

Southern Lights

Near the Mediterranean Sea, surrounded by miles and miles of olive groves and vine yards, where winds blowing from Africa enlase, there is the southern Italian city of Lecce. On the yellow-stone walls of the buildings, the morning light bounces off, grazing past the geraniums hanging next to windows. The fresh heat of spring comes up from the cobble stoned streets that loop and curve past the houses like beautiful sleepy snakes.

Standing in front of the display window of a bookshop, she looks at the book covers and their Italian titles that she can read, but cannot understand. An olive-green scarf is wrapped loosely around her neck, touching her short black hair. She smiles to herself while mouthing the words, trying to guess the right accent of the vowels.

The aroma of recently baked bread floats in the air and mingles with the sunshine and the bird's chirrup and the ever present scent of exhausted history, working up sweet saliva in her mouth.

Sanam rotates on the heels of her boots toward the bakery on the opposite side of the narrow street. An elderly woman wearing a black sweater over a long navy-blue skirt exits the bakery, holding a paper bag in her hand.

From the basilica of Santa Croce, the jewel of the city's baroque architecture, with its bold, curving, elaborate ornamentations, the echo of tolling bells swoops down on the city. She counts the strikes. One, two, three...

"They wear that every day of their lives." He enfolds her in his arms from behind. His mouth near her ears.

"Who?" She rolls around in his grasp.

"The widows. Like the woman who just came out of the bakery. They wear these dark clothes from the day their husband dies until the day they take their last breath. It's like a pact of loyalty. Not even in their clothing they want to betray the memory of the dead husband."

While held tight in his arms, Sanam cranes her neck to look back at the woman who disappears beyond the curve of the street.

"That's so sad," Sanam says, "I like colors."

"So you won't shed your colors even when I die?"

"You won't die." She laughs. "And last time I checked, I wasn't your wife."

He holds his face so close that it is as if he wanted to breathe out of her mouth. "You don't want to be. I'll marry you tomorrow, if you let me."

"Why tomorrow? Why not today?" She jokes. Tries to laugh it off. It makes her nervous when he speaks this way.

"All right then, today. The church is right here. Come on!" Giovanni grabs her hand, makes to pull her with him.

"Oh no! Not the church!"

She draws him back to her, places her hands on top of his eyes. She feels the touch of his eyelashes as he closes them.

"I'm so hungry," she whispers.

"I told you so." He slides her hands across his face. "It's the Salentino air. It whets the appetite. But I thought you'd be so nervous to meet my parents, you wouldn't be able to eat."

"I am nervous. But I guess your Salentino air is stronger than me."

He grins as he unbuttons his jacket and shoves the book he has just bought in its inside pocket. "So now if I ask you to lead us back to the car, would you be able to do that?"

She looks around. At the downpour of light. At a man standing in the balcony, cleaning the windows. At two young girls drinking from tiny cups of espresso, sitting at a wooden table in front of a humming café. At a middle-aged woman looking hot in her fur coat walking a small sniffing dog, with its head glued to the ground.

"No, I'm lost in your metropolis."

"We're in a jestful mood today, aren't we?"

"We are." She takes off her scarf. It is getting hot. "It's because I'm a bit anxious." She lies. She feels like she has to justify the lightness of her mood. She sees that he is nervous. Far more nervous that she could even pretend to be.

"Okay, then. I'll lead us back to the car." He offers her his arm. She takes it. Hard, unwavering, in her grasp.

The green meadows along the road, dispersed near the Mediterranean coastline, are dressed in bright red poppies. Her gaze runs past hundreds of these long-stemmed crimson blossoms scattered into the

horizon. It makes her heart swell with feelings difficult to describe. Joy comes close. But it goes beyond that. It inspires a sort of lightness, like the breeze, or laughter.

It is liberating.

"It's been a long time that I haven't seen Salento's countryside in the spring," he says, looking around as he drives.

"Did you miss it?"

"I hadn't really thought about it. It's certainly different from the Californian one."

Driving past the sparkling meadows, Sanam tries to see if she can hold her breath as long as there are poppies in sight.

"There's the house coming up." He points at a house down the road, with dazzling yellow walls and green shutters. A few palm trees crane their necks as if trying to peek from behind the roof. One of the walls is all but invisible under the heavy green and white of a jasmine tree.

Sanam lets out a sigh. She places a hand on his lap, smiling widely. "It's beautiful!"

He halts the car in front of the moss green, somewhat cemeterial gate and gets off to ring the bell. A woman's jagged voice shouts out through the entry phone. The gate buzzes several times in quick succession. It opens to a long row of red and pink geraniums and tall cacti placed along the walls.

Giovanni gets back into the car, the muscles on his face taut with emotion. The anxious excitement seethes underneath his skin, tussling across that smooth oval face. This is an important moment for him. He has been preparing for this visit for months.

The wheels of the car crackle on the gravel. He parks in the shade of a fig tree with its wide leaves like a hand with thick, splayed out fingers.

"We left the shaded parking for you!" A woman says in an English made musical with a thick Italian accent, as she lopes down the brilliant marble steps and toward them. She is a tall, hefty, vociferous woman, her hair wrapped in a stylish scarf.

"*Ciao, amore mio!*" The woman embraces Giovanni. For a moment, his face disappears behind her kisses.

Sanam looks away, leaving mother and son to the sweet palpitations of meeting again. She squints in the refulgent sunlight as she looks at the house. Another figure is approaching from its open

door. An old man. Lumbering into the sunshine as though for every step, he had to decide whether to take it or not.

"And you are Sanam." Giovanni's mother turns with open arms and draws Sanam into her warm, all-encompassing embrace.

From behind his mother, Giovanni winks at her. Sanam smiles, feeling suddenly wispy against the solid, robust body that encradles her like a tree. "I am Marta."

The father has finally arrived. He is visibly much older than his wife. He embraces them both. His thin, discoloring lips barely touch Sanam's cheeks. He smells of old curtains. Musty. Warm. Wilting. Underneath her hand, she feels the pleasant roughness of his wool vest. Only his eyes shine with a blazing light. A blissful happiness. As if seeing them, he has staved off death. For a little longer.

"We heard Giovanni had found himself an Iranian girl," says the father in a cheerful but raspy voice. His English more fluent than Marta's. "We didn't know he had found a Persian treasure."

Laughters go around,

smiles,

gazes full of love,

and devotion,

unquestioned, unquestionable, detailed,

and hands touching,

pulling closer,

brushing hair aside,

caressing.

Inside the nest of parental love.

Sanam feels young. Younger. Giovanni looks proud. Of her. Of their looking at her. She feels like she is a prize that has been won after a strenuous endeavor. She straggles slightly behind as they enter the coolness of the house that smells deliciously of something cooking.

They sit at a heavy-set wooden table with a vase full of daisies and peonies in the middle. Sunlight floats obliquely into the room through the open door, along with the carol of the birds invisible on the palm trees.

"You have a beautiful house," Sanam says appreciatively.

"We bought this house after we came back from Australia." Flavio's voice rattles with age. "We wanted the kids to grow up in our own land."

Marta takes out a chilled bottle of white wine from the fridge. Her heavy, tanned wrist bends over the glasses. "But the children leave anyway, huh Giovanni?"

Giovanni smiles without responding. The wine works up a sparkling golden rush of bubbles in the glasses as it gushes out of the bottle. The cool drops of sweat slides down the bottle into the large palm of Marta's hand.

