younger, shorter blond haired man smiled and in English but with a heavy German accent attached to it said "Hello. Matthew."

"Come in. Helene was expecting you later for tea."

"Are we disturbing your work?"

"Come in. She's shopping."

"For her special pastries, I wager. How nice it is to have her back and opening the grand old apartment again to visitors. It will be like old times."

"Stefan told me that she held salons here on all sorts of serious questions. How exciting that it will all happen again." Adelbert's accent required Matthew's transmission of its gist. He subsided into silence at an unspoken shove from his elder.

"Well, I can see by you, Matthew, that there have been changes in her life, unexpected ones, I might add. There was no you, just dear Helie. You know her brother Wilhem and I were chums at university. He was 9 years her elder, which dates me thus. She was just a child. Always an impulsive little or not so little creature. You know the story of her trying to get onto the truck carrying Jews out of Vienna, circa 1939-40?"

"No, I don't."

"She was 8, perhaps 9. Wilhem and I were conscripted into the army, over their father's protests. He was of the old nobler sort, who hated Hitler and the National Socialist Movement. He couldn't accept the fact that we had no choice. When the Jews who hadn't fled to Spain and the Americas were rounded up with Helie's two best school friends among those on the trucks, she ran from this building and climbed up on the truck with them. The driver, an obedient Nazi of the worst sort, stopped the truck, went to the back, grabbed her and threw her off onto those very cobblestones you see through these windows. He sped off with Helie running after them. Wilhem and I saw it all, and when the truck passed from sight, we went and fetched her off the street and carried her screaming back into the house."

"I can believe that," Matthew said.

"It's true. She's head strong, prone to deep attachments as a little girl, defiant still as a grown woman. She got what in Oxford one would call 'a double first' in university, and argued her case brilliantly for a position in the Archaeology faculty, but to no avail. She was, though loath to admit it as a relevant fact, just a woman. She was included, however, as a member of the Austrian team in Egypt. Always a fighter. How good it is to have her home."

"She said you had helped her now to get a lectureship."

"Yes. It's not a tenured position. Things have not changed in the Academy that much here. Her doctoral studies in Political Science at Harvard intrigued them, given America's current ubiquity of power, shall we say."

"You're a professor of History, she told me."

"Yes, Greek and Roman as the background of our dear decadent Europe's Middle and Modern Ages. What is your field? She wasn't too explicit about that when she phoned."

"I'm not an academic. I'm a translator of French and Arabic non-fiction."

"Ah, Arabic, Helie's latest passion. I know nothing about the Arabs, except that they contributed to the transmission of Greek to European universities, and that the Jews hate and persecute them. How ironic, what?"

Matthew wondered if his side kick, whose name he had already forgotten, was present only as a prop or served some higher purpose yet to be revealed. He looked at his watch. It was 3:30. She would surely be back soon and change the mostly onerous atmosphere.

"Are you planning to marry our little Helie?"

"Are you her guardian or something?" Matthew was finding it hard to remain civil. He remembered Helene's standing claim of not being nice, and now he understood her training grounds.

"No, just that I have known her all of her life before she was 6 feet tall and a strong, determined and, to my detached perspective, a highly attractive woman."

He paused and stared at the newcomer intently. "You must understand that it's our nasty nature here to practice what we like to think is enlightened cynicism, since we know sincerity was killed in us and cannot be faked. I wish her all the best with you, and that's why I came early with my friend to make sure which way you leaned and might you in fact be honest in your intentions. The fact that you didn't answer my

impudent question showed the proper disdain that one who cares for her would show to someone like me."

"Stefan, are we staying for some reason to see the woman, or leaving for Andre's, as you promised?"

"Keep your mouth shut, you little ass hole." Stefan was speaking in German, but Matthew, whose German was minimalist, grasped a word or two and the gist of his sharp response.

The front door mercifully opened. Helene was back trailing her acquisitions behind her in her wheeled grocery satchel.

"You came early. I thought you would. Have you met? Of course you have. Who's your little blond friend?" She spoke in English.

"Helie dear, you're back with us and the house will come to life again with your dazzling conversations. He's my little blond friend, he's nobody." He said in English.

"Kind and compassionate as ever, Stefan. Nothing changes."

"Some things must remain the same."

They embraced as old friends, mystifying Adelbert, leaving Matthew indifferent.

"I was supposed to have tea and goodies already for your arrival when I would formally introduce my lover Matthew Albertson."

"We've met. Is he your lover? Do you mean by love, you are finally caught and ready to surrender? An *egoisme a deux*?"

"I mean whatever we make it to mean. But there won't be any old times. If I invited Frieda, Max, Albrecht, you and other knowns to join us, we would all sound like old ironists gloating over America's Vietnam. It would go round and round."

"And it should, if only as a kind of catharsis for those of us who will never have one. Old boy," he said addressing Matthew, "I'm sure you are a different kind of American or dear Helie wouldn't love you."

"You are right. I wouldn't. He prefers quiet to conversation. So we shall have teas and pastries but none of the old clever days when everyone returned from horror to vacant normalcy."

"Your appointment in Political Science is set, so you may be under some pressure to compromise with cleverness."

"We'll see. Thank you, in any case." She kissed him on his left cheek. As she started toward the kitchen, she asked "Did you tell Matthew about you and Wem being classmates?"

"Yes, with no extras, no embellishments."

"Could your friend help me in the kitchen?"

"Friend," Stefan said sarcastically, "help this lovely creature of the opposite sex with the tea and pastries. Did you get some berries?" he called out after her.

"Yes," she shouted back as a cowed Adelbert followed her out of the living room.

"Not quite like old times," Stefan said drawing his brocaded upholstered chair closer to Matthew's. "We tease. Pay no attention. No one wants those old days back. We envied her for her Fulbright that got her away. She was our star whom our academic firmament failed to recognize. Of course, Wilhem and I and all of us loved her, but she always lived on an edge where we couldn't join her due to our fear of heights. Do you understand me, Matthew?"

He stared intently at the American stranger, being suddenly serious.

"I wanted to come early to find out if you truly understand her and intend to keep faith with her no matter what may ensue. She's everything good that once belonged to us who were mere shadows of an ugly past surrounding her that cost her dearly. You do love her, don't you?"

"I do."

"Keep that for the priest and beware of pardoners, if you recall your Chaucer."

"What about her brother 'Wem'? Is he...?"

"She must tell you. I should not. It's not a happy outcome from any angle. Back to you, Matthew. How did you meet or, rather, what kind of experience had you that made her comprehensible?"

Matthew stared at his seemingly unmasked adversary, wondering if there was indeed anything to share with such a person. Suddenly he abandoned his usual caution and quiet.

