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**AWAY, A NOVEL, AND A CRITICAL ESSAY ON NARRATIVE
SPACE WITH REFERENCE OF PAUL AUSTER'S FICTION**

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth in partial fulfilment for
the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Faculty of Arts

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List of abbreviations

- A* *Away*, the creative part of this dissertation by M. J. Capelo
- SP* *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by T. E. Lawrence (1997). Hertfordshire: Wordsworth.
- SS* *The Sheltering Sky* by Paul Bowles (2006) London: Penguin Books.
- RLVS* *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* by Marguerite Duras (1997) in *Duras: Romans, cinema, theatre, un parcours 1943-1993*. Manchecourt (France): Gallimard.

The editions of Auster's works cited in the text are abbreviated as follows:

- CLT* *In the Country of Last Things* (1989) London: Faber and Faber.
- NYT* *The New York Trilogy* (1990) New York: Penguin Books.
- GW* *Ground Work* (1991) London: Faber and Faber.
- MP* *Moon Palace* (1992a) London: Faber and Faber.
- MC* *The Music of Chance* (1992b) London: Faber and Faber.
- MV* *Mr Vertigo* (1994) London: Faber and Faber.
- AH* *The Art of Hunger* (1998) London: Faber and Faber.

ABSTRACT

Name of Candidate: Maria José de Brito Capelo

Title of thesis: *Away*, a novel, and a critical essay on narrative space with reference of Paul Auster's fiction

My novel, *Away*, is mainly the story of a woman travelling alone, leaving all friends and relatives behind. She seeks out remote, beautiful and difficult places where, firstly, she has travelled to before and, then, different locations that she hasn't known in the past. We discover that, through trauma, she has lost her sense of identity – she is in the midst of a psychological crisis that becomes clear only after the journey has been underway for some time, when circumstances force her to accept help from others.

With the protagonist my aim was to portray a permanent and continuous possibility of ending, stretching endlessly. This idea is irretrievable from the notion of space, as conceived here.

In Part I, I explore how not only this main character, but also, Fred embody space. Here, I examine the conception of space, taking in various perspectives ranging from philosophy, geography, culture and literature studies, where we find an interdisciplinary approach to space. My contention, drawing on mainly Lefebvre's and Massey's investigations, is that space is produced and is simultaneously a product embodied by the characters. In addition, I analyse how a particular territory – the desert – enacts the nature of space, as defined before, in selected works by T. E. Lawrence, Wilfred Thesiger and Paul Bowles. Also, I argue that this conception of space is explored in some narratives of Paul Auster - *CG*, *MC* and *CLT* - in part II. Further, I examine other features of space. I contend that Auster's writing explores space as a realm upon which Auster's characters engage in a process of construction and disintegration both of space and their identity. Therefore, here, space is considered as a sphere constituted by a process of an ever-opened, changing and ongoing interrelation

with the characters and the text.

Finally, although space is presented in this essay as the major tool for investigation through composition and critical analysis, other tools, intrinsically, and I argue inseparable in fact, I proceed to an investigation, in part III, of notions of time, identity, writing and narrator in my creative work. Beside these, I investigate particularly the relationships between characters.

The thesis concludes by demonstrating that writing as space evolves in more subtle, more transient and labyrinthian ways through the reference to other writers whose writing has significantly influenced my creative work.

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Finally, as a small token of gratitude I launch into the future a tribute to my nieces, Aurora and Clara Neves, who were born during the writing of this thesis.


I dedicate this thesis to all my friends and family, with all my love.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

Publication of a short chapter (fiction) 'Siri and Ray - One Night in Aswan' (1999) in the anthology *We Write in Water*, launched and presented at the Bath Literary Festival on the 1 February 2000 (ISBN: 1 903383 00 5)

Word count of main body of thesis: 89, 259 words

Signed..........

Date28 January 2011.....

AWAY

by M. J. Capelo

Once you start throwing yourself away, it becomes easier with practice
Lewis (2002)

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Away with boundaries, those enemies of horizons! Let genuine distance
appear! Milosz (no date supplied¹)

¹ Milosz, O.V. de L. (no date supplied) *L'amoureuse initiation* (no place and edition supplied) in
Bachelard, G. (1994) *The Poetics of Space* Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, p.190 [Permission
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1. WHERE ARE WE?

