

“Our beloved Lazarus has gone to sleep, yet I will go and wake him . . .”

“Why, O Lord? Have I done something to displease you?” Lazarus whispered in his darkness. Apprehensive, the Messiah rolled away the stone, called to Lazarus, and waited. After only a few seconds, Lazarus emerged, blinded by the blaze of light that struck his eyes. When they started unwinding his white wrappings, he realized that the miracle had actually been performed. He had fallen sick, and the illness became so severe that death had come as a mercy, carrying him off to a place without any pain or suffering. He spent four days there in nonexistence. He had been sleeping, and then he had been awakened; secure, and then disturbed; floating in the beyond, and then the Messiah arrived and brought him out. “Why, O Lord? Have I done something to displease you?”

The whistle of the electric teakettle startled Mr. N. He left his papers on the table and got up to switch it off. He turned to face the window, where a black fly caught his attention, perched motionless on the wall above one of the panes of glass. He reached out to catch it, but it flew away and landed



on the wall over the other windowpane. Mr. N stepped toward it, and the fly circled back again. Mr. N smiled. He drew the curtain back halfway and opened the window, sliding one pane behind the other. The fly cocked its head and gave him a wink out of the corner of its eye before swooping through, leaving no trace.

The sky spilled down an enormous quantity of light that struck Mr. N all at once. His eyelids dropped involuntarily as the light poured onto his face, his neck, his chest, his arms. The light stopped at his waist, which was as far as the window allowed it to reach. Looking down, Mr. N backed away two steps from the window and drew a long, deep breath—like someone about to jump. Even with his eyes averted, however, the white metal bars forming their squares over the window reminded him of their existence by casting shadows across the floor tiles.



A car horn blared, startling Mr. N. Other horns followed, proclaiming their own excellence. Then the flock of horns raced off, without any shepherd to guide them or any sheepdog to bring them back to the straight and narrow. Their hooves crushed everything in their path: passengers, pedestrians, children, residents of the neighboring buildings, sparrows, trees, shops.

Mr. N pressed his face against those white iron squares and looked down, annoyed. Why all these cars, and where could they be going? The clock showed 10:25. Employees were at their offices, children were at their schools and universities, mothers were in their kitchens, he was in his room. So who were all these people, and why were they all going for a drive together?

More than once over the years, it had occurred to him to abandon this apartment on account of its terrible location and the noise that poured through the window and into his ears at all hours. But Andrew—the tall building manager with the friendly face—had resisted the idea, had tried to dissuade him, suggesting that Mr. N move instead to a room on the opposite side of the complex. There, he would forget about the street and look down on the beautiful garden in the rear courtyard. Still, Mr. N had hesitated. He wasn't a person who liked change. He might be fed up by the noise, but his fear of giving up the window was greater. What if this window proved to be his last, and giving it up meant he was giving up the world as well? From here he could take the pulse of the outside world and look out upon God's creation. He saw time racing by, the departure of each day. He enjoyed the air and seeing the sky. If he ever missed the sight of nature, he went down to his hotel's garden at night when it was empty and at rest. He greeted the plants and their blossoms, he embraced the trees, and he touched the stone benches, inspecting what time had stolen from them. And if his tired body protested, he just went down to the end of the hallway outside his room. He would get a chair, open the window, and sit there absent-mindedly, looking out. He hated leaving his apartment. He only ever braved the streets to visit his mother. No, Mr. N found his lodgings quite sufficient; he walked from room to room, content with his home and his guests, feeling no need for the world beyond.

Mr. N closed his window and dropped its white curtain back into place. The insolent light retreated, the noise began to behave itself, and the traffic congestion melted away. Mr. N

went over to his teakettle, produced a mug that had his name written on it in black ink, poured the tea, and drank. The flavor was strange. The tea was cold and the color of water. No matter. He pulled out the chair and sat back down to his papers.