"Here's to you coming here," says Marta, beaming at them both, lifting her glass. "*Salute!*"

The wine tastes of raisins, or the nectar of orange blossoms Sanam would eat on the sly in her uncle's garden in the countryside of Tehran.

"And did you have a chance to walk in Lecce?" asks Flavio.

"Sì, papà. We took a short walk."

Marta picks up the lid from a steaming pot and begins stirring something inside it. She is wearing a white dress that falls below her knees, exhibiting the back of her thick, column like legs.

"Lecce has changed a lot since we came back." Flavio directs his attention to Sanam. "All the city center is restored. It wasn't like this thirty years ago."

"How was it?"

"It was the poor part of Lecce. Nobody went there. Now it's full of shops and restaurants. Very nice."

"*Oddio!*" Marta suddenly exclaims. "*Ho dimenticato il basilico!*"

"What happened?" Sanam turns alarmed to Giovanni.

"Oh, nothing." He laughs. "She forgot the basil. My mother is quite a drama queen. You'll get used to it."

"Shall we go and buy some?"

Marta rotates her flushed face to them. "Oh, no buy! It is here in the *cortile*."

"I'll get it." Sanam stands up.

Giovanni gets up with her. "You don't have to."

"I want to." She turns to Marta. "Where is it again?"

"In the *cortile*. Where you park the car. It's in a big, a big..."

"It's inside a clay pot." Giovanni helps his mother out. "I'll come with you."

"Oh no, you stay here with your parents." Sanam places a reassuring hand on his shoulder. He sits back down, lifting his gaze to her.

He is more in love with her than she would like to admit.

Outside, the onslaught of light dominates the house and the sky. She lifts a hand to her blinking eyes that for sometime see nothing but blinding whiteness. She almost staggers down the steps. There is no banister to hold on to. Reaching the ground, the gravel crunches beneath her heels.

She crosses the courtyard and spots the clay pot next to the car. Snapping between her fingers, the basil leaves emanate a sweet perfume of fresh green.

"Sanam." A voice calls her softly. A voice similar to Giovanni's, but lower, richer.

He is standing a few steps away from her. Looking up, she almost gasps at the tender, welcoming edge of his beauty.

"I'm Michele, Giovanni's brother." He is tall and slim. His light brown hair falls down to the side curves of his neck. A pronounced nose gives him a thoughtful expression.

"I'm Sanam," she says, suddenly nervous. "Well, you knew that already." She waves a hand in the air as if she was trying to flap away a fly.

He shakes her hand. His gaze gyrating around her face. For a moment, she surrenders to the hazel of his eyes, eagerly.

Untethered.

Like a dove in the cool freshness of a pond.

"You've bought a cake," she says.

"Oh, yes." He smiles, looking down at the box, almost surprised, as if he did not know what it was doing in his hands. "My mother sent me for desert."

"I had a pastry at Lecce and it was very good."

"So you had a chance to see Lecce."

"Yes, a little bit."

The basil leaves are getting warm and moist in her hand. She takes a quick sweeping look at the gravel, tucks a strand of hair behind her ears, straightens her back. The incomprehensible battering of her heart begins slowing down. She has regained her composure.

"Shall we go inside?"

He steps back to let her precede him. Walking slightly in front, she can feel the weight of his gaze curling around her like a rainbow. There is a prickly sensation at the back of her neck.

The two brothers embrace, their long, strong arms wrapped around the other, patting each other's back with a certain theatrical manliness. As if in their happiness, each was also putting up a show of hardness and unsentimentality for the three who watch them admiringly.

They settle around the table as Marta serves plates full of pasta basted in a sweet-smelling tomato sauce, mounted with parmesan cheese. Giovanni is sitting next to Sanam, Michele in front of her. From time to time, she catches him looking at her. He seems in thought. As if he was pondering something nonnegotiable. Contemplating a different ending for a story that has already been written.

A moment of hungry, appreciative silence falls as each digs into their plates. Flavio eats slowly, chewing carefully, looking straight down at the yellow tulips of the table cloth.

"Is it cooked enough?" Marta regards him with a worried gaze.

"Sì, va bene."

"The countryside is very beautiful," Sanam says. She means to say it in general, to no one in particular, but her eyes fall automatically on him. As if there was nowhere else they could turn.

Marta begins stacking up the empty plates and replaces them with clean ones. Pieces of meat sizzle as she lays them on the hot pan.

"If you want, we can go for a walk later. I know a very nice spot. Near the sea." His eyes seem to be smiling before he does. His Adam's apple, poking from underneath his beard, glides up and down his throat as he speaks.

"That'd be great! I can take some photos."

Giovanni leans back against his chair. "Maybe we rest a little first."

After lunch, Marta accompanies them to their room. Her heavy waist sways side to side as she walks into the moist darkness of the corridor. Michele follows them half way. Then as if suddenly changing his mind, he stops. From the extreme corner of her eyes, Sanam watches him turn and walk away without a word.

"This was Giovanni's room." Marta opens the door and enters. Sanam and Giovanni follow her in. There are two folded towels and robes placed on the wide bed. The bedspread and the drapes match. A light cherry-color. Through the slight opening of the window, the breeze lifts the wispy undercurtains.

"You let me know if you need anything."

"*Grazie mamma*, it's perfect."

"Rest now. You are tired." Marta closes the door soundlessly behind her.

Giovanni wraps his arms around Sanam. There is urgency in the way he encloses her. Like a soldier embracing his beloved upon returning from a war.

"So what do you think?" He digs his head into the soft of her shoulder.

"They're very nice."

He stands over her like a giant. As if he meant to cover her whole. Holding her, he takes a few steps forward. His weight pressing down on her. She steps back.

"Close the window."

He tugs at her thin waist. Almost picks her off the ground. His other hand fumbles at the curtains for the window. He pushes it closed.

"They'll hear," she murmurs. Her body comes gently in contact with the lump of folded towels on the bed. His arms accompanying her.

"Don't worry. They won't."

From the corridor, she thinks she has heard the wooden floor squeak, weighed down by footsteps approaching the door. She cocks her ears. Slightly lifting her head.

She pictures him, returning, standing outside of the closed door.

The floor creaking yearningly underneath his feet.

A sharp pang of desire darts through her as she imagines him listening. She imagines his face, his hands, his long neck. A sigh flees through her lips.

Giovanni kisses her. The creaking dwindles away. Her head falls back on the bed.

The tip of the grass tickles her hands as she walks, arms outstretched, through the meadow. The air scented with the wild perfume of flowers. Each meadow expands between cultivated fields with their plowed soil turned inside out.

The two brothers trail behind, speaking in Italian. Their voices mingle with each other. At times, she cannot tell who is speaking. A quiet calm settles on her as she steps on the solid ground of the only possible path through the meadow. The rest is so thickly dense with grass, dandelions, and poppies that only by trampling their long, delicate necks would she be able to jostle her way through them.

She turns around, lifts the camera to her eye, and zooms on the two brothers. Michele raises a hand as if he wanted to wave at her, or protect himself from the dazzling sun. Or from her. Or from the future.

Giovanni's hands are in his pockets.

"Take your hands out of your pockets." She raises her voice over the breeze swishing through the field.

She laughs as his hands emerge from his pockets. She takes several photos. Shutting one eye, watching through the lens at the world

that opens up like a brightly remembered dream. Click. Click. The artificial eye opens and shuts as if it was blinking.

Presently, the smell of the sea wafts through the air. The light begins to gain momentum. Its brightness manifold. Layer upon layer of white reflections rising from the sea blend with the light of the sky.