After the long hours of waiting, perhaps it would be best just to forget it. Forget the hours, the wait, the bus: forget everything altogether. It was not that Fred had to put up with it. He knew it was best to give up. It was silly for someone like him, after only a handful of days in Egypt, to find himself completely at a loss, when he could put off travelling until the next day or even the day after.

Maybe it was that drive to push ahead that had led to all the problems he'd run into: bug bites, which were still stinging throughout his body; diarrhoea draining him inside of every fluid together with the realisation that both in Luxor and Aswan he'd found absolutely nothing left of what he'd come for. Instead, in those places, he'd landed in old luxury hotels, whose features only accentuated an eerie silence. Despite their immense embedded history in his eyes they'd been like the dust, sand and even the Nile. Everything all around him emerged striking and inaccessible. Fred felt squashed by the imposing vision of each and every place. Only later, much later, he would see himself at the Valley of the Kings, eyes blinded with sun and sand, trailing along nothingness, realising it as the perfect image of those first days of his travelling. Then, he hadn't become aware that secrecy, astuteness and a kind of imaginative artifice were part of that space and people inhabiting it. It was a wall Fred wasn't quite able to get through. At the moment, though, behind this wall that he could sense but not yet perceive, he was like a scrap of paper blowing in the wind. And he didn't even know if this wind was hot or cold anymore.

His vision, or whatever it was, presented him a surreal scene every time he went outside the café. Was it just because of the rain lashing down, after the sun scorching days, he wondered, without being able to really think about it. Yet also within him,

there was this bizarre feeling growing deeper and deeper still, a frightening blur of stark contrasts like a sudden downpour in the middle of spring.

By now, he was doing nothing but walking into the café again. He had kept coming and going in and out, time after time, like an automaton.

Ali, Fred's whirling new friend, slid once more into the chair beside his.

'Any news, Ali?'

'Those two men over there are getting really angry, because Layla, the fat man's daughter, said she did no more washing for her husband, the other man's son, because...'

'Ali, I mean news about the bus!'

'I don't know about the bus. You see Layla thinks...' and he took off at the sound of the two men's voices swelling to a crashing wave above the damp, smelly and smoky cloud clinging across the café.

Fred got up and went outside. Inside, he could barely stand the strange noise of a language he didn't know and he could hardly breathe in that airless place. Outside, the rain hadn't stopped pouring. Only the night looked darker, wetter, colder than before. All the same nothing seemed to move anywhere. Even the rain was as if it had been glued to the place; its rhythm the same, just playing over and over again on the very exact empty screen.

'Come, come in,' said Ali popping up very excitedly next to him, pointing to the café.

'What is it?'

'Come.'

'There's no bus tonight?'

'No, no. There is dinner. They are friends again and they are buying everyone dinner. Come, quick' and back he went inside.

Fred raised his hands to his forehead.

‘Mister!’ he heard.

He turned his head and saw half of a young woman round the corner of the café. He went towards her, but before he got close to her, she suddenly disappeared behind the corner, as if she’d been pulled from behind by something. An old woman was holding the young one’s dress and they were arguing with one another. Fred looked at them, bewildered. He wanted to do something, though he was aware it was bad policy to intervene in a dispute between women, Arabic or not. So, he stepped backwards a little, put up his hands and started saying: ‘It’s all right, it’s all right’. It seemed to make not the least difference as far as they were concerned; they carried on all the same. He gave up, putting his hands down, and sighed. At that moment, the dispute stopped as if he’d pressed some concealed button. Only when they had passed him at a trot, did he hear the roar of the bus’s engine, filling the place with its din. He shot over to fetch his luggage from the café, but as he got to the bus there was already a shouting and gesticulating crowd round the driver. There weren’t enough seats for all the passengers, even if the tickets had number seats printed on them, or so he supposed, being Arabic numbers one of the few things he had fought hard to learn and could read. Again, he felt powerless, completely drowned by the scratchy pitch of zillions of aspirating h’s clashing against a maze of sibilant sounds, striving to win out amongst the rain, the mud, the others; everything and everyone. Instead of growing dispirited, he too plunged into the fight and, almost in the blink of an eye, was screeching the sounds of the few broken Arabic words he could get hold of. No way could he get an inch closer to the bus, though. All his broad-shouldered stature, colossal among the natives, only gave him a view of what was going on. There, power was of a different nature. Despite that, as luck would have it, slowly the people moved aside, allowing him through till he came to the front, where the bus-driver and the two women who had been behind the corner

