

Balloon Theater

Steve Street

“Je voulais sortir de chez moi, de mon moi. . . .”

[“I wanted to get away from my home, from my self. . . .”]

— Gustave Flaubert, *Voyage en Égypte*,
journal entries of 6 February 1850 . . .

Jan called Norton and told him to dress nicely, because tonight was going to be a special occasion. They’d both been aware enough of the approaching ends of their contracts—and their work visas, a decisive time for their relationship—to have been avoiding any behavior that might be construed as intrusive, so he asked what kind of special occasion she meant. “I don’t know,” she said. “Just look good.”

He hadn’t even wanted to go, particularly, but her abruptness surprised more than offended him, and he got out a washable khaki suit he’d bought expressly for bringing to Cairo, though he hadn’t worn it twice in the six years he’d lived here. But the pants he’d washed often enough that they’d faded, as Jan noticed by last sunlight in the cab she had stop at their usual spot on the Corniche to pick him up. Then traffic clogged in Tahriir Square, and she began flicking at his lapels.

“Will you relax about my appearance?” he snapped. “What *is* it about tonight?”

Two dirty girls were approaching with packets of tissues for sale. Jan gave them the Egyptian gesture for No, shaking an index finger instead of her head, and turned to him with a tremulous sigh. She’d worn peach-colored lipstick, and even through his annoyance, Norton was aware of how good she looked.

“Vesna’s so fragile,” she said. It was Vesna’s dinner party they were going to. “She’s been through so much. I’m just worried.”

He relaxed. It would be no worse than he’d expected: another strained expat evening, everybody trying to make up for the impermanence of their circle with the intensity of their delight in and concern for each other. He liked Vesna fine, though her scrambled Balkan accent had precluded talking to her much; he hadn’t met the man she’d moved in with, but the guy’s name came up in expat gossip so often they might have roomed together. Now Norton was actually looking forward to the night’s predictability, and as traffic moved again he reached out and bought a fistful of crushed flowers from another kid who’d approached their window.

“Take her these,” he said, handing them over. “Fix her right up.”

Jan gave him the look the remark deserved and didn't speak again until the routine argument with the cab driver over the fare to Zamalek, which started halfway over the 26th of July bridge. Norton was so tired of such quibbling he'd have paid the extra pound, but Jan came to life for it, as did the cabbie, a skinny young guy with gold front teeth and a pressed Michael Jordan T-shirt. When they'd reached an agreement, he held the money Jan gave him to his forehead and kissed it, then stuck his palms out his window for Norton to slap, rolling out into traffic with his steering wheel a-spin, teeth a-glint.

"Can you dig it?" Jan said, holding up her sixteen-cent triumph: they'd ended up paying foreigner's fare, but not *ignorant*-foreigner's fare. And their several-block search for the address—unnumbered as half the buildings were, street signs obscured with whitish dust—Jan played like a shell game, pulling him into side streets, where the sounds of traffic receded like a flock of geese, then back to the first place they'd considered, pausing occasionally to laugh. She hadn't been here as long as Norton had, and, all else being equal, he thought she'd be happy to stay. He didn't like to think about how he might figure into that "else," and right now he didn't feel like thinking about his own renewal, either.

In the lobby they faced another delay: the wooden-cage elevator wouldn't start until a Nubian bawaab came to rig the contraption with a piece of string. It was just the kind of improbable miracle that Norton used to love about this place as much as Jan still did, but when the car stopped on the twelfth floor, after a wobbly ride up, he couldn't relax his grip on the wooden slats. On the landing, holding the scissor-grate door for him, Jan looked back. "What's the problem?"

"I don't know," he said. "Nerves or fury. Who the hell owns this building? We'll be lucky to make it home alive."

Apparently the sound of voices was all his muscles needed to unclench, but Jan looked at him with the same kind of baffled resentment he'd directed at her in the cab. He buttoned his jacket, trying to recover some dignity, and she stepped up to the doorbell with a move like a fencing thrust.

"Wonderful," he muttered to no one in particular, but it was Jan who scowled back.