"One day in October, the 19th to be specific, 1961, just 5 years ago, in Paris, French police shot and killed several immigrant Algerian workers, not FLN terrorists or soldiers, and threw their bodies in the Seine. My professor, Henri Rochemont of the College de France, assembled us from his *equipe* and we attempted to retrieve their bodies to give them proper burial according to the Muslim rite. During our attempt we were charged by the police and mocked by crowds along the bank."

"What part of Paris? I'm trying to visualize just where..."

"East of the Jardin des Plantes."

"I know it. My God, what happened after that?"

"One of the gendarmes pushed the professor off

his feet with the butt of his automatic rifle. I and an Egyptian member of our *equipe* tried first out of instinct to push the gendarme back. The professor, who had been a battalion commander in World War I, shouted at us to stop. *Non-violante*, he insisted. I pulled him to his feet up off the muddy bank, and then I was pushed from behind by the gendarme down the bank into the water. He hit Abdullah, and called him *un chien arabe*. Two of our group, both women, interceded and the gendarme cursed them as *putaines*, but backed off as one senior policemen in civilian clothes waved the gendarmes back."

"Did you get the bodies out?"

"No, we failed. The next day in *Le Monde*, front page, there was a piece quoting Professor Rochemont as raising *le cri d'Antigone*. He believed it was the only witness possible in 'that fratricidal war'."

"Incredible story, unforgettable experience for you and your friends. Were you injured during the ordeal?"

"Just wet and some bruises on my shoulders and back."

"And the professor?"

"He was 78, defiant, and spent by all his actions against the war. He died on October 31, 1962."

"You are a match for Helie. I understand. You both are mad, but you are quietly so; reserved, outwardly calm. You tell your story *sotto voce*. One might say you lack flamboyance, unlike Helie, who has an abundance of it. She needs your tone, and your sobriety."

Matthew remained silent as Helene and Adelbert returned carrying the tea and crustless cucumber and feta sandwiches and pastry trays.

"What have you been telling Matthew about me?"

"Nothing bad, mostly making sure he was suitable for you, my dear. He appears to be so."

"Therefore I have your consent."

"To do what?"

"All of what you have no tendency to do yourself."

"You are a bigot after all. Adelbert, she wants you to pour, being the youngest. Hop to it."

"She doesn't want Adelbert to pour," Helene snapped. "It is a woman's role in this instance. I am the one without a penis and testicles here."

"Shocking revelation!" Stefan rejoined. "Help in some way then, Adelbert, for you do have, when last I looked, facsimiles of both."

Matthew remained silent, though he observed

Adelbert trying and failing to smile at what he was supposed to take as a tweak not as a sadistic entitlement.

"So, to return to seriousness, my dear, will you have none of your famous soirees for us?"

"Matthew and I have much to discuss."

"Are you wanting for money. I could divvy up and so could several of your old friends."

"We have money, both of us."

"Ah, I'll miss the social aspect of those splendid occasions. Perhaps the same discussions did go on and on until everybody had had the chance to say the same thing; but one enjoyed the moments of conviviality seduced by your tasty bits even if we failed to abide by the rule that everyone invited must avoid saying the obvious."

"Stefan, those soirees were designed for those who could only be clever, never thoughtful," she said, conclusively, she hoped.

"Well, the clever can at least provoke when the sincere imagine only they are deep."

"It has been grand to see you, Helie, and to meet you Matthew. You may think I'm scandalous, but I'm only doting on someone for whom I have, trust me, deep affection."

There was the customary embrace of older family friend to taller former child, handshake with her new lover Matthew, and cordial recognition in return by both to the latest pretty youth, Adelbert.

The door was shut after them, gently, not loudly. "It was once my world," she said simply. "Poor Adelbert. There is always abuse from one who finds his lover is nothing more than beautiful."

"Apart from that abuse, which I didn't like in him, I think Stefan was sincere in caring for you and concern about who I was."

"Sincerity comes hard for those in this circle. In his case, there is so much self-hatred, not from being homosexual, but from the war and the part he once played in it, even as a junior officer in Hitler's army. He can't forgive himself for having served evil, albeit in a minor role and without, as he used to be proud to say, distinction. My brother was both more fragile than Stefan and more hesitant to serve. As a result he was crushed by being forced to act, then captured and carried off as a prisoner of war to a labor camp in Russia."

"You've never told me: is he alive or dead?"

"He's alive but in a hospital, a psychiatric unit, here in Vienna. He remembers nothing. He sits, he stands, he's taken out into a garden for walks with an orderly. He recognizes nothing and no one. We thought he had died in Siberia, but then there was an article in one of our newspapers about Austria's detainees in Russian prison camps. And though he was emaciated we recognized him in a picture of a group of prisoners. It took a year of negotiation by our parents, but finally he was found, brought home, but not home, to a hospital, where he has been for the last 12 years."

"And he didn't know you when he returned."

"No."

"Does Stefan visit him?"

"I don't think so. Did he speak of him?"

"Of Wem, yes, but said you should explain."

"As I told you, what is left of us as a family is here in this old apartment, now mine alone."

"I'm sorry. I would like to go with you to see him if you want to go."

She said nothing, but put her arms around him and held him tight.

Baumgartner Höhe was on the periphery of Vienna and was thus a taxi ride of over 30 minutes from the apartment through a series of traffic jams in the busy hour of 6 pm. Both passengers seemed calm to each other as they held hands and stared out of opposite windows at the urban sites of buildings, parks, pedestrians and stop lights, with glimpses of the Danube. Though some of the 4 and 5 storey buildings were similar to those in Paris, it was a foreign city to Matthew and one familiar but barely noticed now to the more resigned and sad Helene.

They were doing this, not to please her, but for her, according to Matthew's understanding of the story. In any case, they walked into the gray Psychiatric Hospital building through iron gates and a large interior garden to a locked unit, where she pushed a buzzer beside double doors and waited. An attendant answered the bell and opened the doors to allow them to enter.

The walk was mechanistic, perfunctory, institutional down a long light green corridor to a large room where Wilhelm was standing by a window looking out. Many people were in the room, some sitting on chairs, some standing, others walking about speaking to someone.

"He's very tall," Matthew said.

"Height is what we learn to live with, not what we choose." Helene remarked colorlessly. "He was less bent over once. He was 6'6." Our parents were both tall. He was the giant among us, I the freak, as a girl."

"Does he know you at all?"

"He remembers only a girl of 8."

They walked across the room and stood beside her brother.

She spoke his name. He didn't turn around. He was looking at a garden that was in view through the window and beyond that in the distance at mountains. To Matthew it was an awesome view, a scene from a child's book of old world fairy tales. Helene grasped her brother's left arm. He stood straight up in response, then turned around. He resembled her strong aristocratic features and bearing, though his hair was gray, his face thinned and his blue eyes were unresponsive.

"Wem," she whispered.