of the café were engaged in negotiations, trying to reach some kind of agreement. The girl pointed a finger to him and up they went on the bus followed by Fred and finally the bus driver. The door was immediately shut and the bus was off the same instant with a dangerous jolt and a noisy splash. Fred, still standing at the entrance, tumbled over two passengers who protested loudly at once or so it sounded to him the shrieking of their voices. Apologising, he tried to get up as quickly as he could, which wasn't easy, with that tall and sturdy body of his. In the middle of the natives, there was no chance of him not standing out. You couldn't miss a white blue-eyed hulk of a man. With some difficulty, Fred struggled to keep on his feet, as he crossed the aisle, searching for an empty place, all the way to the rear, where he eventually settled on the edge of a seat.

He gazed at the bus's interior. Although these people were still strange to him, he realised he didn't feel them as unusual anymore. The two women who had helped him to step on board were seated at the front. They were the only women on board and he the only foreigner. He should thank them, he thought, although he didn't have a clue how they'd managed to pull themselves and him through. As it was out of the question to get up from his seat, he merely stared ahead, waiting for the moment they would glance at him to say thank you. After a while, however, he gave up. At the start of the trip, he'd seen them talking to each other and then the back of their heads had stopped moving in any direction; they only kept swaying at the volatile rhythm of the drive. They had not turned their heads back once. They'd probably fallen asleep, like most of the passengers and his neighbours. No wonder his seat had been the last to be taken; a sleeping passenger was stretched out there. He occupied almost the entire space, completely oblivious of everything; not making even a slight move to change position. It looked more like a bundle of clothes, with that heavy black coarse cloak and hood he was wearing, than a person. Fortunately, it didn't make practically a sound, but it did smell bad, even though he didn't have a blue plastic bag full of dirty clothes as most of

the travellers seemed to carry. Fred also had one with the indispensable big bottle of water.

Only Fred, the driver and someone next to him seemed awake. There was no silence however: music was playing; the driver looked to be arguing ceaselessly with the fellow by his side and so much that, even on top of the music and the uproar of the driving, Fred could discern those high-pitched notes, now and again.

Eventually, Fred fell asleep too, despite the erratic and reckless driving that had been keeping him very conscious and the intense cold from gusts of wind coming through the broken window opposite, along with the rest, for a long time. The fact that it was raining hard clearly didn't make any difference to the traditional wild way of driving. Luckily for him, it was too dark to see anything.

After that, he just remembered jumping up, startled, with shaking hands and sharp fingernails clawing at his right shoulder on the empty bus. It was his neighbour's hands. Instinctively he pat one of his hands on top of the others' one feeling a big ring protruding from it and the smoothness of a woman's hand. It was a woman whom he'd been sharing the seat with. He gaped at her surprised, but as soon as he moved his legs slightly out to the corridor, she leapt over and in a flash scurried for the bus exit.

'Where are we?' he'd asked as she was fleeing.

'The end. Cairo. Cairo,' was the answer given along with a gesture, pointing into darkness pierced by flickering lights.

Pat, by his side, had been pretending to sleep, her eyes shut almost entirely, ever since she'd noticed who was coming to share her seat. Her mind though had raced, battled throughout the journey. She was tired and bored beyond the limits. It had been a day to scratch out from beginning to end. She'd made all the wrong moves. She'd gone too far into paranoia territory; farther than she could handle.

That night, Pat had to drag herself to the hotel and on to the bed, stunned by the

endless pills she'd swallowed during the last stretch of the trip.