And beyond a small sandy hill, which puts an end to the fields, emerges the Mediterranean Sea shimmering under the sunlight.

The three of them stand at the hill top surrounded by prickly pear cactus, mesmerized by the turquoise sea. There is barely any froth at the end of the waves as they stroke the smooth body of the sand.

"It's just like a pool." She takes off her boots and sprints down the hill. Throwing herself into the lights and reflections and perfumes.

The brothers follow.

The three of them run cheerfully down the sandy slope. The echo of their voices carried away by the breeze. Their feet in and out of the sand. Their arms half raised to the sky. Heated with the sun, and the salty air, and the burst of energy that is barely contained in the flesh.

She is the first to reach the beach. She lopes through the pebbles and the dead seaweeds, throws her boots to the side and quickly begins getting undressed.

Giovanni calls from behind. "Are you going in?" He sounds alarmed. "It's still really cold."

She laughs. Her cheeks flush to a lovely flame. The sparkling black of her eyes reflecting the sea. "Come on! It can't be colder than the ocean."

She tosses her clothes down and sprints toward the waves. Her slim body embraced by the blue and the gold. She dashes into the sea.

A shock of cold.

She swims quickly, taking several rapid strokes. The water reaches out to her, pulls her in, flows through her hair, into her armpits, lifting her breasts, seeping underneath them, pushing them back.

It oozes like a sudden secret in between her legs.

At last, she arises, breathing hard, and looks back at the shore. Someone is sitting still on the beach, observing the sea. He waves at her. Another tiny figure is approaching. Knowing Giovanni, she would be surprised if it was indeed him swimming towards her. She dips her head into the water, floats, wallows in the light-filled sea, and waits.

Michele bends double, his long brown legs rise above the surface, and he disappears completely, without leaving any trace. A few seconds later, he resurfaces in front of her, wiping the sea drops off his face, smiling contently at her.

She is suddenly aware of their nudity and feels the heat rising in her cheeks. She closes her arms in. Letting the sea embrace her glittering skin.

"They're all for us, the beach and the sea," she says.

"Yes, I love the sea in the spring."

"How would you describe it?"

"I don't know." He reflects. "It's beautiful."

She laughs. "Come on, you can do better than that. If you had to describe the sea now, just in one word, what would it be?"

He looks at the sea with a pondering gaze. "It's young."

They float side by side. With their necks thrown back, their feet dipping out of the water, enveloped in the sea.

"Giovanni tells me you're a photographer."

"You saw me taking your photos."

"Could I see some of them?"

"The photos of you?"

"I mean some of your work." When he smiles, his mouth curls downward at the edges. "And yes, my photos too. But I'm not sure I'm very photogenic. Maybe only under the sun."

She laughs and takes a few strokes further into the sunlight. He swims slowly behind her. Their arms drawing the sea away, holding it close.

A seagull flies over their heads and toward the beach. She looks back at the shore. At the immobile shape of Giovanni.

"And you? What do you like to do?" she asks.

"I like to teach literature to young people, who most of the time are not listening to me."

She laughs. "I'm sure they're listening."

Another seagull flies above them, vanishing for a moment as it passes through the glare of the sun. Gradually, Sanam begins to feel the cold of the sea encroach upon her. Wet goose bumps run along her arms.

"It's getting a little cold."

They swim next to each other. Their bodies boring through the water. Taking long strokes, pushing the sea back, feeling the sun beams on their shoulders.

Giovanni is waiting for them at the glossy borderline between the sea and the beach. He drapes the scarf around her shivering body.

He rubs her arms, her shoulders, her back, drying her, warming her up.

Her face in his shirt, for a moment she is lost in the cold, the brisk movements of his hands, in imagining Michele's lean body behind her. Of which she stole a glance as he emerged.

The sea dripping from him.

"You crazy child," Giovanni says as he pulls her top over her head. He dresses her with quick, capable movements. Like someone who has done this many times before. Her face glows like the flushed cheeks of thrilled children after a bath.

She laughs, shaking her head rapidly, sprinkling him with the last drops of the sea.

Her hair hides half of her face as she hunches over the jigsaw puzzle. Her chin cradled in the palm of her hand. The fingers of her other hand fumble with the pieces scattered on the table.

"What are you doing?" Giovanni enters the room and lies on the bed with a heavy sigh.

She does not respond. She removes a piece and replaces it with another.

He half-rises on an elbow. "Where did you find that?"

"It was on the bookshelf."

"Really? Wow! It must be old."

"It looks old. The color on the pieces is faded."

"Michele used to do jigsaw puzzles. It was an obsession."

She turns around. Her back is suddenly tense. She shakes her shoulders as if she wanted to shake off the tension. She stands up and strides toward him. A cold feeling at the pit of her stomach. She sits down on the edge of the bed and strokes his hair. Giovanni looks at her. The kindness in his eyes makes her heart writhe. She averts her gaze, concentrates on the tiny mole above his left eyebrow.

"Are you getting bored here?" he asks.

She shakes her head. Her mouth wobbles into a smile.

"Just another week and we'll go back home."

"I know."

She lies down next to him and buries her face in his chest. The voices of women chattering outside glides through the opening of the window and into the room. She closes her eyes. Listening to his heartbeats.

She wakes up to the soft snoring of Giovanni next to her. The room is filled with blue twilight. She gropes for her phone. It is nearly seven. How could they have slept so much?

The house is drenched in silence save for the gentle creaking under her bare feet as she passes through the corridor. Streams of gentle light waft in from the living room. She follows its lead and finds Michele sitting alone, a glass of wine in front of him on the table, reading a book. She stands at the doorway, unsure whether to go in or return to Giovanni.

Michele has not heard her approach. The glow of the table lamp casts irregular shadows over his face. He looks older. With a comfortable maturity that Giovanni lacks.

"Hi," she says as she steps over the threshold.

Holding her heart in her hands. Like glass.

"Ciao!" His face lights up upon seeing her. He quickly places the book down on the table. "Come in please, sit down."

She lowers herself on the couch, leaving a space between them. Space for a person invisible but there.

She lifts her feet off the ground and places them on the cushions, wrapping her arms around her bent knees.

"You're cold." He springs up smoothly to his feet. Like a dancer. Light on the toes. "The temperature falls after sunset."

He wears his clothes in a charming carelessness. As though charm was a gift bestowed upon him without his approval. A gift he thinks he will never use. So he carries it with an absent-minded elegance, forgetting it is there, unaware of the tricks it could play upon others.

He snatches a blanket from a nearby armchair and wraps it around her.

"Would you like a drink?" he asks.

"What are you drinking?"

"A red wine called Primitivo. It's a local product."

"Can I have a sip of yours first?"

"Of course." He offers her the glass. He sits in front of her at the edge of the table, which does not stagger. The antique chestnut wood is capable of carrying weights far heavier than him. She takes the glass.

Tasting his lip-prints on its edge. "It's quite strong, but I like it."

"I'll get you a glass."

For a few moments, they sit, sipping the ruby-colored liquid in the dim silence. Her foot pokes from underneath the blanket. She does not try to cover it and lets it stay there.

"Sunset is quite early here," she says.

"Yes, and an early sunrise." He watches as she runs a hand through her hair that falls like black silk around her face. "That's the way of our southern lights."

On the inside of her lower lip, a red trace of wine comes into view when she parts her mouth. Her face aglow with the gentle yellow light looks unpredictable, fluid.

"We saw so many poppy fields," she says, "Once I tried to hold my breath for as long as there were poppies in sight."

"And what happened?"

