

"It was the happiest time in my life,"

the young Algerian man says, very excited. "There were three of us — me, Kedar, and Sami..." Unable to contain himself, Hamid half-rises from his chair. He is a small, handsome man, neatly dressed. His face is shining with love as he talks about a friendship that was "more than friendship," between three boys who grew up together in a small Algerian town.

They used to kid around together a lot, and Hamid's philosophy of life seems to be that "life is beautiful, you have to kid around," still, he must have been a serious fellow, as well, because he made it to college and then studied hard enough to end up teaching here in France. Kedar had a bad attitude, and he looked like James Dean, so they used to call him "Shems ed-Din," "the Sunlight of Religion" — although he didn't believe in religion or in much of anything. "You know, the lost generation." The third one, Sami, was the mildest of the three. He was tormented by a failed, early love affair with a woman from a higher social class, and by his father's death which had made him responsible for his mother and siblings. When one personal disaster after another struck him, he turned more and more to religion, keeping himself together, believing.

The three boys went to college together and that's where they met Abdelmalik, one of the "Ikhwan," the Islamists. All of them lived on campus, in the dorms. Abdelmalik was too poor

to leave on weekends to go home. He stayed in the empty school. On Ramadan he had no money to buy his evening break-fast. Hamid blew up when he found out that Abdelmalik had broken his fast at a soup kitchen. "Why didn't you ask us! Aren't we your friends," yelled Hamid, and so they were.

Strolling around together Hamid expounded to Abdelmalik his philosophy of life, his counter to Islamist ideas. "Life is beautiful, you have to kid around..." I told him, and he accepted it — from me." Abdelmalik liked Hamid, but he liked Kedar the most. They were both poor, tough kids, Abdelmalik with his beard and the gun hidden under his long white robe, Kedar with his James Dean hair hanging over his eyes.

One night Hamid, Sami and Kedar were wandering around the campus, bored. It was 2 AM. "Shems ed-Din" said, "Let's go check out the girls." Hamid was game, and Sami hesitated, then said "Why not." In front of the girls' dorm they saw them: 5 or 6 Islamist guys, "tough," armed with knives and bats. Abdelmalik was one of them. It was a kind of morality patrol. Sami ducked his head as if to say "it's not me it's them..." But Abdelmalik had recognized them and stopped the patrol from attacking. Real friendship comes first.

Since college, the four friends drifted out of touch, their reunions less and less frequent. After Hamid moved to France, Sami was the one who always wrote him, no matter what. They were best friends. Hamid knew Sami, knew about his secret dreams, his unrealized goals. And — sure proof of trust between the young men — Hamid had once met the girl, Sami's only real love. The two helped each other, though their lives were so different now — still Sami would send letters filled with advice and admonishments, ending up half-seriously with the phrase: "Be a man as I have known you!"

Recently Sami stopped writing for about six months. Finally the letter came:

In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful... to whom I do consider his competence... Dear Hamid...

Sami wrote in English, as he often did.

All praise belongs to Allah — the Sovereign of the Day of

Judgement — and may His Peace and Blessings be upon His Messenger — Muhammad — The Trustworthy. “Our Lord! Give us good in this world and good in the Hereafter, and defend us from the torments of the Fire” — (Holy Quran 2:200) — “and who is better than he who calls to Islam and says I am from (of) Muslims...”

Hamid read on, eager to get past the interminable Koranic quotes to the text of the letter.

Around the twilight, when the first cool waves of breeze start stretching over faces of over seventy guys, I wake up and find myself in a fairly large room where silence presides over the scenery however from time to time the sharp mewing of cat breaks that silence... and brings me back to this evil box.

What evil box? Mystified, Hamid kept reading.

My Lord! where I am? what I am doing here? Am I dreaming or is that the imposing reality?

On the next page Hamid finally understood.

In a twinkling of an eye, the sight of bold bars that cross windows and the strengthened door hauled me steadily to this evil box. “Prison.”

Why is Sami in jail? The letter only says:

What did you do to be sent to a prison? Simply I declared “There is no other object of worship but ALLAH, Muhammed is the Messenger of ALLAH” “A witness that outweighs the seven skies and seven earths altogether.”

If Sami is vague about why he was arrested, he is clear about what happened afterwards.

First, I was called out to the Brigade where I was tortured for three days, then sent to Military Prison in Mers El Kebir. Being kept there for approximately two months, I have been transferred to — Prison, in two weeks a time I was once again transferred to — until now.

Sami goes on to say that it looks like he’s going to be on a long vacation. He is happy to have heard from his friends and urges them to write:

The longer you dwell in this evil box, the sooner you want for letters from such sweet fellows.

Then, as if nothing were wrong, he gives a few pieces of

advice as he always has, ending up:

— *Be a Man as I have known you!!* and signing off “*yours faithfully, ever, Sami.*” The postscript is another Koranic quote, and a request that he be remembered in his friend’s prayers.

When he finished reading the letter, Hamid wanted to do something. But what? He wrote to Kedar, asking what was going on. So far, there has been no answer. “Maybe he’s in jail too,” Hamid says ruefully, as if nothing would surprise him now.

Why is Sami in jail? “Frankly, if it had been Abdelmalik, I wouldn’t have been surprised,” Hamid says. “If he were tortured, he’d fight back.” But Sami’s another story. As Hamid remembers him, he is gentle, apolitical, likes to pray but not to go to demonstrations. “I swear this is an injustice... I know him... I know him...” Hamid says urgently, then suddenly hesitates: “I know him, but I’ve never seen the police file on him.”

Hamid’s excitement and confusion, the loving and also strangely elusive quality of Sami’s letter, reflect a friendship strained to the limit by a society which is polarized, at war with itself. Hamid’s memories are full of nostalgia not only for youth, but for the times when ideology was less important than friendship.