Next morning, Fred came down to the hotel dining room for breakfast, but couldn't find the breakfast room. Walking through the maze of public rooms and bars, he just saw tables set for lunch and the few members of staff he spotted seemed to be always in a rush constantly disappearing, before he could reach them. He was sure that he'd read that breakfast was being served between 7 am. and 10 am. With all this wandering, it was nearly 10 am. and he was getting nervous, afraid of not having anything to eat for he was hungry and the hotel was in the middle of nowhere, except the Pyramids, which kept coming into sight from practically every window. At last, stepping on to the terrace, Fred saw someone at a solitary table eating. However, after his first stride, he stopped immediately. He didn't know how long he stood there motionless, as he didn't know when his look turned into a stare. One of the Pyramids dazzled out of the glare, blinding his vision at first and overpowering everything with its sheer immensity, magnified by the light. Then, for a while, focusing on the lonely figure on the terrace – a woman wearing a traditional Arab dress and a scarf covering her head, from where bright colours radiated - he realised why he had instinctively halted. He was looking at an image he'd already seen. Not only was the scenery the same, the woman was in the very exact position: the body sideways, facing the desert, by the small table with crockery. Even the waving curtain, placed at the right-hand corner was identical. Pinned to the place, gazing in awe at the scene, he couldn't believe what he was seeing. He was looking at a double. The woman, as well as everything else, was the living picture of a photo he had. A photo, which had been taken there many years before,

exactly the same, except for the colour, as it was a black and white photo, and the fact that the woman in the picture was dead. Still, eerily, the live woman seemed to be motionless too. The woman in the photo was the reason why Fred was there. So, only after what seemed an eternity, yet unhinged, did he take a small step, just to see if something happened, but nothing changed, except the perspective and the perception that the woman was making moves. Finally, taking a deep breath, Fred slowly began walking towards her. Pat was finishing her breakfast, when she saw him approaching. As the distance between them shortened and the movements took hold, Fred willed himself to think it was nothing but a *déjà vu*, just a trick of the mind, which had replaced what seemed like a rich educated Arab woman by a dead one.

At last, standing next to her, he smiled shyly and explained his breakfast problem. A flicker of a smile passed across Pat's face as a reply; she lit a cigarette, slowly, and eyed him for what seemed to him a long moment, before saying to him: 'Wait.' She went inside and returned a few minutes later. A shiver went down Fred's spine.

'Someone will come shortly,' she said.

'Thank you,' he said standing up as he waited for her to take her seat. To Fred, it looked as if she obliged with the composure of Cleopatra herself. Also, her appearance was resplendent in the bright orange dress with a small golden pattern, neatly showing the shape of her body, which could have been the body of a goddess. When she'd passed under the sunlight on her way to the interior of the hotel her figure was all glittering, except for her head, covered tightly by a black scarf.

He sat at her table, feeling both excited and uneasy. However, Pat wasn't expecting company, but managed to suppress her discomposure by briefly closing her eyes and saying to herself, 'Help me, Allah, to keep my nerves'. After the bad previous day, she was trying to find some balance.

Fortunately, the waiter arrived immediately to take the order and in a second, it seemed, tea was on the table, followed by toast and scrambled egg.

‘Are you the owner of the hotel?’ he asked her, impressed by the swiftness of the service and the familiarity with which she had spoken with the waiter.

‘Me? No, no. Just a guest. Please, enjoy your breakfast,’ she said and opened a book.

Hopefully, she thought, she would get through with no further small talk. At least he wasn’t American. So, perhaps, he would know to leave her in peace.

While eating, Fred, now and then, cast his eyes on her, trying to figure out who this mysterious woman was. He’d taken her for Arab because she was completely dressed as a native, but also her face fitted the profile of an Arab with the deep tan and broad dark line of kohl around her eyes. Still, underneath all that make-up, her features didn’t quite match the characteristically Arabic ones, even if in Egypt the mix of different frames seemed so diversified. Something in those lines of her physicality looked to point somewhere else. Anyway, now, he couldn’t see much, as she was shielded by the book she was reading, but he noticed the ring-bracelet she was wearing on her left hand. For some reason it caught his eye. His mind searched back and forward – why did it hold his attention? Was it similar to something that Carole Lynn, the dead woman on the photo, had worn, or to a bracelet he’d seen in some shop window in Luxor, or on some woman’s wrist? He didn’t feel brave enough to ask, but he was determined to find out somehow. To begin with, he decided to stall her until his memory could work on it a little more. It might be an interesting lead to investigate for his project. Admittedly, it wasn’t very likely, but without knowing you couldn’t tell. And if it turned out to be a special item used by the engaged women or for a particular purpose or reason, then it would be good to know. He took a chance:

‘Did you come to Cairo on work?’