The door was opened by Vesna's new boyfriend, the infamous Raymond Veneer, who turned out, in the first surprise of the evening, to be enormously fat. Norton had pictured a small, fit guy with a rigid grin, an image he became conscious of only now that the reality clashed. Neither Raymond nor anyone else was dressed up, but both his manner and his apartment were lavish. He kissed Jan's hand and introduced Vesna, a petite redhead who'd either forgotten Norton or pretended to; the young couple-about-town Rania and Mohammed, whom Norton had met at other parties; and a guy closer to his own age in a fringed suede vest,

Yehia, who'd brought his cousin, a calm-faced woman with hair to the back pockets of her jeans: Ibtissam, whom apparently Jan knew from the high school in Maadi where the two of them worked, and they embraced as if it had been more than a few hours since they'd seen each other last. With that much of his hostile duties discharged, Raymond caught Norton's eye, stuck a Glenfiddich scotch in his hand, and commandeered him for a tour.

The apartment was huge. Raymond named his possessions as he pointed them out, and Norton responded, "Wow!" or "Nice!" to a collection of masks from Swaziland, a zinc Ouzo bottle from Naxos, a computer with a new gazetteer program whose data included number of dentists per thousand inhabitants and national anthems, lyrics and tunes both, and an original-edition owner's manual for a 1944 B.S.A. M20 motorcycle that Raymond kept, fully restored, in a garage he rented two blocks away.

"Want to go see it?"

Norton thought of the elevator. "Maybe later."

"Come out and see my balcony, then. No exhaust fumes up here, you'll notice."

In fading pink light he breathed deep and explicated his spectacular view of the Nile: among palm fronds across the river they could see the striped tent of the Balloon Theater in Agouza, a kind of permanent puppet show, and the white-and-gold minaret of the mosque in Kit Kat Square, named after a nightclub near a British army barracks that had stood there during the war, as Norton happened to know from a guidebook. But he acted otherwise, and Raymond was encouraged to turn him around by the elbow and point out seventy-five meters of stout new genuine hemp rope wrapped around a huge iron bitt he'd had bolted to a wall in case of fire. He called the bitt a *bollard*. "The building's got an alarm," he said, "but I wouldn't trust it to wake me for tea around noonish on a Saturday. As for the bloody lift, don't make me laugh."

Norton didn't, not only because he agreed but because he thought any unexpected exertion at all might be dangerous for his host, whose consecutive sentences seemed to have brought on heavy breathing. The man's throat was a bag, a full wineskin with a chinstrap of sandy beard, his voluminous pants multi-pleated, his shirt opened to the middle of a hairless, waxy chest. All his clothes were slightly different shades of plum. Hard to believe that this was the guy who, according to rumor, had not only propositioned every foreign woman in town, single or married, after his wife left him, but had met with a good deal of success. The worst story involved a woman who wouldn't, a quite famous poet, a widow, invited to read at the British Council, where Raymond worked: while driving her in from the airport he was supposed to have told her that if ever she felt the need of a man during her stay, he was available. "And he didn't mean for moving furniture," Jan had said.

The big man rapped a pinky ring against the bollard to show how

solid it was. The stone in his ring was plum-colored, too, and Norton wondered if he had others for other outfits. "You've heard 'em get into a lift an' say, 'Fourth floor, God willing,' haven't you? Buggers can't make a bed. Whole country needs a back-up plan, dunnit?"

They'd strolled the length of the balcony, and through a sliding screen door to the living room, some of the Egyptian guests sat within earshot. But everybody inside was deep in a conversation that distracted Norton, too, now: apparently another bank had been bombed, this one in the Garden City district, where Norton lived. A month ago at work he'd heard one go off, and if this one wasn't just a rumor, it meant the government's crack-down wasn't working. Some of the guests were pooh-poohing the fundies' feeble efforts at overthrow, but Yehia was lambasting government corruption. Both reactions were familiar, neither too reassuring. Norton and other foreigners stayed at the government's behest, and each slight shrinkage of their comfort zone felt like saltwater drying on his back.

Raymond slapped it, his eyes like the heads of nails driven into his fat.

"Subject change—host's prerogative," he announced as they stepped inside, and everyone but Yehia laughed.