He nodded without speaking. Then he turned around to face the window and the fairy world beyond.

"He is 44 years old and looks 60," she said. "It broke our mother's heart to see him when he was finally released to us. We couldn't manage his care in the apartment. He needed everything. He had lost everything."

"The Russians," Matthew said.

"The Germans who conscripted him. He wasn't a soldier. The war. The killing fields, as they're called now. And yes, the Russians, who tormented him when he couldn't work."

She was speaking as she was holding onto his arm with no response forthcoming.

Matthew felt no awkwardness standing in the large room, hearing arguments, mutterings, stomping of feet, and intermittent whinings behind them. But Wem's great stature and striking dignity resembling Helene's unnerved him and he held onto her free hand to steady himself. This might have been his own lost self, was his immediate thought, had he been drafted to serve in Korea, even at that war's end. He had been spared by the army's final physical exam when a childhood heart murmur was detected as sufficiently serious to reject him. Ever since then he had been taking risks, as if deliberately walking toward the edge of his own mortality, as a test. Wem's fate wasn't deliberate, unlike his secretly, but involuntary.

"He always used to lean forward to hear people better. He could curl himself up in an easy chair when lost in a book. He wanted to be smaller," she said when they were once again in a taxi heading home.

During the days that followed she visited the university to confirm the position that Stefan said he had arranged for her, and it was so. She met two of her old professors and one of her colleagues to be, all men. There was no woman in the Political Science faculty, and only one in Archaeology. She wasn't about to challenge the old order of things. The salary, though not figured equitably, was sufficient for the life she intended to lead with Matthew.

On his part, there was a telephone call to make to Maryland. He had been accustomed in his single frugal life to under spend his monthly income from inheritance, even to the point often of not cashing the checks that followed him wherever he lived. The Baltimore Trust & Savings Bank trust officer Mr. Hering was surprised he had settled in Vienna and informed him that there was a surplus of unspent interest monies totaling \$82,124.45. "Your monthly income check had risen from \$3,271.28 to \$4,176.69," he informed his client. "Vienna must be very interesting with all that history and music," he added.

Matthew spelled out the address where to send future checks "until further notice," excluding, he thought prudently, the larger surplus amount. Helene would know which bank in Vienna would be appropriate for opening a new account.

He and Helene were awaiting signs, always without knowing what to expect from their actions or inactions. They were not oblivious to practical concerns, but were not obsessed about them nor, he thought, about the question of permanence versus readiness to move.

What was he really thinking about Helene's state? She seemed uncomfortable in her home in Vienna, less free and controlling of her space than in Cambridge, where she had been a guest among guests serving a generous hostess. Their love had grown with mobility, freedom to change, and, he had to admit it, belief in fairy tales and legends and things meant to be seen as mysterious and not limited to time or space. She had been instantaneous in her reading of signs and was richly imagination prone. Here there hovered about her a spirit of guardedness and dread. It seemed eased only by his embracing her, which caused her to regain only a little of her smile that had reflected such an abundance of self-assurance elsewhere. He wondered if he was enough of a lover for her well-being in this atmosphere that was so lugubrious and musty to him.

Improvisation versus rational selection should be

two romantics' desire, he believed against his awareness of human failure. She sensed his mood dip. "I shall never become a cynic," she assured him.

"I'm not afraid of that for you."

"What is your fear then?"

"That the university job will answer your need forever."

"Maybe I'll turn it down. Maybe I'll even forget about my dissertation. Its point has been rendered 'historic only' by events, in any case."

Later that evening, sitting alone in her father's study, she opened her large sheath of papers for the first time since their arrival in Vienna. A few of the pages dated back 5 years when she had completed her interviews and was excited about her conclusions. Reading further through her analysis of more recent international events she realized the onlookers to history, including herself, had little to offer but cynicism. She was tired of the sound of her own shrill voice defending 'non-alignment' against the boys of war and acronyms and words (like KGB, CIA, SAVAK, MOSSAD, et al); tired of the whole thing. Her mind had been like a caged songbird and she had in fact flown free to something more mysterious and fruitful in conception, released by another bird, her Malcius, who was free to risk experience and imagination and knew of her being caged and rescued her by sharing his freedom.

Upon reviewing the work to its conclusion late that night, she realized she had lost all interest in it. She also knew it was completed as a work of research and decided to box it up and send it off to the Political Science department secretary at Harvard and never think about it again. She woke Matthew, who had gone to bed early, admitted to being tired from "certain conversations," and confessed what she had done and was going to do with "it."

"Will you have a copy made for yourself here?"

"No. It will be in the hands of the postal service and, if it arrives, in the hands of the academic gods."

"Now you are free."

"I was freed when I learned that the sleepers have awakened and come from their cave."

In the morning when they woke she complained of upper chest pains and an increasing rawness in her throat. I know, it is my smoking. It is worse here than in Cambridge."

"Do you need to see a doctor?"

"I'm just fighty, I suppose."

They got up and fixed breakfast together.

"Do you want to tell anybody else about us?"

"I don't know. Maybe, I might phone Albrecht. He's an old friend. He's Professor of Philosophy in Munich, He knew my parents in the old days. He spent the war at Oxford. It's just a thought. I don't know why."

"Phone him. Then we'll take a walk."

"Yes, I'm home. With a friend."

"A friend? I've heard he's more than that."

"You've been spying on me."

"You have many old friends, Helene. You are always newsworthy."

"He's my spiritual friend."

"Is this another fantasy? You've always been attracted to the fantastic."

"Since I was a child."

"Let's start over. I'll tell you what state I'm in: near retirement. I'm 64. Everyone has to go at 65. I can still think and have students who treat me as a challenging teacher. I'm gray haired, often irritable, and live with collective guilt and socialism. I hate both. I'm still a bachelor, never met a woman I fell in love with, except you, and you were only 10 then and you never caught up to me in years or in marital inclination. I have no tendency toward men. My sex life is with books, mostly fiction, like my life. I'm lonely at times, tending, I hope not, toward bitterness. Thank you for phoning. I lack interesting reality, which brings me back to you. Are you really in love, are you perhaps hoping to become pregnant, did you finish your work at Harvard, is it tolerable for you in the old apartment, are you still trying to find the spiritual source of all things, that is, somewhere other than in the realms of mere memory?"

She was tempted to extremes by Albrecht's deep voice and outrageous questioning: either to hang up or burst into tears or laughter. He was a kind of neo-Socratic tormentor with a Wildian twist acquired at Oxford. He wasn't a pansy like Stefan but was in fact far more dangerous and less sincere. If he wanted to he could tear her and all her academic achievements to ribbons with the least amount of fencing agility. He knew her like a parent and doubted she was more than a child.