Pat turned to him, still holding the book in her hands, and then averted her eyes, thinking for a moment how to answer that question. “Yes” would do for a second, but then other questions would follow. “No” was even worse from that point of view. Fred looked at her, waiting for a reply. By the corner of her eye, she saw his frowning brows turn into a fixed stare, while her mind raced for an answer that could put a stop to more questions. Something short, firm and final. But she couldn’t. It was very early for her brain to think for so long it had been out of order to almost everything, particularly social interactions, never mind the time of the day. His eyes aimed at her now. So, baffled and tired, facing straight at him, she jumped ahead:

‘I don’t know. I just came.’

‘Because you like Cairo,’ he said by way of helping her out.

Pat was not quite sure if she was meant to finish the sentence or if he himself had finished it for her. She kept quiet. Fred got up. However, she couldn’t go on with her reading, even if she was holding the book again before her eyes. He’d turned his back on her; let his eyes wander up to the emerging Pyramids and then down to the human and animal muddle. Natives clung to tourists in their attempts to sell the foreigners whatever they had, camel and horse rides, tours to the Pyramids or to Cairo, bottles of water, anything they could think of. And everywhere, the heat was already fierce, pounding on every muscle of the repellent mass below and above, like himself, but reverberating exuberantly from the landscape and Pat, who seemed dry as dust. Then, he swung round, lingering with his hips leaning on the railing, until he could see again, out of that sudden blackness, when Pat blurted:

‘I just came, because I wished to be somewhere else.’

Fred looked at her, perplexed.

‘You know, people often say, Oh I wish I could go away, but they don’t move. I heard myself saying that. So, I packed and took off. That’s all,’ she concluded, letting

her hand fall on the table with a clinking of the bracelet. His eyes alighting once more on that object, he realised where he'd seen it before. It had been on the bus, on the hand of the woman seated next to him. He hadn't been able to recognise it glittering under the sunlight, but now that it was in the shadow he could place it. This discovery only deepened the mystery further, however. One day she looked like a beggar, the next like a queen. And now? One moment she was a sphinx, the following one, a pythia blurting out a riddle. What did she mean by that remark? Something had changed. He couldn't grasp it what was, but even her face looked to have hardened a touch. He felt as if the ground was evaporating beneath his feet. He took a few steps towards her, tentatively, and changing the subject, he asked:

'Are you going for a walk in Cairo?'

Pat thought it was best to resume her lady's pose and make for a French leave that is in her words, scam:

'Oh, no. It's too hot for me, I'm afraid. Even here, it's becoming unbearable. If you'll excuse me, I'll go up to my room.'

'Of course,' he said disappointed but adding with sincere eagerness:

'I hope we can meet again and talk. It's so refreshing to be able to speak to someone. I don't speak Arabic, so... Maybe we can have dinner together.'

'Wrong' she was about to say. Instead, she managed to restrain herself and make a silent exit.

'Carmen Miranda² with the bananas on top,' Pat said to her image in the mirror.

² Famous Brazilian actress/singer who became wide known by wearing a big hat decorated with large fruits.

‘Not only bananas, but pineapple, mango, passion fruit and everything,’ she added laughing wearily.

She took off the veil covering her head and the scarves tied in a knot at the back of her skull looking at the mirror.

‘Christ!’ she muttered letting her hands fall slightly onto the dressing table, after sliding them over her cheeks.

She turned her back to the mirror to face the huge rectangle of sun lighting the carpet and turning it already into a warm pool. She felt like diving and letting herself drift away. Nonetheless, she stood up, stripped off and changed into a black *galabyeh*, put on her leather strap sandals, tied a white scarf around her head and left.

On her way out of the hotel, she stopped by the reception and asked the clerk staring him in the eye:

‘Gamal, tell me honestly, how do I look?’