Vesna appeared in the doorway of the dining room.

"Deenair is sir-r-r-r-rved," she announced with a bow, and conversation throughout dinner was light. Jan and Norton had been seated at opposite ends of the table, and her laughter floated down to him with the music of silverware on plates; between courses he heard it with Vesna's in the kitchen, and he stopped thinking about anything beyond the glow of the centerpiece candles and the duty-free Czech wine, a real treat after Rubis d'Egypte. Good food helped: Vesna, half-Italian, was an excellent cook.

"Which was the special occasion, the wine or the clam sauce?" Norton whispered to Jan as they left the table.

She looked around to make sure no one had heard, then whispered back: "Probably neither. I think they eat this way all the time."

Next came a fashion show: Jan and Vesna disappeared and returned in short, tight dresses. Vesna's was the color of her hair, with a saucer-sized hole on one shoulder and another that showed the opposite waist and hip. Jan, who designed costumes for school plays for a living, had made it from a photo in a French magazine and brought it to the party in her purse. Vesna was supposed to pay her 300 L.E. for it, but now they were dancing, Jan in a dress of Vesna's that was as short as the new one but striped like peppermint, and intact. With their arms around each other's shoulders, they kicked their legs in approximate unison, laughing their heads off, a parody of girlish delight. Jan's full blonde hair still offset the gray that had set in, and Yehia, who had brought the cassette tape they were dancing to, seemed to be falling in love with her, his eyes watering like Omar Sharif's. Vesna was dark, trim, and at least ten years younger,

but Norton's eyes too kept returning to Jan.

He was going to leave her. The founding principle of their relationship had always been *No claims*, her own phrase, and he knew how tough she was; he knew she would be all right. She'd survived her husband's departure two years before, to marry their next-door neighbor in Ann Arbor. And her school here had a quota of foreign faculty to fill; bringing new people over was such an expensive and high-risk proposition that anyone who could stick it out was pretty much guaranteed work for the foreseeable future, barring some socio-political cataclysm that even the war hadn't brought about yet.

But it had ruined his own nerves. At the language institute where Norton was a teacher trainer by now he'd been promised a raise if he signed up for another hitch, but he'd put in for transfers to branches in Turkey and Romania and on Crete, and now, watching the fashion show, he resolved to take the first one to come through. The extremes of Cairo—the bombs and the balconies and the elevators fixed with string, the sidewalk smells of jasmine and piss, grilled meat and gasoline, the new tourist towers jutting up out of grand, neglected architecture, the curtain-windowed Mercedes passing lepers on the sidewalk—had all finally depleted him. He didn't want to go home, exactly, but he wanted something *more like* home. He wanted to go where life was smaller, or where there was less of it, so it didn't seem to dwarf his own so much. And Jan herself was the one who'd once wondered how much of what they had together had to do with them and how much came from what was all around them.

"Everybody!" she cried now, oblivious to him. "Let's dance! Come on!"

"Dance! Dance!" Vesna beckoned around rapidly with both index fingers. "Everybuthy rise!"

Norton begged off, pleading clam sauce, and Jan, after a second of hesitation in which he thought she somehow knew what he'd decided, held her arms out to Raymond, who protested from the depths of a cordovan armchair everyone else had instinctively avoided. At his flattered brays Norton was embarrassed for him; when Vesna stepped in to dance for her man, Raymond laughed louder than anyone.

The other guests' appreciation was restrained, though Yehia and Ibtisam rose to shuffle around a bit. Such festivities wouldn't be seen in any of *their* homes, Norton knew or thought he did, though as a single man past the proper age for marriage, he'd rarely been invited to an Egyptian home. Other intercultural barriers he'd come up against included dating, let alone sex: both happened, but even mixed couples of long standing seemed to cause anxiety for all concerned, including strangers on the street, and even Egyptians who'd lived elsewhere seemed likely to obey the social codes at home, though some who'd spent time abroad made much of their distinction. "Hear that guitar?" Yehia asked over the song's

final flourish, spinning his fringes to address the room at large. "That's me, if you believe it. We recorded this one in Nashville."

"This is you?" Norton recognized the tune from radio airplay fifteen years before, not one he would have recalled unprompted; he was impressed.