Of course, she knew she shouldn't have been cowed by him into calling Matthew "a friend." In fact, why did she telephone him? Matthew insisted, thinking it would do her good to hear another old familiar voice. How

terrible it is to think that feeling good is good indeed, especially when the old familiar voice intimidates with a deeper sense of evil.

"Albrecht, I'm sorry that you are being forced to retire."

"It isn't a surprise, it just came on too suddenly."

It was an Albrechtian sentence, just shy of a cliché. It was the art of the Devil, she recognized in her old family friend: to show he's not afraid of the obvious in contrast to merely clever people who are terrified of being caught saying it.

She was always tempted to feed him further opportunity, being attracted to the Devil as much as being frightened of him. But she wasn't skillful enough in repartee to risk what might extend his interest to destroying her "fantasy."

Instead she just attempted to conclude by saying "I just wanted to let you know, personally, that I've come back to Vienna, have delivered my dissertation, and am here with my friend..."

He interrupted her, "I assume it's a man."

"Yes, you know I'm not a lesbian."

"I know nothing about you, my dear, except what I have fantasized for myself."

"When I was 10..."

"Bitter old men love only children, didn't you know?"

"Matthew is a man, and he's a writer of tales and legends."

"And of you."

"You think it's all about me?"

"Of course it is: you and your attraction to all forms of both creativity and self-destruction. Are you still wearing that ridiculous hair shirt?"

She didn't answer immediately.

"Don't you Catholics know that no amount of self-immolation will ever remove that immemorial spot that marks you out as human? Stop entertaining us non-believers by punishing yourself for naught."

"I've thrown it away. Matthew made me give it up."

"And spoiled our nasty entertainment. I hate him already. I must know more about him, especially what he imagines is his strength."

"You are as devilish as ever, aren't you?"

"I'm a professor of Philosophy soon to be forced by our current government to retire, as if the State will consider itself to be of good conscience by removing another of those who know that neither the examined nor the unexamined life is worth living."

"The double hemlock."

"Only in a Roman Catholic's mythologically prone mind."

"It's good to hear your voice," she said; "it's still the same. Why did you never come to the soirees I held before I left for Massachusetts?"

"I never wanted to see you growing older, conducting academic discussions, becoming anything less important than a whimsical, beautiful, instinctively heroic child."

Now she knew he had her where he wanted her — on the edge of praise, where he was at his best. It was time to hang up, which she did.

"Was it a good conversation?" Matthew asked.

They were on their promised celebratory walk.

She nodded.

"What is he like as a person?"

"He wanted to know the same about you."

"What did you tell him?"

"That you are a writer of tales and legends."

"I mean about us."

"I didn't need his approval."

"His what?"

"Nothing. I told him you made me give up my hair shirt."

"He knew about that?"

"It was rumored that I went to extremes in my religious life. My parents were worried. They found it in my closet. He was a close family friend."

"I hope he agreed with my insistence."

"Yes, he agreed and wanted to know more about you. Why are we talking about him? I've sent my thesis. The rotted tooth came out."

"The pain is gone."

"Yes, my metaphor for that long effort that had decayed."

"Let's walk, not talk."

"What do you think your strength is?" She spoke after a long silence.

"Strength?" He hadn't thought about that. Weakness, yes, frustration, isolation, indifference to collecting things like stuff for a home, fatigue from brooding at length sometimes on loss, etc. He sensed that the question came from the conversation with the mysterious Albrecht. It sounded uncharacteristic of

her in their relationship. He wouldn't ask her the same question. It was too detached, too analytical, clinical, cold and odd as they were just walking along through a public park in a state of relief and freedom, if from anything, from coldness. It was unspontaneous and separating. He suspected she had been thinking this all along, but in reverse. Academically speaking, he was weak, not strong in any area. She now had virtual claim to two PhDs and an appointment at a university in her hometown, so to speak — no, in reality. He had achieved nothing of comparable value. All she could say was "tales and legends." Suddenly they were celebrating her achievement and her eyes were open to the imbalance between them and the intellectual inappropriateness of their relationship.

Her question told him all of this and prevented him from answering. What he grasped as her true intent was: what have you attained thus far to equal my achievement in the eyes of my friends here? In brief, are you up to me? A devilish twist on an intimacy that included her unselfish support of his voyaging abroad to meet—Truth; a kindredness in spiritual madness and mutual folly. Inspired not calculated, with his "strength" being unmentioned, undiscovered, and in fact unknown. He wasn't afraid of death, and he didn't even know if this was a strength. In the middle of a Moroccan stretch of desert alone with a targeted *shaykh* he hadn't been asked the question.

What was she now talking about?

He wondered if their being together in her family home had somehow set her apart and in reverse of going forward together. She was divided now or uncertain. It was a test of him for her, an unexpected exile for him. The question itself made him search back in his memory, even on a simple ordinary walk through a carefully designed and maintained foreign park, to where he most belonged, where strength had been given him as a child, in far off Maryland on another river, not the renowned Danube, but the obscure but living Choptank. There where his mother sat on the shore, moaning, thinking she could hear her deceased husband calling her from far away on the other shore. That was his River Stix. The Charon of his childhood was the fisherman who cut his motor and drifted into their shore to sell his daily catch; then, after settling on his price, he left his big rockfish in his father's hands, and drifted back into the currents, started his outboard

motor with a manly pull, and headed down river and vanished in the ensuing night. When his father died, he believed the fisherman was bearing him away to his afterlife. Then years later, his Charon was bearing him across the river of death, which he had yet to cross. That's where his home was still, he was thinking. It was the same as it had been when he left the home, the state, and went northward to get an education and become what he soon knew Harvard would never give him. Whatever he was given, was given then on that earliest river, and it was refined by the simplest of griefs. To tell a story is not to be outspoken of one's strength, not to need to defend it, or answer on its behalf even to one's lover what it is.

On this walk he wondered for the first time since they came, what he was doing there.

For her part, there was surprise at his remaining silent. Had she said something offensive, embarrassing, inappropriate? Can spiritual friends ever say anything not appropriate?

For his part, the word "Truth" was surfacing. What are spiritual lovers? What is love? He did love her from the beginning, but could he have brought her to the Choptank? Would she have finished her thesis there? Would she support his story writing in a place so natural to him, so foreign to herself? The issue of place seemed serious, which hadn't been a problem before. Where now were they walking? Somewhere outside his thinking, which separated them from place and each other. We are living, he thought to himself, not on pins and needles, but on illusions of compatibility. I don't understand our situation at all.

She was silent now, remembering her phone conversation with Albrecht and wondering why it had so dislodged her from the life she thought they were living.