With a wide smile on his face and winking his right eye, he whispered close to her:

‘Very beautiful. You’re always very beautiful, but you were much more beautiful before. Why did you take off the dress you had on? You were so nice!’

‘Gamal, you are joking with me. You know very well that I couldn’t go out to the streets like that, under this sun. No Egyptian woman would and you know that I know that. Don’t be silly, come on. Tell me, honestly, if you can, how do I look?’

‘Ok, ok. You are fine. A bit plain, a bit like a man, but fine.’

Pat sighed. She knew what he meant by that. The *galabyeh* was loose like the ones used by men and apart from one ring, there was nothing shining on her – no bracelet, no earrings, no necklace, no high-heeled glittering mules, but her concern was of a different sort.

‘I am going to pray in the mosque, Gamal, I want to be plain. But look at my eyes. Is the kohl all right, isn’t it too broad, too big?’

‘No. It’s perfect. The problem is it’s alone. There’s no shade.’

‘Shade?’

‘Yes, on your face: shade. Even just a little bit of brown glossy shade. And you don’t have any lipstick, do you?’

‘Ok, Gamal. Just forget it. You do your job properly, I’ll do mine.’

‘I do my job very well.’

‘Do you? Leaving guests without breakfast?’

‘That was not me,’ he replied offended and added:

‘But you see: that one doesn’t know to dress.’

‘Who?’

‘The guest.’

‘He’s a foreign...’ she started, but then realised that if she continued there would be no end to the conversation. So, she made a gesture of zipping her mouth, while smiling.

‘But, Pat...’ he insisted, but she shook her head, put her hand on her ears and stepped outside.

On the way to Cairo city centre, from the taxi’s window, Fred looked disconcertingly at the increasing uproar and hubbub of that gigantic city as the car speeded towards the destination. It was far too fast to take in all those flashes of pedestrians everywhere, even in the middle of dangerous road junctions and roundabouts; donkey carts; goats crossing the streets; countless unfinished two or three-storey buildings and then even big tower blocks, many without windows, all with uncompleted roofs from where rose

rusty metallic grids waiting for the addition of more floors on top whenever; constant horns and lights throbbing, not to mention the nasty gusts of fume coming from the taxi's open windows like shotgun blasts; the blaring Arabic music gushing out from the radio and the innumerable hanging lucky charms from which two seemed to be compulsory – the evil eye and the hand of Fatima.

Once standing on the high pavement Fred felt as if he was already being engulfed in the fifteen million people overcrowding the monstrous city.

That day he decided to move on his two feet, meandering through the huge tentacles of that massive city. For him it was necessary to advance slowly. Not that it helped much to soften the chaos before his eyes, but at least, somehow, he was part of it too and somewhat in control. However, definitively he wasn't a city man. Tired, sweaty and overwhelmed Fred returned to the hotel, well before sunset.

Again and again he'd looked at his city map, lost himself, got back on track, confused. After sweating and drinking water ceaselessly, he'd been unable to help himself thinking that Cairo was nothing but a vast drained plain where humans **were** doomed to tread, trundle and stomp. All the time, there was that relentless mass of people, of cars, of cyclists moving and weaving through the streets and roads. The way everyone moved was arbitrary: people would put their feet on the roads defying the cars and bikes, while these would dart across ahead of bodies or circling them. It was rare to see someone halting, never mind discerning rules. The only thing which seemed to matter was to get on. To Fred it looked like Russian Roulette, but if you don't play the game, you succumb. As he had. Still somehow he made his way on foot back to the hotel. Once there, with his heart racing, he had only one thing on his mind – to fall on a shady recliner by the swimming pool in the dusk.

‘Hello. Did you have a good day?’ asked Gamal as soon as Pat entered the hotel.

‘Excellent’.

‘Good, but you’re too late. It’s already dark.’

‘Gamal, I can take care of myself. I’m a grown-up woman, you know?’

‘It doesn’t matter. Now, you must remember you’re a single woman again, a very beautiful single woman, and that it is very, very dangerous to go around like that. You know what the Koran says...?’

‘Gamal! Stop right there’, she interrupted him.