Our beloved Lazarus awoke with the taste of fire in his mouth. He cleaned his teeth and his tongue and all around behind his lips. He gargled water repeatedly, and still he couldn't get rid of the taste of fire and decay. He realized his salvation lay in water alone. That is why he had always loved it so much . . .

The pencil lead snapped under Mr. N's hand. At once he snatched up the shard between his fingertips and placed it in a small plastic yogurt container. He had set aside two such containers, the first of which was completely full, the second nearly so. One day, thought Mr. N eagerly, he would set about counting them, one by one, so he would know how many pencils he'd gone through. He stopped short at the idea that the lead of each pencil sometimes broke more than once. No matter. He could estimate the average number of times that a single pencil broke, and then make a simple calculation to arrive at the approximate number of pencils.

And yet to yield to the approximate made him grimace. He liked precision and hated rough estimates. The approximate was arbitrary, the arbitrary was random, the random was chaotic, and chaos was a killer. Mr. N liked to cut away the imprecise, as he did with his pencils when he sharpened them, shaving their tips into points to make their lines clear

and defined. Pens? Pens were unacceptable. Pens could leak, flooding pages with smothering ink. Ink behaved like a dictator: ordering, forbidding, controlling, brooking no dissent. Lead, meanwhile, was merciful, quick to forgive mistakes. Whatever your soul was brooding over, lead would let it speak. Ink soiled the white page; lead dissolved upon the surface, exactly as pain dissolved in the act of writing . . .

Mr. N let his pencil fall and read what he had written. *Why, Lord? Have I done something to displease you?* The meaning of his words escaped him, and he read them again. It didn't help. He took the page and calmly tore it into four pieces, trying to make them all the same size.

Then came an unexpected knock at the door. Mr. N looked up, but otherwise remained frozen in place, the better to encourage his caller to think he wasn't home and so go away, back to wherever they came from. But the knock came again, quick and soft, and Mr. N knew it was Miss Zahra come to examine him. Cracking open the door, Miss Zahra whispered with her wonted delicacy and even tenderness, "Mr. N, may I come in?"

Mr. N smiled and nodded. Miss Zahra eased herself inside and saw Mr. N sitting at his papers. She set what she was carrying on the table where he was working and then tapped his shoulder with a benevolent hand to invite him to stand. She looked over at his bed nearby, and Mr. N got up, following her eyes to sit on its edge, where she wanted him. He was smiling, and she was smiling too. She came in smiling and went out smiling, and in between she kept smiling no matter what he did. And after she left? Mr. N wondered. And after Lazarus awakened?

Miss Zahra lifted his arm. She tapped his elbow and passed her soft fingers along his bulging, blue veins. Then she bent over . . .

“Ouch!” cried Mr. N. “What sharp teeth you have! The better, I suppose, to nibble through these veins of mine that you seem to love so much.”

She apologized and pressed the spot where she’d hurt him. The pain vanished. Miss Zahra then returned to the table and gathered up her things, casting a quick glance over the papers lying there.

“I’m so happy you’ve gone back to writing,” she said. “I’m dying to read what you’re working on.”

“Where are you going?” Mr. N asked, hurrying after her. “Aren’t you going to stay with me any longer?”

With a laugh, Miss Zahra raised her eyes to the ceiling in the customary gesture of refusal. Then she slipped out, closing the door behind her with the same gentleness she had shown upon entering. As she left, Mr. N glimpsed a small hole in her nylons. The run started underneath her foot and stopped at her anklebone. If only she put a drop of clear nail polish on it, he thought, it would stay where it was and not threaten to sneak farther up. That’s what Mary would do, who was so unlucky with her nylons, as she put it; Mary with her rough hands, scraped raw by housework for Mrs. Thurayya and her family.

One Sunday morning, before anyone else was up, Mr. N had caught Mary sneaking her fingers into her mouth to moisten them before holding open her stockings to insert her feet. The stockings were a gift from Mrs. Thurayya after years of service, and Mary lived in dread of snagging them.