It was all wrong. I'm sorry. I never should have phoned him. He is an archetypal academic philosopher. He has no interest in ordinary life or basic questions: like, what do you think life is all about? Or, what is love? Are there different kinds of it? Does one's work involve one in doing things against one's conscience? Is war ever just? He is complex and thus is all complicated as a reflection of himself to the point where nothing can be done, and thus he is intellectually justified in doing nothing. He found Hitler's legacy complicated, thus he means it when he says he has accommodated his collective guilt.

Everything is accommodated. He is the perfect tenured academician. Not a great scholar, and he knows this for a fact; but he's good enough to be installed in the academy in our accommodated age. Why did I call and let him rile me so? I haven't changed. I want my life as it is now with Malcius. I want to conceive with him his story. I believe I was sent to him to do this one day. Does he understand? He seems so distant suddenly. We don't need to stay here. If we do, I'll always be grilled by old Vienna. It can only be temporary, a place to hang our hats until we know where we should be. I can be anywhere. Does Malcius know that or does he think I'm just a part of this past life I still grieve over having lost? I want us to be somewhere where we aren't inclined to seek the source of truth in memory that brought such loss.

"Shall we turn around?" she asked. "I don't even know the city anymore. I don't need to know. My love, I want us to be somewhere else. I know you'll think me fickle or unstable, but I know now I want us to find a new place together where we haven't been as a couple and create a home, not seek an old one that will end by separating us. Can we at least think where that might be? Have I upset you with this change of heart?"

"No. You've guessed what I was thinking but was afraid to say."

"Not a guess. There are signs everywhere. Nothing is guess work or by chance."

"Where do you suggest?"

Part Three

"When do you want to go?"

"Immediately."

"We have to arrange our monies first."

"You're being practical."

"We have to be. It's more expensive when we have no home."

"We have two sources of money. Let's not worry about that."

"Don't you want to see a doctor first about your cough?"

"No. There are doctors anywhere."

"Helene, you have somewhere in mind."

"I was there once as a student archaeologist. One starts with Greece and Rome. Ephesus, with its ruins of a temple to Diana, Artemis, its great Greek amphitheater with the superb open air acoustics, and on the other side of Mt. Celion the cave of the Seven Sleepers, and just a few kilometers away on another hillside the house of Mary where her Assumption occurred."

"We can't live there."

"In Turkey we can. In Izmir, ancient Smyrna, on the Aegean, Homer's birthplace, some say. You can write there. We can rent an apartment."

"And...?"

"There's an American consulate and base there with a hospital if I have to be seen."

"You've had this in mind all along."

"No, only now as we were walking and seeing nothing. We don't belong here together, you and I."

"How do we get there?"

"Plane, ship... We have to follow our story to its source."

"Our madness."

"The gift we share."

"Seriously, Helene, let's have a reevaluation. I'm mad, you're partly mad, and I blame myself for that."

"Presumption. You know me better than to claim that power. We can settle our affairs financially, close the apartment, let the university do without me at its Anglophilia sherry parties, and with plane tickets via Istanbul to Izmir, we'll see what awaits us."

"Planes, not cruise ship?"

"I get sea sick easily, and if I'm sick anyway, I'd rather it not be made worse by a slow moving ship."

"So, now we're going off on a whim?"

"To Izmir."

"To a place unknown."

"I need you, Malcius."

"And you don't need 'home'?"

"We'll make a home as we go along."

"You are, as your friends said, amazing."

"Is that all you know of me?"

The arrangements with Helene's bank for a letter of transfer if needed and purchase by both of Travelers Cheques was easy enough. Matthew insisted she write a letter to Harvard indicating she was leaving Vienna for research in Turkey. She would send a forwarding address to the Harvard department secretary when she knew it. The matter of the Vienna University appointment was handled as *sous entendu*, in the French mode, and left at that. Helene was indifferent to both. In Matthew's case, there was a long distance call to the Maryland bank and the same vague message was given: hold everything until further notice.

They then had to pack the necessities and minor luxuries in three suitcases, hers, which accommodated his things in one.

They purchased air flight tickets from a travel agent she knew: Vienna to Istanbul with a connecting flight to Izmir, second class.

October 31, 1966. They acquired warm clothes. His wardrobe had been scant. Shopping was the most difficult issue.

He purchased new jeans, a jacket, some shirts and underwear, and a wool overcoat by her insistence. Helene was more radical in her renunciation of all of her familiar professional academic suits and hostess dresses. She turned to pants and sweaters, plain blouses, still cotton underwear, with a few toiletry articles that were necessary, and some favorite jewelry, earrings, a family necklace with an emerald brooch which had personal meaning and preserved, as she intended, her femininity.

The flight to Istanbul was smooth and swift. The connecting flight through Turkey's autumnal lodos hurricane size winds, however, was terrifying. The plane was an old two engine number that required two attempts to get off the ground; and when it did, it shook violently for the entire flight. When it landed bumpily and slid sideways to a final halt, the passengers were covered in sweat, stopped screaming, and scrambled recklessly to get out of the machine.

With their suitcases collected on the tarp Helene and Matthew got into a taxi and headed for the Izmir Hilton. Their plan was unfolding chaotically and felt absurd. They didn't regain balance in a large expensive suite in the hotel. The bellhop and greeter in the lobby were dressed in long silk robes with puffed sleeves, big turban hats, and pointed slippers, representing bizarrely a Disney cartoon creation of the Arabian Nights. Angelic mockery was audible; tales and legends, indeed. The man bearing the suitcases also left a list of whiskies that could be sent up from the bar.

Though her cough had worsened, Helene shouted from the bathroom, "Maybe two big stiff ones."

"Irish?" Matthew asked.

"Yes, sir, Both Jameson and Bush Mills."

"You're kidding," Helene said as she emerged, her blond hair sweated and frizzed from the flight.

"No kidding, Mrs," the man said proudly.

She lay down on the double bed with her arm over her face.

Though the dinner meal, a quasi-French menu of delicacies, was good, the service by the waiters in

Disney livery was amusing, and the belly dancer was sumptuously persuasive in her thumping and jiggling. Helene and Matthew were anxious to move on as soon as possible. They inquired of the hotel manager if there was a realtor who could find them an apartment to rent, since they would be staying for an extended period of time. He made a phone call and within an hour they were sitting with the realtor across a table in the hotel bar.

They were seeking at least a two-room flat: living room, bedroom, kitchen, bath, overlooking the sea along the black and white tiled boardwalk. She remembered the exact location and the illusion of a waving boardwalk from her earlier archaeological period. "There are several possibilities," the flush cheeked enthusiastic realtor Tewfik Osman said. "In terms of Turkish currency to American dollars it's very cheap, at about \$120 a month." He was being squirrely, but the two travelers nodded in agreement.

The best one Mr. Osman offered at \$140 a month included a third room, a dining room, which was furnished more in the European style and included sheets and towels plus a man servant who would come once a week to clean and do the laundry in town. There were varieties of shops and khans nearby where all manner of fresh vegetables, fruits, fish and lamb, plus household goods and equipment could be purchased. "I recommend that one to you both, seeing as you are obviously people of good taste and expectations of quality."