‘All right,’ he replied resigned, adding soothingly:

‘You go and have a nice bath, relax, dress up gorgeous and come down for dinner.’

Pat looked at him, her eyes wide open, showing defiance.

‘You want to eat in the room, isn’t it? You don’t want to speak to anybody, even me, Guda and Zhoraid. You don’t care about us.’

‘All right, all right, I’ll come down for dinner. You can save your crocodile tears.’

‘What time do you want your dinner?’

‘In about an hour and a half. Is that ok?’

‘It’s perfect. You’d better go then or you’ll be late.’

She frowned, suspicious of his worrying about time.

‘Gamal, tell me, what’s going on in your mind?’

‘Why, nothing.’

‘Well, never mind, if there were something for you to tell me, you would have told me by now. So, no doubt it’s something you’re not going to tell me, right?’

‘To be honest, I’m just thinking that there’s no such thing as a grown-up woman.’

Pat burst out laughing, turned round heading to her room and kept laughing while muttering to herself: to be honest...

‘Mrs. Sibley?’

Pat dropped the menu and looked up startled.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.’

She was so baffled, she couldn’t say anything. Just as she was reading a note on the menu left by Gamal telling her she would have company and thinking you son-of-a-bitch, she heard her surname, as if it were a police call.

‘May I join you?’ Fred asked.

‘Please,’ she replied awkwardly, pointing to the chair.

‘Have you chosen?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘Anything you can recommend?’

‘I, I don’t know...’

She picked up the menu again quickly and made out a grimace at the choice.

After they ordered, Pat managed to maintain a more relaxed pose. Fred observed her, waiting for her to speak. She had such a dark tan, he thought that maybe she had some Arab blood, despite her nationality. As she remained silent, he told her

what he was thinking about.

‘Who knows,’ she answered smiling.

She wondered what Gamal had told him. Fred decided to take another approach:

‘I wouldn’t have guessed you were American.’

‘Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, but that’s what is on my passport.’

‘I wasn’t disappointed. I was just surprised.’

‘I must say I’m surprised too, to find you know so much about me.’

‘Oh, no. It was just by chance that I knew. And I don’t know that much. I only asked your name. I know your name, nationality and marital status; nothing else.’

‘I think that’s quite enough. I don’t know anything at all about you.’

‘Sorry. I thought you knew. Fredrik Lunt, Norwegian, single, working on a research project about Carole Lynn, a Norwegian writer.’

‘All right, all right. That’s enough,’ she interrupted, adding: ‘You’re not going to tell me now the story of your life, are you?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Good!’ she couldn’t help exclaiming. ‘If there’s something I can’t stand its people pouring out their life stories to the first unfortunate person they run into.’

Fred was slightly taken aback by the sudden spontaneity of her outburst. It seemed to have come from a different person; not from her. Because, again, as on the first time he had seen Pat, she was dressed to kill.

‘Carole Lynn wrote some book called Songs of or to... something. I don’t remember the name anymore.’ Pat said.

He looked at her surprised, though he doubted she’d read anything by Carole Lynn.

‘Do you mean *Songlines*?’ he asked her.

‘I don’t think so. Isn’t that Bruce Chatwin’s? No, I seem to remember that Carole Lynn knew Karen Blixen, alias, Isak Dinesen. They were from the beginning of the twentieth century and Chatwin was born around the mid twentieth century, but I might be wrong. I’m too old to have names or dates in my mind.’

Now, Fred was genuinely amazed.

‘Then it was *Erratic Songs* that you read?’

‘Yes, that’s it. That’s the title. But don’t ask me anything about it. I read it ages ago and I’ve forgotten everything.’

He didn’t believe her. Of course she remembered that book. Even if in her memory there were only small fragments or a general idea of it or still quite the essence of the story persisted. So, he pursued the route where the discussion had taken them. The testimony of a Carole Lynn reader, particularly an American one, who was in the same hotel where the writer had stayed and who moreover bore some striking resemblance to Lynn, could be an asset to his research. Nevertheless, Pat revealed such a strong resistance to it that he let the matter drop, afraid she would bluntly refuse. By now he realised she had no problem in being blunt all of a sudden. Later, another time, he would try again. Anyway, at the moment, having dinner with such a beautiful and interesting woman was like a dream.

