

**A**s soon as  
I woke up  
I realized we  
would have to  
get some videos.

Otherwise the day was unendurable. Finally Dunya and I went for a walk in the desperately hot sun, wearing djellabas so that we trailed, gentle and upright, through the searing streets.

Dunya began hesitantly to recreate the previous night.

"That man who tried to pick up on you last night —"

"He wasn't trying to pick up on me. He wanted information. He was —"

"I know, I know," said Dunya hurriedly. She smiled seriously — an oldest daughter. Cautiously she said to me, "there are people like that."

At least she had brought it up. The sun was so hot that it seemed as if we were walking across an endless plain. The tiny city was made expansive by our slow trek through it at noon. Everyone was indoors, in the cool interior, eating lunch, sipping mint tea to cool down. Or they were sleeping, the shutters were

closed, the angry light was sneaking in through the slats, the woman or girl left with the house work was padding silently across the floor in her bare feet while everyone slept in the stuffy gloom. We were alone on the streets, walking through the flat dust down to Hayy Salim to the video store.

The man who had been at the house the previous night had not been trying to pick me up. He was ugly, in a pitiful sort of way, and he had a pitiful kind of evil based on a (perhaps invented) connection to a massive, distant power so that the fear felt toward him was not even for him, it was not the justified fear and secret admiration felt for strength but a furtive, hidden fear felt because of the money this pitiful, skinny little man might or might not receive as recompense for his surreptitious collection of information.

*It had happened right there in my house.* I was upset and I needed one, two, three videos, good, solid Egyptian films and one Indian film. I knew exactly what I wanted, I needed Adel Imam and an Indian fantasy or else I wouldn't make it through that day, a day in which we could not talk or face each other because there were so many things that we could not say. We couldn't speak but we had to have something, some rich, meaty, real juicy thing: that would be Adel Imam. Then we needed something light, pleasurable, fantastic: that would be the Indian film. And we would survive.

Abdellah's video store was closed and Dunya and I walked on aimlessly pretending that we thought some other video store would be open. Dunya was telling me that a woman has to sleep with just one man and no more or else she will "belong to everyone."

"She'll lose her job," Dunya said.

"But with a man it's not like that," I protested, but she frustrated me by saying with complete complacency,

"No. A man's different. That's the way we have it."

And so that's the way we have it.

Finally we decided to go to the flea market and tell the kids in the booth "we forgot our card but our name is Benjadid." It worked, although it was a lie, we had no card and neither of us was named Benjadid. The kids gave us an Adel Imam and an

Indian story about two friends who loved the same woman without realizing it, and the one she loves gives her up out of love for his friend, but the friend doesn't realize it until twenty years later when he finds a letter that fell behind his cupboard. It was beautiful.

As for the Adel Imam I loved every minute of it, starting from where Adel Imam was a poor student and he hangs out with rich kids, watching them all smoke and drink but never doing it; and he watches and watches and learns to exploit them and he lets one of them rape his girlfriend, a poor girl who loves him, he sits on the couch hearing her screams in the bedroom, the closed door, he flinches; and then he becomes a famous lawyer and is able to laugh and sneer at all the rich kids who made fun of him, and he rejects the rich woman who once scorned him but is now at his feet, and he rediscovers his girlfriend whom he always loved, and is going to marry her but then right at the wedding he dies of a heart attack.

His corruption spread gradually through the years with sickening and satisfying inevitability. It was great.

While we watched the movies Lalla Malika served up an enormous tajine with lamb and ginger and crook-neck squash, my favorite tajine, *this is love*, and Dunya and Djamila and little Fatima and I sat grouped tightly around the TV set and I held close to them in total alienation because of the man who had come the night before. With hopeless physical affection for each other we sat clustered together and watched TV as if everything depended on our ability to ignore what had just happened, "Monsieur Hamid" who had come to the house and had refused to leave until I answered his questions.

If only I had known before I came into the house that he would be there. But instead I came into the house already letting my bag slip off my shoulder, letting my guard down utterly as I slipped off my shoes at the door and slid my feet into my slippers. I was relieved to be home because I had spent the evening at the Youth Center at a discussion of "women and Arab cinema" and it had exhausted me with intellectual effort. All I wanted was to fall into my imaginary role as a grown daughter in the Benjadid family, another spoiled overgrown

daughter like Djamila, sitting by the TV set, letting ourselves be waited on.

It's true the room was rather full but why should that concern me. I barely noticed Djamila's parents where they sat grouped in one corner, eating and drinking with some guests. Without doing more than quickly shaking hands with them I fled toward the TV and settled blissfully down on the couch with Djamila and it's true a rather large group of other friends and neighbors but why should that concern me. There was an American movie on about some kids running away from an orphanage and repairing an abandoned building. All I wanted to do was watch this show because at the Youth Center I had said some things that were way off the mark, talking about "why women watch TV."