It was late. They were tired, but Mr. Osman had the keys to that one on his person and insisted, "as it is a beautiful night, full moon, light breeze off the sea," and they set off. The Aegean glistened in the moonlight, playing seductively against their fatigue. The walk was about a quarter of a mile from the hotel along the shimmering boardwalk. In the end the apartment proved with its wide balcony and satisfactory non-Disney furnishing more than adequate for their needs. Matthew signed over on sight a month's worth of Travelers Cheques, the keys were handed over, and Mr. Osman accompanied them back to the hotel and invited them to join him for a deal closing drink on himself. Though they begged off, Helene asked if he knew a driver who could take them to Ephesus.

"I will arrange it tonight. My son-in-law is an excellent driver. When do you wish to go?"

"We'll settle in tomorrow," she said. "We need to get groceries. It's Tuesday. Could we go Thursday, dear?"

It was a question for Matthew, since she realized

she was appearing too officious, a characteristic she knew it was appropriate to suppress in a Muslim albeit secular country.

"Yes, of course." Matthew said taking her cue. "We'll settle in and go Thursday if it can be arranged."

"No problem. It will be done."

Her sense of the expected behavior of a proper woman there was arousing her own imagining and excitement of her new developing status.

"Good evening Mr. and Mrs. Albertson."

"Good evening, and thank you, Mr. Osman," Matthew responded for them both.

Wednesday they grocery shopped and unpacked their suitcases and set up house. Then after making lunch, they walked through Izmir's inner streets parallel to the sea. Afterwards she said she was tired and they returned to the apartment. She rested. He reviewed a translation he had been paid to do and had nearly completed in Cambridge of a French book on St. John of the Cross' *Dark Night* compared to Celine's *Voyage Au Bout de la Nuit*.

He was indeed a professional translator of works in French, but had set almost everything aside when he enrolled in advanced Arabic courses at Harvard and met Helene. He had de-professionalized himself, postponed completion of works he had been hired to do, and had allowed her in her seductive way to transform him into a writer of Tales and Legends. Of course, he was irresponsible to his publishers and perhaps, he occasionally thought, to himself, that is, to his ordinary sort of plodding and honing of his language skills and literary translation fluency. In other words, he set himself aside in awe and growing fondness of his 'friend'. Now they were indeed spiritual if not sexual partners. He had been tempted to leave his unfinished obligations behind, but didn't. Walking at night together with Mr. Osman on the black and white wavy boardwalk he wondered how they had come to be there. The idea of unfinished work and new responsibilities loomed.

Together with his deepening concern for Helene's health was the unwanted reminder of his heart condition, which he had been told by doctors in his teenage years was predetermined. His father had a similar condition, and his heart attack had nearly killed them all in the fatal car accident in his 57th year. Through school and college sports he participated by denial. Now he felt guilty not telling Helene that truth.

Perhaps he was challenging life itself, without ultimate regard for her. The mad practice of wearing a hair shirt had aroused his indignation and his love. Now it was too late to tell her. Izmir was a faraway place where they were given some time to settle, perhaps not to be entirely truthful. If not denial, it was for him the hope, the act of defiance, for both of them, which seemed to him a less weak word for living on borrowed time.

On Thursday, early, Mr. Osman's son-in-law, Farhat Sokulu, arrived at the apartment in his large comfortable Mercedes to take them north to Ephesus.

Farhat shared characteristics with his father-in-law: chattiness, readiness to do, claims that nothing is impossible, plus mention of some historical bits expected of a guide. "Turkey, though Muslim," he recounted, "is a regular, normal American like country, though it is old and rich in ruins – Greek, Trojan, Roman, Ottoman, and in visitors – Russian, German, American, and it is religiously tolerant, though religious officials, both Muslim and Christian, have to wear ordinary clothes like other people. We do have bars and houses of prostitution. We're a modern country. Ephesus," he shifted, "was a great Greek harbor and port once, now the sea has withdrawn since many centuries. It is a ruin preserved by the government and foreign monies..."

"Do you know where the cave of the seven sleepers is?" Helene asked him.

His response came after a few minutes of silent consideration.

"It's a religious shrine, a legend in *The Book*, not spoken about and not many people go there."

"Can you take us there first?"

"I'm not exactly sure where it is," he said.

"It's on the other side of Mt. Celion," she said.

"If we don't draw attention to ourselves," he said, "I think we can go there, but briefly. There are some restrictions on religious practices and superstitions."

"We understand," Matthew said. "We won't stay long. We just want to see it."

At noon Farhat parked his car about 50 meters from the site. Nervously looking about, scratching his head, clearly agitated, he watched the two tourists walk up the incline on to the side of the mountain which sheltered the mysterious, out of bounds, cave. There was no one else in sight.

The cave itself was large, wide, not enclosed within the mountain side, but open, like an indentation, barely

a cave at all. Helene and Malcius stood upright inside it, though there was almost no inside, given the centuries of erosion and the break up of the clay floor and the walls.

They both decided to relieve Farhat of his anxiety by not lingering, and they walked in silence back to the car. It was the supposed site, neglected or unnoticed, it seemed to them, of a sacred place. After all the seven young Christian men had been sealed inside the cave in the third century of the common era, and awakened 309 years later by various calculations, Christian and Islamic, Malcius had left his "comrades in faith, comrades in rejection of idolatry" over 1300 years ago. It was not known how long or in what way the cave was venerated as a Christian shrine or commemorated on Fridays in Quranic recitations of the tale's "obedience to the true God" theme. Matthew had recited to himself a brief passage from the *Surah al-Kahf*: "And we awoke them that they might question one another." Helene's silent commemoration also included Plato's cave.

They drove next to the ancient city itself, where Farhat was wholly relaxed and told them to wander about and take all the time they wanted. Behind the stage of the amphitheater a man was selling candy bars, coca colas and souvenir key chains. Matthew walked up the stone steps to the rim of the theatre seating while Helene stood on the stage calling quietly his name. He could hear her clearly and responded "Helene!" She might have been Homer's Helene or, better still, Sophocles's Antigone, he imagined, but she was only pointing out to him the acoustics.

They walked the stone streets, past the brothels and market stalls of antiquity, in the city where St. Paul fought the beast.

They bought Farhat and themselves cokes and Mars Bars but passed on the trinkets, and then drove off across a long valley to another, smaller mountain where the House of Mary was situated.

Farhat told them that this was a pilgrimage site where many people gathered without fear.

He introduced them to the site's caretaker, a Monsieur Gaveau, who they soon discovered behind or within his rough work clothes was a French priest, Father Jean-Pierre, who had been caretaker for 15 years.