Two translucent, skin-toned silk stockings. Mary wore them proudly on Sundays and holidays, taking pride in them before her friends and relatives, who had to make do with thick, dark, opaque stockings of cotton or wool. Whenever her stockings were too tight at her knees, Mary would reach underneath the tight elastic bands and roll the edges down to ease the red bracelets they left on her white flesh after a day of wearing them. Each Sunday, Mary would put on her silk stockings and try to sneak off to the nearby church for mass—because if Mr. N woke up and started crying before she left, she would have to pick him up and rock him back to sleep in her arms. Sometimes, though, he would cling to her bosom and only pretend to fall back asleep because he relished being taken along—the warmth of the church, the faint illumination, the scent of incense, the hopeful imploring voices. But he would drift off for real the moment he heard the hymns and the prayers, and then come around only when Mary stood to receive the Eucharist and to present her little N at the altar for the priest to bless with a splash of holy water on his head.

Had Miss Zahra noticed the run in her stockings and worn them anyway? That would be a black mark against her, thought Mr. N. Until today her appearance had always been impeccable. Neat and well turned out, giving off a scent that was a mix of rubbing alcohol and soap. Just like Thurayya. As though she were a new doll, fresh out of the package. Thurayya wouldn't tolerate any scratch, any wrinkle, any speck of dust. She was all clipped fingernails, trimmed hair, elegant clothes, earrings, necklaces, and rings. Even when she slept. Even when she dreamed. Traces of her perfume—that

penetrating French perfume, *Femme*—would permeate every corner of the apartment. In both summer and winter, the scent would emanate from her room in the morning when she opened her door after applying her hair spray, the final step in her lengthy daily beauty routine.

Thurayya had ruined Mr. N's taste in women. Despite the detachment and aversion he felt for her at the time, he couldn't help being influenced by her tastes. What he wanted in a woman was someone who could look as clean and orderly as Thurayya on the outside, yet contained all the abundance, plenty, and warmth that Mary had offered Mr. N. Miss Zahra did have some of Thurayya's coldness, it was true, balanced by some of Mary's kindness, but Mr. N would hardly have called her his ideal. Still, when she came back, he would point out the matter of her damaged stocking. It wasn't right for a woman like her to go around looking sloppy. And when he brought it up, he would also insist that she stay a while.

Not that Miss Zahra hadn't been right to hurry out. There really wasn't space for two people in Mr. N's room. Not that it was small, exactly, but neither was it especially inviting, particularly since it was longer than it was wide. Longitudinal spaces do not inspire a sense of harmony. Instead, they make you feel remote, as though they've decided to keep their distance out of some sense of aversion. Mr. N's wooden table was nothing more than a long slab of wood, and as one of the few items of furniture, it was put to many uses besides eating. The television, almost never turned on, was set into the wall like a dark window behind which who knew what sorts of phantoms lurked. As for the bed, it was neither small nor large. A "twin-plus," as Miss Zahra put it, meaning it was

big enough for one and a half people. The half person being the whole person's shadow, perhaps. An absent lover, or the ghost of some other loss.

Back in the old apartment, his bed had been a mere "twin." He grew, but his bed did not. That building had been something of an antique; their apartment didn't much resemble the ones now being built, all stacked on top of one another like cardboard boxes. A beautiful apartment, large and comfortable, in a yellow building from a different era. There was no elevator, and its five floors never had vacancies for strangers. Mr. N loved the building's tiles: small brown triangles, purple and yellow squares. He loved its high ceilings and its tall, arched windows, decorated at the top with pieces of stained glass that reminded him of church windows. He was familiar with each and every one of its details: the old Arabic toilet that he preferred to European toilets because it didn't provide any perch to sit and ponder; the shower nozzle that used to wash the bathroom and everything in it about as much as it washed him; the dark, corroded mirror in whose glass his skin looked fairer than it actually was; the kitchen as spacious as a sitting room, with its old couch that no longer matched the actual sitting room; his bedroom; the bedroom of his older brother, Sa'id; his parents' room; the guest room, which had been converted to an office for his father; and Mary's room. All this he remembered, all this he loved; just as he loved other things, now forgotten from having lived in their company from the day he was born.