She laughs. "I was about to suffocate."

Her cheeks flush with the warmth of the blanket and the wine. She sits with that easy, seductive air of someone whose beauty works miracles on its own. She does not have to push hard. She can relax and watch it all unfold before her eyes.

"In Iran, there is a very famous poem about poppies."

"What is it?"

She clears her voice playfully. Feeling happy. Weightless. Like the petals of almond blossoms in the breeze. "For so long as there are poppies, one has to keep on living."

"It's beautiful."

"We have many beautiful things in Iran. It's our well-kept secret."

"I see." He blushes. It is odd how it happens, quickly, like a sudden flicker of a match. For a moment, his crimson cheeks unsettle her, throw her off balance. She takes another sip of the wine and tries to think of something to say, to undo any damage she might have done.

"My grandpa used to recite poems for us at nights, after he came back from his bakery. He had a beautiful voice." She looks at him. The moment has passed. But it seems that his face has hardened as a consequence. "He had only studied 'til third grade, but he could read the most difficult poems by Hafiz and Rumi and all of our great poets. Some of them he even knew by heart."

He leans forward. "Do you know the poems by heart?"

She laughs, her gaze swimming in the large eyes, doused with melancholy. "Just the one I recited to you right now."

Silence falls.

His hand, long elegant fingers, inches forward, gingerly. A swallow toward a trap. She watches it. Motionless. He curls his fingers around her foot.

"Your foot is cold."

"Your hand is hot." She gives a nervous laugh.

He laughs with her. Tightening his grasp. She can see the confidence that lapsed a few moments ago, returning, taking control.

He holds his face close to hers. She can feel the wild throbbing of her heart, and is aware, beneath the linen of his shirt, of his.

He places a tentative kiss on her lips. And waits.

Breathing on her. Warm. Expectant.

As if testing the waters before sinking in.

She opens her mouth. He kisses her again. Choking with desire, with the shock of life, she lets go of everything. Of time and place and herself. And the breathlessness of melting away, and pouring and floating.

And the sudden nothingness of everything else.

And the sudden everything of being alive.

At the moment that her sigh, freely, confidently, dissipates into his mouth, a key turns into the lock. A light metallic scraping that shocks them both motionless. From the kitchen comes the bustle of the parents returning.

They quickly unravel. His hand shoots back. She lowers her feet to the ground.

Cold with the sharp stab of reality.

Two fluctuating smiles hiding inflamed hinterlands.

The persistent choir of the cicadas bores into the limpid night. The jasmine blossoms inject their hypnotic perfume into the air. Entering the courtyard, he steals a glance at the closed windows of Giovanni's room, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. He sees a shape behind the drawn curtains. At the thought of her standing behind the window, his stomach quails. He hurries inside.

His parents are sitting each on a rocking chair, staring at the refulgent television screen.

"Ciao." He sits down on an armchair, for a moment turning his gaze distractedly to the screen and the images of a vast sea of people walking silently down what seems to be a freeway or a wide bridge. Thousands of men and women striding side by side. In utter silence. So silent that for an instant, Michele thinks he can hear the sound of their heartbeats.

Gradually, he feels drawn into the crowd. As if they were casting a spell on him. Striking him motionless, sucking him into the power of their silence.

There are women in scarves, men with green bandanas around their foreheads, young and old, passing in front of the awe-stricken eye of the camera. A long green flag floats on top, held up by the crowd. After a few moments, a thunderclap erupts as the demonstrators break their silence by simultaneously clapping their hands. There is laughter as strangers unite through its heart-lifting burst. Quickly, the clapping gains momentum, spurting out of the screen and into the room, like raindrops battering against the roof.

"You see what's happening?" Flavio's excited voice interrupts the flow of the images. "Sanam's been on the computer all day."

Michele catches sight of a girl in the crowd, showing a victory sign. Her utter resemblance to Sanam almost makes him gasp. The same long nose, the same full lips, the same quiet defiance in her eyes. She laughs, looking triumphantly around her. It is almost as if the multitude of men and women was there to accompany her. Her long curly hair floats beyond the borders of her olive-green scarf as she turns around and calls somebody, a young man.

Beaming, the young man grabs her hand and kisses it.

Michele feels jittery. The images on the screen have filled him with certain restlessness. As though he was late for something. Or left behind. Excluded. He is envious of the young burst of energy in that crowd. Of the thought of Sanam closed in the room with his brother. He needs to see her. He looks for an excuse to bring her out.

"What about pizza tonight?"

Marta looks at him. She is not wearing her scarf. Underneath her thinning hair, her pink scalp is like a forgotten scar. She hoists her heavy body off the chair. "Va bene. I go tell Giovanni." She disappears down the corridor.

From behind the closed windows, Sanam looks at the courtyard, drumming her fingers on the glossy skin of the glass, murmuring a song under her breath. She hums when she does not know the words.

"What are you humming to yourself?"

"Just an old song. I've forgotten the words."

"A song from your childhood?"

"My dad used to sing it. It's about a fighter in the mountains. A resistance fighter, I think."

"Come and sit here with me."

She saunters obediently across the room and sits on the bed next to him. Giovanni removes his laptop from his lap and encloses her in his arms.

"And what does this song say about our resistance fighter?"

"I told you, I've forgotten the words."

There is a knock at the door.

"Shall we have pizza tonight?" Marta asks as she opens the door.

"Sure. Why don't we get it and eat at home? Is Michele here?"

"He arrived now."

At the mention of his name, a sharp pang goes through Sanam.

"Okay, we go get it and we'll eat at home."

"I'll come too," Sanam says.

Giovanni considers. "Why don't the two of you go?"

"No." She is nervous. "I meant the three of us."

"I have to write an urgent email. It's better if you two go."

Sanam gets up hesitantly. Regretting having made the offer. She is encouraging improbable circumstances.

What will he think?

She trails behind Marta, who tells her something about the weather, the jasmine. Sanam is not listening. She is fiddling with a string inside her pocket. She reconstructs herself once more in

the mirror of the corridor. Donning an impermeable mask before she goes into the kitchen.

He gets up immediately when he sees her.

Her face is hard, almost stern. Save for the red-rimmed, slightly shriven black eyes. A quizzical look in her eyes. Or doubtful. He cannot tell.

Their eyes flicker in and out of each other's vision with the restiveness of a caged canary.

"Sanam will come with you to get the pizzas. Giovanni has to work." Marta turns the volume of the television down as the news presenter moves on to other news. Flavio makes a slight grunt as he lifts his body off the rocking chair and opens the cabinet for the table cloth. The empty chair oscillates back and forth at his wake.

"Let them get the pizza first and then you set the table," Marta says as she sinks into the arm chair Michele has just vacated.

Flavio unfolds the table cloth carefully as if it was his wedding suit. "Everything will be ready when they come."

Marta looks at Sanam and rolls her eyes, smiling.

Sanam laughs as she steps out into the translucent density of the night. Michele opens the door of his old, white Alpha Romeo. She gets in.

They move off in silence.

The fields surrounding them have sunk into the darkness. A few road lamps breathe out white light on the stone walls demarcating the fields.

"I saw the images of the demonstrators in Tehran," he says, stealing a glance at her.

Her face lights up. "It's amazing. There were so many people. Maybe even millions!"

"Are they going to topple the regime?"