"You know," the priest said, "there is a Muslim pilgrimage every Annunciation Feast Day, not the grand Assumption Day which it represents and where every August 15 a small number of Christians appear. Last year thousands of Muslims appeared on the hillside at the Annunciation venerating the mother Maryam of

Jesus. Yes, Muslims. It was quite a sight. No trinkets, no drinks, so don't tell any of your American friends about it or all that stuff will follow." He was adamant and perhaps a little strung out.

He sat with them in the small stone house itself in silence. Farhat sat alone on a chair at the rear prudently but not anxiously or impatiently. When they all stood together outside looking across the valley toward the village of Selchuk, the priest blessed the visiting couple and their guide. Matthew said, "We are not actually married."

Helene hadn't expected this admission by Matthew.

"You are married here in the eyes of God," the old priest said with a burst of enthusiasm.

On the long drive back to Izmir, Helene slept leaning against her Malcius, who took in the scenery forcing himself to stay awake. She had become progressively less and less of "a Viennese witch", less and less capable of witchcraft, anger or mysterious insights, and more and more tired and unconcerned about plans. She complained of "chest problems." She wanted only to rest, not to think. He felt relieved taking the priest's words on faith. without needing to prove soundness of mind, theirs or the priest's.

Three things became clear to him this day: one, they didn't need to literally be at the cave to tell the story; two, by being there they saw themselves against the erosions of time in a different light; and three, she was Helene, he was Matthew, nothing more, nothing less, Theirs was not a literary, spiritual or historical journey. They had perhaps expected more, ever since she called him Malcius, It was a simple, ordinary awakening from what had been based on illusion.

"Helene, what did he mean by "in the eyes of God"?"

"That we're married in spirit."

"He's an old man. He's been in solitude a long time."

"You think he's dotty?"

"Devoted."

"Human."

"What does "in spirit" mean to you?"

"I can't reduce it to a rational explanation."

"Would you want us to be married, literally?"

"We've been in spirit married. I'm happy with that."

"We've been friends. You may see me as a brother

whom you called Malcius. As Matthew I'm not a lover in flesh. Do you need both? Am I two people to you?"

"Am I one person to you?"

"You are Helene. I'm just one. You imagined me as Malcius and Matthew came along."

"What are you saying?"

"Malcius is a spirit to you but to me you are both a body and a soul. Do you imagine ours is only a spiritual union?"

"I don't imagine, I feel."

"Malcius is resurrected over and over again. Matthew continues to be mortal. He has less faith than you have that when he goes to sleep, he'll wake again."

"I see the immortal soul in you, Matthew. We sleep beside each other. I'm not afraid of what we may or may not become."

"I think we should visit the consul or the military compound, and we should see a doctor about your coughing and your chest pains."

"It isn't necessary."

"I'm serious. Then we will know what we must do."

"I love you, Matthew. You should know that. I'm not afraid of finding out the truth."

"Will you go?"

"Yes, I will, for you, with you, but I don't promise to behave like a normal woman. I'm still the witch you thought you knew."

"Helene, what are we really doing here?"

"Being together, not conflicted by other considerations or doubts. Roses; the Golden Legend says the sleepers turned to roses leaning to the light."

"Perhaps I know the seven and have known them as members of a team bound by a single spirit seen in a smile, a gaze at a fountain in the middle of an unrestricted garden, a laugh at a horse hair couch, a cry for the rite of proper burial, a yawn of fatigue, red crosses on white breasts, abandon of a duffle, all willing to trust in sleep. What are the visions they have?"

"M. sees flashes of blue sky against yellow cotton bolts waving in the wind, as he begins to sleep. He feels lighter, effortless in motion, as he goes without hesitation among withdrawing shadows. A green finch is carrying something tiny in its beak upward toward a throne of light. He is both reposing and absorbed by what he thinks he sees. He smiles."

"Another M. agreed to join the others but he

made one condition: that they were absolutely sure that Decius was demanding they all acknowledge him as their god, leaving them thus no alternative but to deny him. Affirming the One True God also required authentication, otherwise entering a cave was only an act of fear. Once he began to sleep he sensed the disappearance of himself in an expanding space He burst out laughing but heard no sound from himself.

"Another M. heard cries of pain and then heard nothing. He saw fire, as he began to sleep. Our God is the God of fire, he thought, and then he heard his voice protesting gentleness, and then both were trailing off down a long winding river toward purple clouds.

"Another M. smiled as he began to sleep in the arms of a shadow he didn't recognize. She whispered the word 'sleep'. He struggled to keep awake at least until he heard her voice again.

"Another M. continued to yawn and covered his mouth staring at his companions in the cave, but then he saw they were all asleep. He continued his struggle.

"Another M. stood naked before a mirror, seeing himself from all sides as being out of place among them. Red crystals filled his eyes when he closed his lids. He began to ask something but no sound came and he then said nothing.

"The final M. closed his eyes before it was time. He heard shouts outside the cave. He felt the presence of each of the others. A dog was asleep at his feet. He saw two colors, purple and green."

"Of course, there were more," he said.

"Yes, and these were only sketches, interpretations, subjective impressions," she said.

"There were two women at the opening of the cave. One whose husband died, both old friends of the *equipe*, the *futuwwa*, who heard the cry of Antigone. She sees a bouquet of white roses, water, a garden also with a fountain, old stones, and her eyes began to weep from joy. Continue to believe, she said to M. Then the light through the gate into the garden, just a crack, was white.

"The other came late to the *equipe*. Her favorite tree was laurel. She asked if there was beauty in faith or faith in beauty? She fell asleep as if she had disappeared from herself, and when they all held hands and the outside light was extinguished by the rolling of the great stone against the entranceway, she woke again, and everyone knew she was there and felt confirmed in their awakening by her presence."

When his father died, Matthew began the ever-extending list in his mind of deaths of those persons he had known. He believed if he remembered them all they would meet in another place again and end their dying. It was the key to his eventual approach to history, to legend, and to faith: the mental list of those who died. He was the unknown witness who recorded loss throughout his time. He wondered only who would continue it once he was gone, assuming he wouldn't be numbered among those he would meet again. It was the key to his sense of irony and shyness.

This must be mentioned or his sense of what the sleepers were seeing during sleep would be subject to criticism and doubt. The list was subsumed by the account of visions being implanted in the souls of those who slept. One was a child's intention, the other was an adult's intuition. One was Matthew's injured heart, the other was Malcius's wistful soul.

"Continue to be foolish. This is the time," Helene said to him.