But the thing he'd loved most of all about that apartment was its broad, indulgent balcony, over which the building's roof extended, and which was ringed around by a railing

supported by small white columns. The balustrade acted as a shield, protecting the apartment from whatever annoyances might reach up from their calm, narrow, dead-end road, which was accessed via a street less narrow and far busier, Abdel Wahab El Inglizi, in the neighborhood of Achrafieh.

Mr. N—though it's true he wasn't called Mr. N in those days—used to live on this fifth-floor balcony more than he lived inside the apartment. He'd found his natural place there. It was he who picked out a corner for himself among the crowded flowerpots. He put a small table there and two chairs, a chaise longue to lie on while reading, and a straight-backed chair for drinking his coffee, or when he sat with his papers to work. Later on, he added a large, sesame-colored umbrella to that corner of his, which gave an appealing intimacy to the place, such that the other members of the household were satisfied that that part of the balcony, adjacent to his bedroom, was Mr. N's own property.

Mr. N could no longer clearly recall what led him to leave his beloved balcony and check into this hotel. And were it not for the mutual affection he shared with the hotel manager, Mr. Andrew, and his prodigious attachment to Miss Zahra, who cared for him and served him with such self-sacrifice and devotion, he wouldn't have been able to overlook all the inconveniences of life here, chief among which was his neighbor's constant quarreling with his mute wife, and his other neighbor across the hall, an elegant and confused woman who never stopped inviting him to dinner. To say nothing of the noise from the floor below, where the guests took their meals—all except Mr. N, who insisted on having his food alone in his room.

In fact, Mr. N was feeling a pang in his stomach. He wished he could dive into a bowl of mushroom and saffron risotto, like the ones he used to order from Saleem, the maître d' in the Albergo Hotel Restaurant, preceded by a mozzarella salad with slices of sun-dried tomatoes, pickled cardamom, and olive oil. He turned to the clock: 10:25. He still had some time before Miss Zahra brought him lunch at noon on the dot. No matter. He would pour another cup of tea to suppress his hunger, or he would read his books and nap a while.

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Mr. N jolted out of his nap like a madman, frightened and wet with perspiration. He had seen himself as a colt running across a broad plain, thick with tender grass, happy and free, caressed by the wind. He was racing his shadow, which ran across the ground beside him. But then the world went black, and he was thrown to the dirt. Legs bound, he struggled to rise. There was a crackling of fire and sizzling iron, and he let out a whinny in case someone might hear him and come to his aid. But all that came was a red-hot iron on a long metal pole, burning into his thigh. He, the colt, was pressed against the ground as the smell of seared flesh filled his nostrils. When he turned his head, he saw that a large letter N had been branded at the top of his leg.

He inched over to the window. He pulled back the curtain and let the breeze flow over his damp head. It stole through his shirt, traveling down the back of his neck to his spine. His shirt was wet too; he stripped it off and threw it onto the bathroom floor. Half-naked, he stood and spread his

arms wide. He laughed as the mischievous wind tickled his armpits. Then he turned his back to the breeze and went over to the table, where Miss Zahra had set out his clean laundry. He put on the plain white short-sleeved cotton T-shirt that happened to be on top of the pile and went back to close the window. The curtains he would leave open—the better to keep the full day present. Not that the white cloth blocked all the light even when closed, but it did get in the way, and Mr. N didn't want anything to interfere with the free entry of light that had yet to commit any sin against him.