"I don't know. No one knows. But I don't think so." Her voice pulsates with fervor. She gesticulates wildly as if she had no control over her hands. "That's not why they were out there today. It's bigger than that. They want the whole world to know that they are there and they're awake and they're not afraid!" She pauses and interlaces her fingers. "Something great is happening there. At nights they go on the rooftops and chant anti-government

slogans just like during the revolution." She laughs. "I feel like somehow they're calling out to me. It's been a long time that I haven't heard such a call."

Her cheeks are inflamed. Her mouth is parted with an unsustainable energy. Her red eyes shine with enthusiasm and exhaustion. She has never seemed so beautiful. Burning with the echo of the thunderclap of her country in her veins.

"That's wonderful," he says and he cannot help but laugh with her. And yet, something catches in his throat.

For a few moments, silence holds sway as he tries to calm the beating of his heart.

"I'm sorry about last night." His voice ripples through the silence. "I don't know what came over me. It was very..." He pauses, searching for the right word. "It was very inappropriate."

He feels a certain loathing for himself as he utters these words. For, he does not believe them. He has transgressed boundaries. But he is not sorry. Not for a moment. He is simply afraid. Of having already lost her. His voice throbs with insincerity.

Sanam looks at him. "Inappropriate?"

"Yes."

"You kissed me," she says almost vengefully. She suddenly sounds tired.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what to say."

His eyes are fixed on the road. The tail lights of the car in front of them appear from time to time at turnings. Then darkness. Then again the yellow lights come into sight.

"If we go back in time, to last night, you wouldn't do it again?"

He does not respond.

She lifts her hand. White under the moonlight slithering through the window. Her face glowing, she seems to be burning from inside.

"If I offer you my hand, won't you hold it?"

"Why are you doing this?"

She sighs, exhausted. "I don't know." She lets her hand drop down to her thigh. She sways her eyes toward the black night beyond her window.

He will hold your hand, Michele would like to say. He does not. He keeps silent, looking at the empty road.

"Giovanni has always been there for me." She looks at him.
"Through terrible times. I don't know where I'd be without him."

He feels a shiver run up his spine hearing the name of his brother coming from her mouth. His name has the poignancy of reality. It hurts. Shaken, he drives the rest of the way in silence, which she does not try to break. Soon the lights of the pizzeria heap into view.

"Do you mind if I stay here?" she says as he parks the car.

"Of course not. I'll be right back." His voice is tender. Liquid. The calm coolness has all but dissolved. Leaving him vulnerable, like a child who does not know what is the right thing to do.

She wishes she could hold him in her arms until sunrise.

She watches him walk away, admiring his elegant, composed gait. In his composure, there is self-sufficiency. As if the world had nothing else to offer him.

Outside, in front of the door of the restaurant, a group of young men and women are standing, chattering loudly. A few of them with cigarettes in between their fingers. Blowing waves of blue smoke over their shoulders.

One of the girls in particular stands out. With her long golden hair cascading like snow over her shoulders. She beams when she sees Michele walking toward them. She throws her arms around him and presently detaches him from the crowd. Clutching both of his hands as she speaks, with that genuine smile of happiness.

Slowly, the group disintegrates. A few return to the restaurant. A few others get in their cars and drive away.

The two of them enter the restaurant together. The girl with the snow hair holding onto his arm.

From the trees that drip of darkness diluted with moonlight, comes the secret calling of birds. Perhaps warning of intuited threats. Perhaps bidding each other goodnight.

Soon, he comes out with pizza boxes in his hands. He is alone. He smiles at her as he approaches. Sanam tries to smile back. A feeling she cannot identify has taken hold of her. She feels repelled and attracted, afraid and yet unwilling to stop. As though a dam has broken down inside her and she can do nothing to stop the water spurting, washing over everything, smashing it all into pieces.

She watches as he puts the boxes in the trunk, looms around the car, and gets in.

His tender gaze falls upon her like morning mist.

"You okay?"

"Yes."

He turns on the engine. The car makes a little groan as it prepares itself for the drive back. Behind them, a car is waiting for their parking spot. Its signal light blinking in the mirror. With a few back and forth adjustments, he extracts the car.

"Who was that woman?" she asks, as they turn on the road. Her voice barely audible. She is astonished at herself, at what she is asking.

"What woman?"

"The woman outside. You went inside together."

He looks at her, surprised. For a moment, he hesitates to reply. He stares at her intently, trying to decipher the meaning of that stiff blankness. "She's a friend."

She clams shut. A heavy, confused silence falls. The shadows of trees and stone walls flee past them. The moon hangs in its bright fullness from the depth of the sky.

"Why?"

"Nothing."

Out in the floodlight of the car, a stray dog is running, keeping close to the stone walls. It is not clear if it is running after or away from something.

In a sudden, smooth determination, Michele drives the car off the main road and onto the bumpy gravels of a pathway. The entangled trunks of olive trees light up in staggering glimpses.

She grabs on the door handle as he brings the car to a halt and turns the engine off.

He turns to look at her. Her face pale. Wide-eyed.

He clasps her hand. She opens her mouth, as if she is going to say something. But her mouth drops closed. She bends her neck, gaping at their hands. She does not respond to his clasp.

Intuiting her fear, he lets go.

A few minutes pass. He is restless. Confused. She is still looking down. Her long eyelashes cast thick lines of shadow on her cheeks.

He grasps her hand again. This time, she gives it the slightest squeeze. Something inside him breaks open.

He enfolds the smooth line of her face in his hand. With a beautiful little shiver of the head, she looks up at him. Her palpable beauty grows on him, wells up inside him into a convulsion of emotions, strumming on the delicate strings of his raw, tender nerves.

He touches the softness of her cheek with his cheek. Her parting lips discolored under the moonshine. She throws herself forward and kisses him breathlessly. A tremor runs through his body.

"I'm sorry, I—"he mumbles.

"Don't."

She kisses him again. Something inside him drains out and into her. It is stronger than him, tearing him into dribs and drabs, offering them to her.

He tastes the fear, the guilt in her kiss. In the way her eyes tremble behind closed eyelids. He has an inkling that she has never done this before.

It chills him.

The virginity of her betrayal.

He seeks her with his mouth, with every pulse that reverberates through his body. He breathes her in, deeply, as if he wanted to glut himself with the proximity of her body. For as long as it lasts.

Soon she will vanish.

Blown away.

It is not he who possesses her. But the other. Without needing to run, to hide, to despise himself.

It is she, at last, who breaks away.

"We have to go," she whispers.

Through out the silent ride, they clasp the other's hand. Clinging on to save their lives.

He parks the car a little far from the house, away from sight. As soon as the grunting of the engine falls silent, their bodies hurl toward each other as if the car had swung them together in a crash. Her body crushes against his chest, her face assumes all the space in his vision.

Becoming the only thing that exists.

Their lips fasten together in unison. For a moment, they stop thinking with a painful relief of their guilt and their fear. They only breathe and seek each other, blocking it all out with the certainty of their bodies.

Clutching to each other, they seek to hold themselves in place.

He pulls away. "Tomorrow. Come to my apartment." He quickly scribbles the address on the back of some receipt and puts it in her hand.

"I can't," she says, with a feeling of panic. "How could I leave the house? By myself? He'll want to come with me."

"Just say you want to buy him a gift." He cannot bring himself to say his name aloud. "Thursday is his name day. Say you want to surprise him."

"His name day?" She asks, confused.

"Yes, we have this—" He stops, almost laughing. He feels something akin to hysterics working up a distasteful froth in the pit of his stomach. "Never mind the name day. I'll explain it tomorrow. Just take a taxi and come. Don't worry about anything."