Ibtissam paused to lean down to him, holding her hair back against her clavicles. "My cousin," she confided, winking. "The wonder of a single hit."

She sailed away, just her feet and hair moving. During dinner she'd mentioned attending a design school in Denmark, and he'd placed her from Jan's previous talk: engaged to a Dane at one point, she'd broken it off because she missed her family, and now, according to common wisdom, a match here would be difficult. Mohammed and Rania were married but still living with their respective parents until a suitable apartment could be furnished: they were *maktoob kitabna*, Mohammed had explained with irony and pride at the same time. He'd gone to medical school, but instead of practicing he was modeling for a fashion magazine that some friends in Mohandesseen were starting up. Rania, who'd studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, never raised her eyes or lifted a fork that Norton noticed, her index fingers tracing invisible patterns on either side of her plate.

Norton himself was the son of a high-school principal in Gas City, Indiana, though he'd adjusted to the automatic social privilege of expat life easily enough. Cynics said that the only three reasons for a foreigner to stay were religion, sex, or money, and now that he'd decided to leave he could admit that for a long time it had just been the money for him, and not even much of that. He made enough to travel and live comfortably, certainly better than he'd be able to afford without a great deal more effort in the States. Even the money, though—the currency itself: the small brown pound notes and larger blue fives, the green twenties that almost matched the inflated new hundreds—never seemed quite real to him. But foreigners who made their lives here sure did. As Vesna's rich sauces worked their way into his bloodstream he noticed that Raymond seemed to have fallen asleep: feet extended in front of his chair, he looked in profile like a plum-colored mudslide. Another tune ended, and Vesna sank into the huge lap.

"We're all so very *mad*, aren't we?" Norton heard Ibtissam murmur to Rania as host and hostess rubbed noses and Jan sprawled out on the rug, exaggerating her breathlessness for comic effect. Yehia laughed appreciatively while the Egyptian women reddened and looked away. Still clowning, Jan blew him a kiss, then blew Norton one, which he returned. They could have several more months together, but he promised himself that he'd tell her of his decision soon, though probably not tonight. Better on their own special occasion, he thought.

"I hop you *doan* think," said Vesna, on her feet once again, "that *thiyus* was the special occasion. I will catch my *breaths*, and you will get

leequerrrs, and *theyun*, you *will* zee." Her small jaw worked out the vowels as if she were chewing; she stressed too hard and often wrong, flattening her r's like a Brit mocking an American, her accent veering between the exotic and the ugly.

"Raymond has," she said when they'd all been served and she'd settled in a chair of her own with a cigarette in an ebony holder, "been transferred to Singapore." She looked at Jan. "Singapore?"

"Well, maybe," bellowed Raymond, enormously pleased. "Maybe. At this juncture it looks likely, but we'll have to see. It would certainly be a boon if it happened, and the London chief's an old friend of Dad's from Nairobi, which of course never hurts." He chortled. "That's not the *main* announcement, though, is it, darling?"

Suddenly he stood up, amazingly agile, without spilling a drop of amaretto from his tiny tinted glass. Holding it out to the assembly, he cleared his enormous throat.

"She's only known him a few weeks! I can't believe she'll go *through* with it," Jan said when the taxi driver ran out of English to practice on them. It was almost three in the morning. Rumors of bombs made cabbies nervous, and Norton and Jan had spent twenty minutes in the street before this guy stopped—partly, apparently, for a vocabulary drill. In the daytime he was an accountant, he'd told them, and to support his family he drove all night, though he was hoping to land a job with an American firm someday. It was far from the first such story Norton had heard, but he encouraged the conversation, anxious to avoid the one that suddenly felt imminent with Jan, about how the wedding announcement might relate to their own case.

But she didn't seem to be thinking about them. "I can't believe she doesn't *know* about him. Then again I can't think of anyone who would have just come out and *told* her, either."

Norton didn't know what to make of this, after the way she and Vesna had hugged. They'd gone to change their dresses and emerged from the bedroom arm in arm, laughing through tears, and the gathering had become warm and intimate. Even Rania's effusive congratulations seemed genuine, and by the end of the evening, Raymond himself hadn't seemed so bad.