What month was it? Mr. N wondered. Nothing in the street or the appearance of the people outside gave any clear indication. The small trees lined up at the end of the street—what he was able to see of them, anyway—had green leaves. The bitter oranges, which they called *naranj*, were growing old at their mother's breast, lost, as usual, in the ambiguous middle ground between a proper shape and a palatable flavor. The people passing by in the street below were wearing clothes appropriate for more than one season. Mr. N could still recall a time when regular seasons divided the year equally, three months each, and the climate had been perfectly in order, rotating right on schedule like soldiers on watch; the plants coming only in their proper time, each with its own fragrance; a time when even the city itself—whatever the poverty and nakedness of its buildings—stood in lovely, regular, meticulous rows. But now there was no clear identity to its structures, whose ugly outdoor awnings hid not only the balconies but also the characters of their inhabitants, revealing only that their tastes were chintzy and perverse. When had those abominable awnings rolled in to spoil the city? The

eighties? Before that, the balconies had been uncovered and free, decorated with flowerpots, with people's faces, with the laughter and cries of children. But someone had come along and decided to hide all that away, bringing in the damned awnings to wrap the city in a thousand gaudy colors.

Mr. N contemplated the buildings across from his window. Towering beggars' bodies in threadbare, tattered clothes, he thought. No floor looking like another. No building in harmony with the one beside it, either. Each doing its own thing, with no regard for the others. Striped fabric, polka-dotted, smudged and stained, in every shade: orange, red, blue, green, brown . . . Side by side, without any regulation, harmony, or coordination. It hurt the eyes to look at them, especially the awnings that were neglected, torn, and abandoned to the wind, remnants of cloth that neither protected nor concealed but hung down, emaciated, together with random objects that dangled from the dying awning frames.

His own neighborhood had not yet been exposed to this butchery. It had resisted for years, for decades. And when Mr. N left for the hotel, it was still as it had always been. Were it not for the damned tower going up in front of his beloved building, with all the noise, dust, and darkness that it brought, his neighborhood would perhaps have been among the last of the blessed isles remaining in a country of abominable ugliness. Even wealth provided no protection. In neighborhoods of higher social status, the vulgar awnings were replaced by so-called "curtain walls" of glass. "*Kurton*," people repeated proudly, twisting their tongues to say the foreign word. Screw them and their *kurtons*! They were uglifying the city even more than their predecessors had, disfiguring its balconies—those

aerial bridges, those connections to the warmth and the air, those shelters for the soul—and then boasting of those horrible glass enclosures, “They can be sealed shut in winter and then opened up again whenever you want!” If that wasn’t a perversion of the city’s very identity, then what was? Did they do it out of spite? wondered Mr. N. And then spite against what? The sun? The neighbors? In any case, it was certainly against him, even if no one else cared or suffered as he did.

Thousands of festering tongues hanging suspended in the air, an outrage to any sense of engineering or taste. That is what a stunned Mr. N discovered the day he wandered on foot through the alleys of the Bourj Hammoud district, as his neighbor Kevork—a friend of Mr. N’s late father—had recommended. “Don’t worry about trying to figure out which street you’re on, or really anything else either! Just keep walking in any direction, and you’ll come across whatever you’re after.” That’s how the seventy-year-old man had put it, in the middle of one of his usual tirades about their local plumber, Hammouda, and his disgust at the plumber’s habit of setting the price for any repairs at twice the going rate. He was basically robbing the apartment tenants, besides which the new parts he installed didn’t even work. And each time someone called this thief to account or directed any blame his way, did he take any responsibility? No, he would pour out his overflowing cup of rage upon the Chinese, on everything Chinese, placing the blame on China and its people and its products.

“Hammouda, the fraud,” Mr. N’s neighbor Kevork whispered in his pleasant Armenian accent, casting a glance in each direction. “Hammouda, the cheat. He installs something

Chinese and charges you for a European part.” Kevork went on to say that for his part, he’d learned to do without the man’s services, going instead to Bourj Hammoud to buy whatever he needed. Sometimes he brought a Syrian worker with him, one of those who spent the day at Daoura Circle, waiting for someone to come and offer any kind of work in exchange for ten American dollars. Mr. N nodded and inquired about the parts needed to repair the water tank of a European-style toilet, and then the address of where he could buy them.