There is a strained look on her face. She is afraid, shaken. For a moment, he feels sorry for her. For himself. For his brother. He feels a painful tightening in his chest. Maybe he ought to end it all right here and now. They are going to be left with nothing but pain. With impossible pleasures. And pain. He ought to stop. He cannot. He only too vividly remembers the freshness of her lips.

"Tomorrow at four. Just show the taxi the address. You'll be fine."

She clutches at the piece of paper in her hand.

"Okay!" She laughs. Her laughter moist with unshed tears makes him quiver with emotion.

They emerge into the night, walking separately, afraid of touching each other. Afraid of no longer having the strength to

disentangle. Currents of emotions dart across the untouched, uncrossed space.

She pushes open the gate standing tall against the yellow walls.

He walks into the living room, opens the shutters to the afternoon glare, and looks out on the square. A few elderly men are sitting in harmonious silence on a bench in the cool shadow of a tree. Several pigeons are busy pecking at the tiny space between each cobble stone. One of the men takes out a handful of something from his pocket and sprinkles it on the ground. For a moment, there is a hysterical flapping of wings as the pigeons try to get the bigger share.

He stretches his neck out of the window and scans beyond the square to the far edges of the street.

Searching for a familiar shadow, a dear shape.

Nothing.

Except the sun expanding its blinding light along the street.

He looks at his watch. It is nearly four. He returns to his desk. Fumbles with the books stacked on top of it. His gaze runs around the room. For signs of imperfection.

She won't come.

He runs an agitated hand through his hair. He prowls. He looks out the window.

He goes to the kitchen, opens the French windows, and walks onto the balcony. From here, he has a better view of the street. He can see all the way to the point when it makes a gracious turn and disappears from sight. He searches for her face among a group of women that come out of a shop, talking, carrying shopping bags.

She is not there.

He is outraged. He knows he should not be. He has no right. He should have never asked her to come. It was all wrong. Now he is paying the price. With his heart in tumult. A plague. Of which he cannot rid himself.

He takes out the bottle of wine from the cupboard and pours himself a glass.

A few days and she has become indispensable. For his happiness. For his peace of mind. For his integrity.

A few days and she has come to possess all the majestic mysteries of the world. Everything else has been smashed into insignificant smithereens.

He checks the time. It is ten past four.

Emptiness spreads its white uncompromising wings across the street. The chirrup of the birds hidden in foliage.

The sun glaring back.

She will not come.

She runs the comb through her hair with sharp, jerky movements. Her face in the mirror is set, expressionless. Her lips pursed. She is pale. She cannot slow the throbbing of her heart.

Giovanni's reflection passes through the mirror behind her. Casting her a glance. He comes forward.

"Are you going somewhere?"

Her face wavers into a smile. "I'm going to Lecce."

"To Lecce? By yourself?"

She continues combing her hair.

A trembling hand.

"I've just found out your name day's coming up, and I want to get you something." Michele's lies disgorge out of her mouth as smoothly and quickly as water out of an overturned glass. She is disgusted. And yet, enchanted with the ease with which she unbinds herself.

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to."

His reflection strides out of the silky vision of the mirror. "But how are you going to get there?"

"I'll take a taxi."

"A taxi? No. I'll take you."

She turns around. Alarmed. He is at his desk, looking at the screen of his laptop.

"You can't come with me!" she cries, "How could I buy a surprise gift if you're there?"

He lifts his gaze to her. "I'll just drop you off and then I'll come later to pick you up."

"I can just take the car myself." She feels more and more desperate. Since the morning, she has been battling quandaries, hesitations, guilt. So many times, she decided to forget about it all. It was madness. She could not go through with it. She could not do it. It was all wrong.

And yet, something roared in her like an insatiable lioness. Cruel, thoughtless, pure. She could not silence it. She could not chain it down. She had no strength.

She was going.

"You can't drive in these streets!" Giovanni exclaims, "You don't know how they drive here. You'll get yourself killed."

She walks up to him, places her hands on his cheeks. "You're exaggerating. It's not so bad."

"I'll take you. Don't worry, I won't prowl around to see what you're going to buy."

She stares at him, not knowing what to say. Helpless. For a moment, she thinks she is going to cry.

In any other time, she would have insisted. Would have been offended. Would have blurted out something or other about not being his child, about his being over-protective.

I can't even go shopping on my own anymore? She would have said.

But not now. She cannot insist. She cannot say anything. She slouches down on the bed.

Sucked in deeper and deeper into the quicksand of desperation.

"It's so sweet of you."

"What?" Her eyes waver from his.

"Wanting to buy me a gift."

"It was just an idea." Her voice falls low, sinks deep into her chest.

She no longer recognizes herself.

"I'll just get ready." He places a kiss on her forehead and gets up.

She walks out of the shop, holding a bag in her hand. On the opposite side of the street, Giovanni is sitting in the car, reading a newspaper. She checks her watch. It is half past four. She takes a few steps back, slips the receipt out of her pocket, and reads the address. She looks at the name of the streets around her. Hoping his street would miraculously come into sight. None of them match the name scribbled on the piece of paper she clutches in her hand.

She crosses the street, gets into the car.

"Done?" Giovanni asks, smiling.

"Yes."

"Shall we take a walk?"

"Okay," she says, a bit too eagerly.

Slowly, the cafés are stirring with afternoon bustle. The waiters close some of the umbrellas next to the tables, as the stone walls begin casting their shadows along the streets. Well-dressed men and women linger in the shade, sipping cups of cappuccino. Their jackets draped on the back of their chairs. Young Senegalese women sit on their wooden stools in front of large black umbrellas, from which hand-made earrings glitter in the sunlight. Waiting for customers.

The sky is blue, without a cloud, featureless.

"Michele lives two blocks down," Giovanni says, "Shall we go and pay him a surprise visit?"

Her heart skips a beat. "Michele?"

"Yeah, just a few minutes from here. Come on, let's see what he's doing, all crammed up in his apartment."

She feels her knees giving way as they walk past shops and cafés and the casually clothed waiters in black T-shirts and red aprons fluttering around tables.

It is not too long before they reach his apartment. An antique yellow-stone building with monumental balconies. Pots of violets decorate one of the window sills. On a large terrace, the washing swings softly in the breeze.

Giovanni rings the bell.

"Sì?" Michele answers quickly, as if he was standing by the entry phone.

Her heart hammers violently as she hears his voice.

The door is buzzed open.

The air in the shaded entry leading to the patio is cool and moist. A guarded space where sun beams never enter.

They climb up the three flights. The heels of her shoes echo through the quiet building.

The door is ajar. Giovanni knocks lightly.

"Permesso," he says as he sidesteps to let her in.

She finds in front of her a long dark corridor, receiving a little bit of light from the rooms that branch out from it.

He ventures forth from one of the doorways. She looks at him. Apprehensive. Their eyes meet. Brush against each other like grass in the wind. He comes forward. His face severe with a paroxysm of emotion he is trying to hide. He kisses her on the cheeks.

"We were passing by," says Giovanni as he closes the door behind him. "We thought we come and say hi."

They walk into the glare of the living room. All the windows are open. The breeze draws the curtains out, breathes them back in.

There is a white round table with two chairs in the corner of the room. A white sofa. With a few striped red cushions. The walls are light blue. There is a black and white poster of Federico Fellini and Marcello Mastroianni standing under an umbrella in the rain. They look as if someone is calling them. Their faces half averted from the lens of the camera.

"It looks a little different here." Giovanni sinks into the sofa next to her.

He sits in front of them on an arm chair. He looks around. "Does it? I don't know."