"People change," Norton offered, but Jan bit a thumbnail and shook her head.

"Of course *I* never told her anything, but I never thought it would go this far this fast. Now I don't know how I *can* tell her."

"Tell her what?" They were crossing the island on Mohammed Mokhtar Street, between the Japanese-built opera and a new sports arena, its walls painted with featureless figures representing tennis, basketball, and soccer, which in spite of their action poses and modern design looked stiff and sad. Norton noted the absence, at this hour, of the crippled hunchback who usually wheeled his chair into traffic to sell bread along here.

A possibility that had never occurred to him before suddenly did.

"Raymond never put the moves on *you*, did he?"

The ordinary brick wall around the opera seemed to fascinate her. She opened and closed her mouth twice before sound came out.

"Moves?" she said weakly. She tried to laugh. She tried to shrug.

It was not a fidelity issue or even a how-could-you issue, considering the anxious nights they'd all spent during the war or after an assassination or a demonstration or last year's earthquake, rumors flying like tracers around town. At worst this was none of his business, at best a kind of solution, and he thought it would be easy not to touch. They spent that night at her place in Maadi, fatigue a handy buffer, but in the morning Norton realized that he was not going to be able to leave it alone. After a distracted cup of coffee he said he had tests to grade, and they'd probably last all weekend. Jan bit her lip. She'd been talking.

Back at his own apartment, every time he finished one paper and reached for another he recalled something he'd only half paid attention to when it happened. Occasions came back to him, and looks and tones of voice did, and when he calculated time spans he thought of a time, after Jan's husband had left and Norton was just getting to know her, when she must have been sleeping with Raymond. The fact of it floored him. He spent the afternoon telling himself he couldn't hold what she'd done then against her, but by evening he was back in their first tentative weeks together, feeling revolted and duped.

At about nine o'clock he called her. The line was busy until after ten. He didn't know what they would say to each other, but he thought it might go better face to face. He suggested dinner the next night, naming a fancier place than they usually went to. "Fine," she said.

But he saw Vesna again before he saw Jan, the next afternoon at Sunny's, the cramped Japanese supermarket in Zamalek where foreigners shopped. Norton had gone there mainly for the walk from Garden City, the most exercise he'd been getting since his latest tennis partner, an engineer with the French company that maintained the subway, had returned to Paris. The half-dozen items Norton usually picked up at Sunny's he could buy anywhere, but he liked being able to take them off the shelves himself. And he liked just looking at the Fruit Loops and Camembert and freeze-packed coffee and wrapped meat with no tails attached and now, he saw in the cart ahead of him in the checkout line, even Johnny Walker Red, at a hundred L.E. a fifth. Somebody must be getting paid off, he thought, idly counting not one bottle in the cart but three before looking up and recognizing the back of Vesna's head.

Surprised, he nudged her elbow with the jar of peanut butter he was holding, and she whirled around already smiling, her dark eyes shining: she'd known he was there. He thanked her for the previous evening. "The

bride-to-be does her own shopping, I see."

She shook her hair back and grinned. "Wayull, the wedding hasn't hoppen yet!" People in line ahead of her turned; her voice was as loud as it had been to address her assembled guests. "But insha'Allah nothing will wrong. The question is, when will you marry my girrrl? Haaaah?"

More people turned, and Norton lost his grip on his peanut butter jar. It didn't break but rolled under a rack of German tabloids, and when he'd stooped to retrieve it Vesna grinned down at him, one hand on her cart handle and the other on her hip.

"When? When? When? I *want to know!*"

He tried to disarm her with a smile, pointing to a space ahead of her as the line moved up. But even when she'd paid she waited, dangling her two full bags at the door, until he'd paid for his own items and joined her.

"*When?*"

"Shhh, Vesna. Listen. Have you got a few minutes for a cup of coffee? I think the President Hotel is open."

Vesna nodded once, as if satisfied. "Tea," she said. "At the Marriott. It is clozayrrrr."