“You’ll easily find the parts in Bourj Hammoud,” replied Kevork. “Take the old bits with you and just ask around the alleys down there. You don’t need an address.”

In any case, given that Mr. N was more used to Arabic-style toilets, he always kept a bucket of water next to his European toilet regardless, like families used to do in the days of the war, when the water could be cut off at any time and they were forced to store water in whatever containers they had. So he didn’t consider the repair essential. He could put it off.

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“Miss Zahra, Miss Zahra, come quick! Someone has stolen my papers!”

Mr. N gave a terrified scream and nearly choked on his own tongue when he discovered the surface of his wooden table bare. He ran to his door and yelled at top volume, but Miss Zahra didn’t appear at the end of the hallway as she usually did when he called. She would run to him, smiling, reassuring, bearing the antidote to all his panic attacks. He

repeated her name in a plaintive tone and waited. Then he stepped into the corridor himself, trembling, afraid that the thief would be hiding in the shadows there, ready to swoop down and attack him.

The door across the hall was open, but beyond it was only silence. Mr. N cautiously approached and entered the room. He found a woman there, standing. Familiar. The same woman who invited him to dinner every time she saw him, despite knowing nothing about Mr. N. This was her apartment, he must have known that already, but he rarely saw her, afraid as he was to leave his own space. Or, if not afraid—he preferred not to. Miss Zahra brought him whatever he needed, and the manager, Andrew, visited often enough, chatting for hours, to keep loneliness at bay. Besides, he also had his papers to occupy him. They wore him out, and didn't leave much time for socializing.

Still, the woman didn't acknowledge Mr. N's presence. As though she were trying to remember something she'd been about to do but forgot, and which was now taking an exceptional degree of concentration to recall. Perhaps she was going out, thought Mr. N. The elegant clothes, lipstick, and hair pinned atop her head all seemed to indicate as much. Mr. N figured he would withdraw, and he turned to go, but that's when she finally noticed him and said, as usual, "Please, come in!" As she spoke, she took two steps back and invited him to advance further with a sweep of her right hand.

Mr. N found himself sitting in front of a slab of wood much like his own, but which, unlike his own, had found its true identity as a dining table, he felt, set with bowls and white plastic spoons wrapped in paper napkins. Well, after all, they

did live in a hotel; there was nothing strange in all that. The lady parted her red-painted lips, and, holding one hand aloft with her fingers pressed to her thumb, said, "*Al dente!* That's how my children like it. And you, Mr. . . .?"

Mr. N nodded and said, "Of course. Spaghetti must be cooked until there is only a hint of softness, no more. That's how Thurayya insisted on making it, and it was the only dish she would make herself. She would grab a noodle and throw it against the side of the sink. If it stuck, she would say it was done and turn off the stove, pick up the saucepan, and pour it into a colander. Then she would pour cold water over it to get rid of all the starch."

The lady was smiling and showing her interest in what Mr. N had to say. But his well quickly ran dry. He bowed his head over his hands, folded in his lap, as he remembered Thurayya, who refused to cook anything except pasta on account of her preoccupation with her own strained nerves, her excessive sensitivity to the tragedy of her own life—a life that hadn't treated her fairly at all, marrying her to a decent and humble doctor when she deserved so much better, she who was a queen among commoners: the queen of beauty, the queen of good taste, the queen of high emotion, the queen of the salons—

"What are you two doing in there?" asked a rather distasteful voice.

Startled, Mr. N turned. It was his neighbor; that is, the resident of the room alongside his own, whom he could not stand to see on account of the torments Mr. N suffered from hearing his voice through the wall. The never-ending quarrels the man had with his poor wife, whom Mr. N never

once heard defend herself or object, for the husband talked nonstop, filled Mr. N's ears to bursting every single day. One moment the neighbor would tell his wife that she was to blame for every misfortune; the next, he would flirt with her and tell her she was the only thing that made his life bearable. Sometimes he would cry and beg her pardon, only to become angry with her again.