I was off the mark, talking about what "women" thought when they watched "Arab cinema," leaning forward in my chair and switching to French and gesturing with my hands while everyone listened in astonishment. I was off the point. The point was to survive.

The schoolteachers were nervous and direct, anxious to make something happen at their meeting, and very sincere, and brave, because what can you do, you have to do something, and there is so little that you can do really, after all, as one of them had confided in me, "*nous sommes très surveillés...*"

In the bare cement ugliness of the youth center, in spite of the absence of youth and the preponderance of men, the schoolteachers were struggling to put something forward, beginning with a man who said, "Why aren't there more films about women we can really admire... like..." (he searched in his mind) "— heros — Palestinian or Algerian women..."

The conversation moved awkwardly until a woman took the floor, sharp, crisp, energized by the possibility of anger and communication that was in the room, and she said, "the films don't portray women, they portray the 'woman-as-body,'" and the room relaxed into the possibility of speech, and more and more people spoke until another woman admitted, what was on everyone's mind, while the Palestinian and Algerian women guerilla fighters receded farther and farther into the distance,

"but the films in a way are realistic, they portray things, in a way, the way they are."

"...but there has to be a way, there has to be a way for there to be films that *are* about the way things are, but also can give us some inspiration." The conversation was tentative and slowly unfolding...

...so that what I had to say, my own perceptions and ideas which I asserted suddenly in French about sexualité and moralité, perceptions from so far outside from someone perhaps slumming, perhaps forgetting the struggle for dignity or perhaps even forgetting her own dignity for some reason — whatever I was doing it was irrelevant and made me feel phony and pseudo-intellectual and like an impressive and lonely character from another story, as if a character from one comic strip could hop down and visit another comic strip, out-of-place but still on the same page.

Unfortunately when I came home I found out for once and for all that I was not from another comic strip but was in the same one as everyone else and this was what was hammered home to me by "Monsieur Hamid" first and later by others as I fell into the grip of those stronger than I who joined me with utter finality to the whole human race and destroyed any pretensions I had of freedom and brought me home to the commonality of our plight and represented my failure and my silent, bitter, triumph.

Coming home I wanted just to collapse with everyone in front of the TV set and watch this American show about some kids who run away from an orphanage in Detroit and end up rehabilitating an abandoned building. It was all totally irrelevant to the situation around us and it made me feel frivolous, privileged, as if I were someone lucky who came from a country where problems were solved easily by "tough love" and kids slapping up walls and painting over graffiti. The movie was just beginning and the rock soundtrack made me sweetly nostalgic for an America that does not exist but would be a good place to come from if it did. But although I was homesick I did not really want to go home, actually it was just fine to be sitting with Djamila and Dunya and Fatima and Auntie Yezza and El-Hajja

all packed in close together around the TV set, this wasn't so bad, there was nothing waiting for me anywhere else, no other home anywhere. This was as close to home as I got, at least up until that night, until the thing with "Monsieur Hamid."

The worst parts were: his hand on my wrist, preventing me from going back to sit with the others, my realization that it was not a joke, his hand holding my wrist. Also: when he said, "*réfléchissez bien, mademoiselle.*" "*Réfléchissez bien,*" he said, leaning down over me and impressing his words upon me and then walking off leaving me to it. Then the other worst part, at the end, him yelling, "Sing! Sing!" after it was all over and I had *réfléchissez-ed bien* and had decided on a strategy and had drawn him aside and flashed some papers in front of him and smiled at him and asked him *his* opinion and fooled him and flattered him, after I had triumphed over him by taking out my *own* notebook and saying to him, "Tell me more, this could help me in my research"; after all that, at the end, when I had gone to bed in the side room off the main room and was lying in the darkness not far from him and then when he still wouldn't leave and he yelled at me, "come back out! Sing! Sing!"

Maybe it would have been easier if my own father hadn't been in jail when I was little. Maybe it would have been easier if I hadn't been burdened with a child's brutal understanding: the police can come into your home and take what is most dear to you. The whole society is against you, I learned with a child's blunt insight. Maybe if I hadn't already known and feared the idea of a hand that can reach into your home and smash the things that are precious to you. Maybe then it would have been easier to forget it all to relax. It had happened in my home.

So the next day Lalla Malika cooked my favorite tajine and I curled silently inside myself, shocked and brought up short by the undiscussable, silent and mute before each other we did not talk about politics, we turned on the video, Adel Imam sits in the front room while his rich friends rape his girlfriend, he clenches his teeth, he flinches, in some prison somewhere someone is being tortured, *patience, patience, it will all be evened out in the end.* The end of the movie.