The Marriott Hotel was where he and Jan had agreed to meet that night. It had once been a palace for three wives of the khedive Ismail Pasha; during the opening of the Suez Canal, Empress Eugenie had stayed here. What Norton noticed this time was how much security had tightened up. Vesna, who'd sent her groceries home in a cab, walked in with her hands in the pockets of her camel hair overcoat, stalking through the metal detector as if it didn't obstruct the ornate cast-iron porticoes. Norton had to stop and hand over a thick pocketknife, which the guard opened to examine every blade and implement. When he got to the tiny magnifying glass he raised it to peer at Norton suspiciously, then laughed, closed the knife, and handed it back, all jovial smiles.

Vesna lifted an elbow for him to take her arm, but it was she who steered him across the richly patterned lobby carpet toward the marble steps at the back. "We will try the patio," she said. "I think it will not be zo *warrm*, but!" She raised her black eyebrows and smiled. Her bright red lipstick was perfectly applied, and after his first impulse to somehow talk things out with her, now he didn't know how he could or even why he should.

The patio was sunny, but menus flapped in the wind on the round marble tabletops. The only other patrons besides Norton and Vesna were an Arab family strolling in the garden. Vesna sat in a round-backed wicker chair and turned up her collar. At least it was quiet out here, Norton remarked pleasantly when they'd ordered from a waiter who carefully placed their cups on their napkins. Vesna stage-sighed. Under the table, apparently, she'd put on a pair of olive kid gloves.

"Nor Tone, please. No non *sense*. I tell you now about Jan Ice." She gave each syllable in each name equal weight. "These are think you think you know, but you don't know. Zo I tell. Jan Ice is a forty year old. Yes? Thirty-nine, forty-two —" she waved a rapid hand at the surprise that must have shown on his face. "I call forty. And you?"

He had a feeling of pleasantness past, but he told her.

"Zo. Close enough. Unless you want children, but you don't. Am I true?"

"Too small. Easy to pack but easily misplaced." These were his standard lines.

"Nor Tone. You are funny man. But Jan Ice is unable, since a time when she was young. You know this?"

He knew.

Vesna shrugged. "A problem for her husband, always-always, but not for you. And never married. Are you gay?"

He looked at this woman Jan had called fragile.

"Zo, fine. You decide. Many men come here, they want boys. About you, Jan Ice think no, but we never know."

"Wonderful."

"Zo, zo, fine, OK. But what I want to tell you iss not so much for you." She held up a leathery index finger. "Iss for Jan Ice. It will be very difficult for her to marry now. It is always difficult because of the age, but I have read magazines from your country, you are very hard people, though you seem so soft. Zo. Some like alone, some doan. Jan Ice is a doan. She doan want to be finally alone, I doan think you know thiyus how much. *Me*, she tell." An olive thumb thumped her chest. She dipped into a pocket for a drawer-pack of Dunhills, lit one with a marbled red lighter, clacked it shut, blew smoke, and raised two fingers.

"Two. She is a good work. She has millions of taste, she can do many things. She can go anywhere, she will have job. She worries, but she will have. She will have job because she wants job. That is maybe another thing, but zo. Three." The third finger popped out. Vesna set her elbows on the small round tabletop and looked him in the eyes and waited, as if she didn't already have his attention.

"*What?*"

"Three iss loff. She *loff* you."

Norton's heart jumped like junior-high. He looked around for the waiter and made the wrist-chopping motion that indicated he wanted the check.

"Thank you very much for your concern and advice, Vesna. I will certainly consider the things you have said."

Vesna half-rose, scraping her chair legs on the salmon-colored tiles. She stabbed her cigarette into the ashtray and ground it out, her black eyes boring into his. "Nor Tone. She will *not* loff you always. You must *do*."

The waiter arrived, and Norton reached for the check.

"More *tea!*" Vesna barked.

The waiter hesitated. In bow tie and striped vest and tailed jacket, he had an obsequious smile and mocking eyes for any man who would sit still with such a woman, and Norton felt a flush of anger until, looking down, he saw ripped seams in the man's shoes. "More tea for Madame," he said then, and Vesna smiled. Dark stains between her teeth made them inverted points, like the teeth on some creative child's jack-o-lantern. When the tea came and she'd steeped her bag and sipped, Norton leaned across the cold marble and asked her quietly who she thought she was, to be setting him straight about his own life like this.