"Maybe the table is new?"

He looks distracted. "Yeah, maybe."

"But the poster is always there."

"I'm thinking of having the whole apartment painted," he says, "Everything white, the living room, the kitchen. Here, I'll keep that wall blue." He points at the wall behind them. He speaks with enthusiastic spontaneity, as if he was just inspired by the idea.

"Just one wall?" Giovanni sounds unconvinced.

"Just that one. And in the bedroom, I'll have one wall green."

"That sounds great." She feels she has to participate in the conversation and not sit there, struck silent by emotions.

"You think so?"

"Yes, I think it's a great idea."

"So I might have to come and bother you guys for some time while they paint the house." He looks at her. His eyes sparkling provocatively. Dangerously. As if he was ready to throw himself off a cliff. Laughing all the while.

"Great!" says Giovanni as he excuses himself to go to the bathroom. His footsteps die down in the corridor.

They rush towards each other. Their nerves, tense, entangled. Their bodies in commotion. Intoxicated with the seething energy of despair,

of plummeting sweetly down a precipice.

"You didn't come." His soft skin smells of the summer and the sea. His beard tickles her cheek. She breathes him in.

"I couldn't. He came with me."

He kisses her with everything in him. Tugs at her hair. Digs his fingers into the soft of her waist.

Like he wanted to carry a piece of her with him.

"I shouldn't have asked. I'm sorry. It was too risky." He speaks quickly, snatching her lips into the urgent heat of his mouth between each sentence, each word.

The door of the bathroom squeals open.

The tips of their fingers brush fleetingly as they disentangle. He goes to the kitchen. She stands up quickly, hurrying out of the room. Suddenly struck by an urgent need to ease herself.

Passing Giovanni on her way to the bathroom, she hopes the darkness in the corridor hides her flushing lips. And the sparkle in her eyes.

They unravel before her eyes. In glimpses. First uploaded by unknown hands. Then downloaded on her computer. She is sitting in the darkness of the room with the curtains drawn. She holds her breath while she watches history taking shape in her country.

She clicks on a video. Her heart beats so wildly, her eyes begin to hurt. Slogans are chanted on rooftops. Women and men. Young and old. Feeble and strong.

Slogans against the wrong done to them. Slogans for whatever memory of justice they can fathom.

Nocturnal chants. Like the calling of the birds. Rising from the rooftops, the carol of their voices filling the air, gliding against the sunset.

She feels a shiver run up her spine. She whispers their words, their slogans, their cries of resistance.

Their calling of God.

Calling their god against the dictator.

She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes.

She can almost see their god. She can almost touch their voices that call upon his name as they straighten their backs, as they shout louder and louder. As they shed their fear into the crimson night.

She can feel their chants surrounding her. And their night penetrating under her skin. She can feel their lovely, uncompromising voices swell inside her veins, inside her lungs. She can feel them becoming an irrevocable part of the rhythm of her breathing.

She can hear their voices calling out to her.

She can see herself standing on a rooftop.

Her fist in the air.

He arrives after dinner with a small suitcase over which Marta and Flavio make a huge fuss as they unpack it. He leaves his parents to the undoing of his suitcase and walks out of the room. Passing by Giovanni's room, he casts a quick glance inside. Sanam is sitting on the bed, leafing through a magazine.

He pauses at the doorway. She looks up at him and smiles.

Her eyes flicker like fireflies at night.

He is impatient to be with her. But he does not know when and how. Like a wounded animal that writhes and wriggles, not knowing how to make the pain go away.

He takes a tentative step into the room. "Giovanni?"

At the mention of his name, her face falls. The smile vanishes. Her gaze hardens. Like the breath hardening in the cold.

Before she can speak, the door of the bathroom opens and Giovanni appears, wearing a robe. He carries the steam of the bath into the room.

"Hey, Michele. *Tutto a posto?*"

"Sì, sì, *tutto bene.*"

She puts the magazine down and stands up. "Would you like to see some of my photos?"

He looks at her gratefully. "Yes, that would be great."

"You've got photos with you here?" Giovanni asks, surprised.

"Oh, yes." She opens one of the cabinets. She is filled with excitement. "The photos of Cambodia. I've brought them with me."

She brings out a large, heavy envelope that she holds in her arms like a child.

"Don't worry, you don't have to look at all of them." She laughs. "I'll show you the selection."

"I'd like to see them all." He turns to Giovanni. "You're coming?"

"No, I've seen them all many times. I'll do some reading."

He hopes Giovanni has not detected the relief palpitating in his eyes.

They move to the sofa in the living room. Their faces gently illuminated by the table lamp. He looks at her for a long moment. He grasps her hand that lies expectant on the sofa and lifts it to his lips.

She smiles at him, feeling extremely awake. Extracting the photos from the envelope, she begins narrating her journey.

A photo of a man and a woman on a motorbike. Between them three children. Two in her arms, another in front of her. Like beans that could spill any minute.

Two men push a boat in the shallow waters of Tonlè Sap Lake. From far, the silhouettes of a floating village. Breathtaking in its unwavering melancholy.

A street kid. Tiny. Shaved head. She plays the flute she means to sell to tourists.

Sanam's voice quavers with emotion as she speaks about them. As if she was reliving the whole journey, here, sitting next to him, feeling the heat of his body, the protection, the yearning. Her thoughts, her emotions flit in and out of the photos, like excited butterflies, flutter around him, smell him, drink him, inhale him in, then back to the photos and that land of sad smiles.

He is obviously moved. He stares into the photos as if he wanted to travel through them by the means of her frozen glimpses. Meanwhile, he presses her hand. Communicating his thoughts, the soaring throbs of his heart through its pressure.

It is now only the two of them. Nothing else exists, except them and the images of the agonized laughter of the world.

The house is immersed in silence. Everyone seems to have gone to bed.

She lays her head against his shoulder. He kisses her. Tenderly. The heavy cloud of guilt and fear begins to lift, to dissipate into the air. He clusters his hands around her face. That feels as if dissolving like a wet painting under the rain.

In her hand, she has the photo of a young woman waving from behind a street food stall.

Silence. Save for their breathing, for the susurrus of the soft blending of their mouths. At last, she draws back.

"Go to your room," she says. She feels not the need to reflect.
"Wait for me there."

She is no longer astonished by the clear sparkle in her voice. By the certainty in her steps towards their bedroom where Giovanni is sleeping. By her steady voice as she whispers into Giovanni's ear that she will be reading in the living room. She watches him fall back to sleep.

Her heart already beating in the room down the corridor.

In his room, there is only the moonlight.

They undress each other. Fingers on buttons, on shirt collars, on sleeves, pulling up, down, off. Like fingers dancing on a harp.

Easing away the pieces. Slowly. Savoring the sweetness of time. The silvery darkness belongs to them. They are now the children of night.

His head on her shoulders, the soft of her stomach. Inhaling the biscuit and honey scent of her warm skin.

Their bodies entangle, like dreams.

Like love poems.

Becoming the strength rushing through the other's blood.

It feels complete. Impeccable. As if this was the moment they have been waiting for ever. And they clasp it, this sigh of pleasure, this blossoming of life, neither frightening nor apologetic, this sweet submergence into stirring, churning, gasping oblivion.

It is like a rebirth.

Afterwards, they lie side by side, she on the soft of his outstretched arm. Motionless, they lie.

Wordless.

She closes her eyes. Just for a second. He turns his face to her, watches the eyelashes interlace. The skin aglow under the starlight. The lovely shape of her mouth. Like a rose blossom.