Early on, Mr. N used to pound on the wall they shared to let him know he was there, listening, in case that would make the man feel embarrassed. Then he did it to inform the man of his annoyance at all the noise. Later on, he knocked to appeal to the neighbor's modesty, since it isn't appropriate for people to shame their loved ones publicly. In the end, when the neighbor took no notice of any of these knockings, Mr. N complained about the man to Andrew and to Miss Zahra, and they promised to move him to a different room. That never happened. But Miss Zahra had started coming around whenever the neighbor raised his voice. She would go into his room for a few minutes, and when she came back out she left only silence behind.

Once, when Mr. N was complaining about his situation to Miss Zahra, he asked her about his neighbor's wife, asked her how any woman could bear all that cruelty without uttering a sound. Miss Zahra replied, "It's better that we don't get involved in the affairs of others, don't you think?" Mr. N agreed, concluding that the man's wife had to be mute, for, as he saw it, there was no other explanation for her behavior.

Without asking permission, that mute woman's husband, who had been standing over the two of them in his striped pants and blue short-sleeved shirt, sat down at the table

too. He pushed away the bowl in front of him, scratched the back of his head, crossed his legs, and said, laughing, "You're absolutely correct, my dear lady. But it's not just pasta that needs to be *al dente*, but emotions too! Especially love. It should always be left just a touch underdone, don't you think? That's the secret: right on the cusp, as it were, neither more nor less. For if love cooks longer than it should, it gets mushy and tastes burned. That's what I'm always telling my wife . . . But alas, Daoud, to whom do you sing your psalms?"

"Is his name Daoud?" wondered Mr. N. He thought to invite the man's wife to have dinner with them too, but then he remembered the words of Miss Zahra, and checked himself in time. Was he really going to enter the life of this man he despised? In any case, he had begun to feel an aversion for everyone and everything that possessed a voice and, moreover, used it to speak. And yet . . . there were signs of a deep, weathered sadness in his neighbor's eye as the man spoke that final sentence.

"Dante," said the woman with the stained lips, as though she had arrived just that moment, "was my favorite poet before I died." Then, like someone on stage, she recited:

*We set off across the water, leaving the shore behind.*

*Sluggish, that ancient boat embarked,*

*Weighted on its passage as never before.*

*As we crossed that lifeless slough*

*The mud rose up before us—sorry—before me,*

*and from within came a voice:*

*"Who are you, you who have come here before your time?"*

*"Even if I have come here," I replied, "I will not remain."*

*But you, who are you, O fallen, unclean man?"*  
*"I am one who weeps," he replied. And I said,*  
*"May you weep and wail forevermore . . ."*

"That's Dante's *Inferno*," whispered Mr. N, stunned and fascinated by what the woman was reciting from memory.

Daoud, indifferent to it all, asked, "By the way, why were you yelling like that? Calling for Miss Zahra?"

Of course! Mr. N struck his forehead. He shot to his feet and stammered, "Someone stole all my papers, everything I've been writing for weeks."

"You're a writer? I'm very pleased to meet you! I've never come across a writer before. You'll have to tell us more sometime about what you're writing. As for your papers, it has to be Miss Zahra, no? There's no one else, believe me. Take it from me: she often goes into our room when we're sleeping to steal our things."

Mr. N didn't care to hear Daoud accuse Miss Zahra of petty theft. Besides which, he was upset with himself for forgetting such an important matter as the loss of his work. He excused himself, muttering, explaining his hasty withdrawal by saying he had important things to attend to.

He hurried to his room and closed the door behind him, chest heaving. His hatred for Daoud, the mute woman's husband, was now complete. He knew his name! "To whom do you sing your psalms?" How dare he! Mr. N sat down on the edge of his bed before his knees could betray him. Why couldn't Andrew be the thief, after all, seeing as he was always butting into things that didn't concern him and peppering his guests with questions about things that weren't his business?