She nodded once, as at a fair question. "I will tell you. Do you know why I am now in Cairo?"

He shook his head, though Jan had mentioned a few things.

Vesna's wicker creaked. "I was visiting my sister in Riyadh. She married a Saudi, our mother is Muslim. I loff my sister but in Saudi I had to be covered, there is nothing to do, I left early. In Cairo I change planes. I wait. Four hours, five, six. *Seven*. Do you know what has happened? My country disappeared. Zagreb, Dubrovnik, Sarajevo—airports closed. My town was Split. I phone my mother, I hear guns. Thanks God she lives, my aunts, we are alive. But we lost houses, cars, money. We lost the future. And position!" She sat up even straighter. "Our friends were the best people. Then nothing. I have a passport from no country. Now, with the help of Raymond, I have papers. Without him—who knows? I don't say to make you cry. I am lucky. We are. But I have *learn* what a person must do to be what a person is."

Norton didn't say anything. He believed everything she'd told him. Jan had mentioned some of it. But the satisfaction Vesna took in telling her story made it all seem false. He felt mean and low and petty, but he remembered the bottles in her shopping cart and wondered how much she drank herself. Maybe it was her accent, or the green gloves, or the jaw-jutting way she was clamping her ivory holder and lighting another cigarette, but what struck him was not the pathos of her story but the tired realization that he'd heard a pathetic story either *from* or *about* every foreigner he'd met since he'd arrived. Was it the distance they came or what they became when they got here—a few pale, pudgy faces among the masses of gaunt copper, brown, and black—that made their lives so spot-lit? No matter what we were at home, he thought, here we're like bad mimes, gesticulating in greasepaint.

He told Vesna about Raymond and Jan. He told her the dates he'd figured. He spread his hands. "I have no proof. But Jan told me, more or less."

Vesna's throat moved. Her lips parted slightly, closed, and parted again.

"I see."

She was quiet for a long time.

"I wondered," she murmured at one point. "Maybe, I knew."

Her eyes sought Norton's, her chin small in the lapels of her overcoat. Her lipstick suddenly seemed too old for her face, and he couldn't look at it. He turned to the octagonal fountain. Its water pump wasn't working, but it was a stately thing, its salmon-colored marble elaborately carved: on every side was a roaring lion. Around it a small, black-haired boy walked beside a woman in slacks with a sequined *higaab* over her hair. They walked slowly, their demeanor formal, but the way they were together made Norton think the woman was the boy's mother. The boy matched her steps, his hands clasped behind his back like a grownup, his face serious as a grownup's, too. He wore a blazer and creased trousers and shoes like lacquered blocks. Then woman and boy made a turn and snuck a grin at each other, and Norton got a glimpse of the precarious place in the world of most of what he still, even now, assumed to be plentiful and free.

"I'm sorry, Vesna. I'm sorry it happened, and I'm sorry I told you."

"No." She stood up. "It is better that I know. Raymond has cried in my arms, at the size of his stomach. He will be difficult." She removed her glove to shake Norton's hand, her own warm and smooth and dry, and then left, her posture perfect.

He had a drink in Harry's, a facsimile English pub in the Marriott complex, then called Jan to suggest they meet there, a little earlier than they'd agreed. Or else he'd get a cab out to Maadi and they could go to Pub 13, a smaller and more casual place. The fact that she heard him out told him Vesna hadn't called yet.

"I'll come there," Jan said quickly. "Why the switch? I'm already dressed, and I haven't looked this good since the fashion show."

It was a familiar kind of quip from her, though her voice was strained, and the best he could manage was an imprecise answer: he said he'd gotten held up in Zamalek that afternoon and didn't want to cross the river just to change, then come all the way back. A few days earlier he wouldn't have thought twice about telling her the whole reason for a delay, and now he wanted to tell her something, any small thing that was true. The rest could wait for another hour, at least.

"I'll be here," he said, hearing a strain in his own voice now. He slid into an accent like Vesna's: "Don't vooooorry!" Then he listened, hoping she'd . . . what? Laugh?