They fall asleep in the scent of the other's body.

Serene.

Like children's content collapse after a long day at the beach.

Sanam opens her eyes with a start. As if she was pinched while sleeping. Or someone shouted into her ear.

For a moment she cannot remember where she is.

Around her, there is nothing but silence.

He is breathing softly next to her. A few strands of hair have bent into the corner of his closed eyes. His mouth is lightly open, his breathing warms her forehead.

She remembers.

And her stomach quails.

She has to go.

She does not wish to wake him up. She looks at him and an onslaught of emotions takes hold of her. Bitter and piercing, wild and liberating. She places a kiss on his lower lip.

The room is engulfed in darkness. The clouds hold sway in the black sky. It takes a few moments for her eyes to adjust and begin to recognize what is around her.

The door is ajar.

She lifts her head, propping herself on an elbow. The door is indeed open, slightly. Enough for someone to peek in. She remembers having closed it. Not having locked it, but she knows she did indeed shut the door.

A pang of panic goes through her.

She pulls a blanket around her and sits up. Next to her, he makes a little moan, but does not move.

As she gets up, she has the unnerving sensation that there is someone behind the door. She stands in the middle of the room, staring at the door, unable to go on.

Silvery light pours into the room as the clouds are brushed aside from the face of the moon. And she immediately sees it. The shadow. Motionless. Voiceless. Paralyzed behind the door.

She inches forward. Her body stiff with fear, with foreboding. Her trembling fingers lie on the door knob.

She draws it back.

Behind it, Giovanni stares at her, sunken cheeks, white as chalk. His lips the color of dusk. His eyes, empty. In them, there is nothing she can recognize.

She tightens her grip on the blanket, feeling the blood coagulating in her veins. She takes a step back.

"Giovanni," she cries quietly.

Behind her, she hears the sounds of an awakening and shocked movements, and silence, and grappling with sheets, and turning immobile.

Giovanni takes a step towards them, then back. He is staggering. Reeling back and forth. A horrifying dance of agony.

It looks as if he wants to say something, but cannot. As if he has forgotten how to speak. His body fails where it is supposed to help him with the abyss of words.

He stumbles backwards into the thick darkness, turns around and totters down the corridor. His tall, thin body vanishing like a drunkard shadow into the pit of the night.

For a moment, none of them makes the slightest movement. She has to prop herself against the door. The earth shifting underneath her feet. Like sand beneath the waves.

Michele jumps out of the bed and begins quickly getting dressed. She watches him, paralyzed. The world swirling around her head.

"I must go to him." Her thin, quavering voice trickles out of her lips.

She stumbles out of the room and down the corridor. Her legs feel empty inside. Her teeth are chattering. Tears lurking behind, frozen in her eyes.

She bursts into the cold air. Shivering. Dazed. The chilled marble steps under her bare feet. She looks anxiously around.

Giovanni is faltering toward the gate. She runs after him, gasping, panting, calling his name. The gravel piercing her feet.

He does not hear her. Does not turn around.

His shadow stumbles out of the gate and onto the road that suddenly comes to light. The grunting of a fast approaching car reverberates through the air.

Then the violent screech of tires.

And for a moment, everything comes to a sudden, breathless halt. The night, the moon, the blood-splashed silence of the road, the brutal slanted luminescence of the headlights.

Sanam lurches toward Giovanni's body lying motionless on the ground. Her arms outstretched as if she wanted to grab something before it falls.

Out of her open mouth, there is no sound coming out.

As if there was an invisible pillow pressing down on her. Cutting off her air.

Her blanket fallen over the hood of the car, dims the sharp light.

She crushes down next to him. Embracing his head into her naked, shivering body, bending her head over him, hiding his open eyes from the world.

Her hands and breasts shiny with his blood.

Something erupts in her.

The shrill of her wails pierces the cold black sky.

After a few days of rain, the sky has cleared at last. A thin crescent of the moon lies behind a transparent layer of mist. The leaves of the fig tree in front of the window of her room are strewn with rain drops that dolefully reflect the yellow light of lampposts.

Sanam opens the window, holding her face to the mist, closing her eyes. The skin of her face is worn and thin. Bluish shadows underneath her swollen eyes. Her high cheek bones are gaunt.

Savage, merciless pain.

Her suitcase is ready against the wall. A bare room save for a porcelain table lamp and an abstract painting of some sort hanging above the bed.

She is wearing a black dress and a black scarf draped around her shoulders. For anyone looking up at her window, she is like a grief-stricken young widow mourning the premature death of her husband.

The evening hum of the streets trickles into the room. From the corridor comes the hubbub of the other guests of the bed and breakfast descending the stairs, chattering loudly. Outside, an old man wearing a Sicilian hat, with an accordion hanging from his neck, stations himself underneath the fig tree and plays a lively Pizzica.

A few moments later, a young couple begins dancing in front of him. Picking up one foot, making a quick gracious turn, landing the foot on the ground, lifting the other. The woman approaches the man seductively, gives a laugh, dances away. The man trails behind, his open arms around the woman's waist, without touching it. His body swaying rhythmically side to side.

Their bodies full of southern lights. They dance.

There is a light knock at the door.

Michele stands at the doorway, his face haggard, drained, sallow. To hide the trembling of his hands, he hides them in his pockets.

She looks at him inquiringly, anxiously.

"He'll be released in a week." He does not venture forth. He seems to have gotten old in these few days. Strands of gray hair blemish the sides of his temples. "He wants to see you."

"Come inside." She wraps the scarf more tightly around her. "Close the door."

He sits on the bed slowly, as though he did not want to ruffle the bedspread. She lowers herself in front of him on the only chair in the room.

The sound of laughter and music bounces off the walls.

"I'm leaving tomorrow." She pauses, looks at him. "But I won't be returning to California. I've decided to go to Iran."

He does not respond. He merely looks at her. His chapped lips draw apart in a desperate smile, and her stomach quails. The wild sorrow on his face unsettles her. She cannot endure his falling apart. She looks away from him. From the painful dazzle in his eyes.

A tiny, white butterfly enters the room through the open window. It flits around the bed for a while and finally settles on the white curtains.

The mist curling around its wings.

In a sudden act of despondence, Michele lunges forward and down at the foot of her chair. He embraces her knees, his body shaking violently with stifled sobs. He kisses her legs, her knees, her feet with broken, demented fervor.

She crumbles to the floor. Her scarf sliding down her back. She throws her arms around him.

They yank at their clothes, strip each other with the unassailable force of their suffering. They pounce at each other like two wild wolves, foaming at the mouth, tears running down their hollowed cheeks, breaking open, their tormented passion spurting out of them in spates. They writhe and wriggle on the warm floor, digging their nails in the other's flesh, tearing the other apart, gathering the pieces with the sweeping strikes of love and agony and loss.

On the floor humid with the breathing of the night, under the painful thrashing of their bodies, they watch a part of their being die a torturous, inexorable, irreversible death.

Sanam leaves the bed and breakfast at dawn. The deserted streets await sunrise that will not come. The sky is once again laden with hovering gray clouds.

The taxi driver helps her with her suitcase. She gets into the car, wrapping her scarf tightly around her, clasping her hands. In the silence of the morning, she is aware of the beating of her heart, hesitant, yet green, like the spring.

The driver eases the car off the curve and begins a bumpy drive down the street.

From the window, she sees a bunch of poppies by a yellow wall, boring their long necks out of the cobble stones.

Swaying in the wind, it looks as if they are waving at her goodbye.