Matthew himself sensed that time was accelerating for both of them. They were all joined in a circle, the two of them plus five and two more. The rock had been rolled into place by the spies of Decius to whom their secret was revealed by frightened people of Ephesus. They were entombed, that is, those who refused obeisance to the Emperor, not just as leader of the civilized world but as self-proclaimed god. This world and the next were now declared ruled by one god. The end of Christianity, its antecedents and its inheritors, was then and there proclaimed settled by the uniting of both worlds in one man's law and rule. The sleepers in the cave were sealed away to sleep as witnesses of the God who filled their sleep with visions that would awaken them and send one into town with coins for bread.

Over and over and over again the recitation of the simple poem of the seven who slept inside the cave is sung.

His mind was reeling with the story's truth: that Decius is always born again in the world; the sleepers awaken, and the colors of their sleep are shimmering again.

Helene agreed to go to a doctor in the American compound. Matthew had persisted, she relented, and then they went. He was thinking also of the phrase "in

the eyes of God" that needed to be understood if they were to live in Turkey or, indeed, anywhere.

The American consul, Mr. Edward Rossiter, was as expected tall, clean, suited with tie, smiling, genial and *efficient*. The latter virtue Helene qualified aside to her lover, "like Exlax."

She was not going to be easily cooperative. The rebel inside was shouting to break out.

There was a resident doctor and a nurse. "Which do you want to see?" the shiny one asked objectively.

"The doctor," Matthew said after whisperings back and forth with Helene.

There followed a long slow walk, metaphorically across the tarmac, so to speak, to the auxiliary clinic style hospital. Inside papers were given to fill out calling for personal health history, medications currently taken, and reason for coming.

Once accomplished, there was a long waiting tedium despite the obvious fact that only two other people, both men in uniform, were in attendance with a bloody towel pressed over an outstretched right hand on one and a caste on a left leg of the other. The doctor was late in arriving, according to the female attendant behind the reception desk.

Helene's papers were still on the desk an hour later after the two uniformed men had been seen by a nurse, treated and dismissed.

She was beyond the arguing point and was rising to leave when a middle aged man in a suit entered, looked into the waiting room and beckoned the remaining patients to join him in the inner examination chamber.

"Malcius, for this I prefer to be alone. I'll be fine. Trust me. Please, wait outside."

"Miss or Mrs. Teile," the doctor who didn't give his name said, "it says" (meaning the personal record she filled out) "you've been having throat and chest pains, and you are a lifelong smoker."

"Yes, I am guilty as charged and am unrepentant," she said sarcastically, which drew a surprised look on the doctor's face.

"Is he" (meaning Matthew) "your husband?"

"No, my companion," she answered.

The attending nurse smiled skeptically and closed the examination room door.

Matthew stood near the one window of the waiting room looking out at a parking lot, imagining Helene alone being examined by strangers. He prayed they wouldn't in any way treat her insensitively.

They walked along the black and white rippling and vertiginous sidewalk beside the sea wall and eventually sat down on a bench.

"You must never be distracted by anything from the story you have been given," she said to him.

He held her tightly in his arms.

"The Devil knew the risks I've taken and let me babble on." Tears of anger burst from her eyes.

When she was able to speak again, she did so with an eerie calm that frightened him. She sat straight up holding onto one of his hands.

"We're together always, you must know," he said.

"You're sweet to say that."

She stopped talking then.

They continued further along the dizzying walkway, then diverted their direction down a side street to an open market, where they bought some oranges, onions and carrots, and a large fish for supper, and found a date and honey shop for some after dinner sweets. Finally, they stopped in a coffee shop and had two cups each of thick Turkish coffee with sticks of sugar. They lingered in the shop watching two old men playing checkers on a wooden table.

Walking back within the town to the apartment she said, "We don't need to change anything. We are as we have been."

"We do all things together. We think together. We have been in the cave together."

"Malcius," she whispered.

Part Four

"Tell me again what the Seven Sleepers Pardon included in its Brittany commemoration."

"There was a gathering of perhaps 100 to 150 people in a small town called Plouaret: mostly Breton farmers and fishermen whose wives wore white coifs on their heads, some Muslim men with their wives wearing head scarves, a handful of international visitors including scholars and journalists. We all walked about 4 kilometers in a solemn procession to a small hamlet called Vieux Marche where there was a chapel dedicated to the Seven Sleepers built on an ancient dolmen crypt. When we arrived outside the chapel a Breton bishop, a Muslim Imam and Professor Rochemont led us in Breton, Arabic and French prayers for peace."

"Go on, Tell me again what came next."

"At night a bonfire was lit and a group of Breton men and women chanted a *Gwerz*, a short poem repeated in its refrain several times about the building

of the chapel."

"Recite it again."

O when the world was made,
The sky, the sea, the land, the fire,
So also was this cave created
Where the companions sleep.

Seven candles are set in a boat
Called Abandonment to God
In witness that these seven hearts
Refuse idolatry to Decius.

They sleep in a circle of darkness
Until it is time to wake.
And then their faces glow like roses
Drawn to an opening for light.

O when the world was made,
The sky, the sea, the land, the fire,
So also was this cave created
Where the companions sleep.

"In the reflected light of the Tantad bonfire the people walked to a holy spring, which is known for its curative power over blindness, literal and, as the bishop pronounced, "spiritual". Some of us dabbed our eyes. Then the return walk to Plouaret followed. It was night. Candles were carried. The white Bretonne coifs bobbed up and down like sails on a dark sea in the procession's candlelight."

"Then the next day," she said; "recount that."

"There was a mass at the chapel and a reading of *Surah al-kahf* by the Imam. At the conclusion of these remembrances the Muslims prepared at a long table set outside the chapel a Feast of Abraham, including lamb, couscous, vegetables and fruits. That was the Pardon's celebratory conclusion."

"What did you do there?"

"I became a pilgrim."

"And it was on the Feast Day of Mary Magdalen, the first to see our resurrected Lord."

"Yes."

"You told me all of this when we first met and I like to hear it. It resonates still. It's the cave of fruitfulness."

"Yes."

"In this retelling Professor Rochemont was mentioned only once."

"And?"

"He has let you go. You are the master of your own story now."

"Jacobus di Voragine wrote that when the cave was opened, they looked out and their faces opened like roses drawn to the light."

"They were witnesses to the truth."

"Then comes their quiet death."

"Helene, what happens next?"

"We find a place to live, and live. It could be anywhere: here, there, where we've been, or where we've never been. There's been so much loss in this world."

"Do you believe there will always be a Decius?"

"Yes, always in this world."

"Do you believe in the seven sleepers?"

"As witnesses against Decius, yes."

"Do you believe in good?"

"Witnessing against evil done is good."

"Do you believe in Satan?"

"Mockery of witnessing against evil is satanic."

"Do you dread him?"

"I dread encountering evil until I'm standing face to face with it."

"You've known that?"

"Yes, with others, and with you."

"Where do we go from here?"

"Here. Until we're called to leave. Meanwhile there's no hurry."