As the main dishes came, the conversation tuned in to the topic of food and cooking, which proved to be neutral ground.

Later, on the way up to their rooms, Fred said:

‘It would be good if you could show me the sites of Cairo. You see, it’s very hard for me to go around this city – it’s my first time here. How about being my guide tomorrow?’

‘I’m sorry. I’m busy tomorrow.’

‘Well, we’ll meet at dinner then.’

‘Right. See you tomorrow.’ And wrong, she said to herself again, closing the door. Not that the evening had turned out to be so bad as she’d thought, but she wanted to travel by herself; everything, especially people, were to be kept at bay as they were the heaviest burden you could carry. Actually, people were unbearable altogether. For lack of wings, Pat was training her feet to fly; precisely to escape from being held by anything or anyone. She had cut herself away from everything and still there was much more to unload. No way she was going to fall into the most common of all traps – to be caught in any dependence on people. She was just picking up speed. The lighter you are, the faster you’ll go; that was the only thing on her mind. It didn’t matter if she’d have to keep on the run forever. She didn’t know, she didn’t care to know. She just knew she had to let everything fall, to discard the whole lot, as she did with the clothes and things she bought on the way and then left behind. Like she was doing now in her room: stripping herself down to her naked body, getting into bed and falling asleep to the mere sound of her breath.

Fred fell on the bed. He was exhausted and conscious of having failed throughout the day, but happy that at least he’d had a good time at dinner. He was amazed by the number of countries Pat had been to and by how much she knew about so many different cultures and languages. It was a shame she didn’t seem to want to go around the city with him. She could help him enormously. However, for some reason, at some moments, she’d withdrawn herself, like an animal going back into its shell. He hadn’t learnt anything else about her, except what the clerk had provided him. Throughout the whole evening, she had not disclosed a thing about her life or personality. All she’d done was to scatter herself through her food experiences over the entire world, so it seemed. Maybe, she was a writer too, like Carole Lynn. Either that or she worked for some secret service. The likeness between Pat and Carole was so incredible that it was becoming scary, in his mind. One thing clear, perhaps the only

one, about Carole Lynn was that she'd not been shy. Wherever she'd been, she'd met a lot of people; she'd led a full social life, even a promiscuous one. Fred envied that joyful life Carole had lived, although he knew that way of life wasn't possible anymore, nowadays. True: she'd also suffered acutely through severe periods of pain. Anyway, where were the vestiges of that past, he wondered. He was starting to fear that these residues were deeply encrusted and that he wouldn't be able to notice them. That again reminded him of Pat, of that secrecy, that enigma hovering in the air round her. And around and around in his head he compared the two women, till he felt exhausted. Still he had to keep moving on. Though he had already moved in several directions, eager and open eyed, he felt confused and defeated, Fred had to persevere, because he believed it was important to see things, to come as close as possible and to feel them. Carole Lynn had lived there on and off. If he was going to write her biography he had to understand why she had chosen that place, what was there that had made such an effect on her. She'd left only scarce notes about Egypt – a few places, a few names, but in her writing the passion she'd succumbed to for that land was deeply embedded; it was in the characters; in the settings like an air current streaming, sometimes only a waft, other times a gale, but the problem was it never blew as a single flow. There were always so many disparate winds from such innumerable places. No doubt, he'd followed some wrong directions. On and on, his memory tried to track his footsteps, his reasoning, but there too he lost himself in a chaotic jumble, until he drifted off to sleep, unaware and drained.

Right under the blazing heat of the day till sunset, Pat wandered about in a part of what

is known in the Western world as the City of the Dead, a cemetery where mostly poor people lived. All covered from top to bottom in black, slowly her boots meandered through clutters of stones, scraps of metal and wood, garbage of all kind, trees, gardens, marbled floors, on top of the dead, and amongst the living. Occasionally, she halted here and there behind stone walls or miserable shanties to avoid attracting attention from the inhabitants or tourists or where there were more crowds or groups of children playing. Now and then, she rested inside rich and vast mausoleums; in open courts with trees or in crumbling cubicles where it was said Sufi dervishes had once lived. Sometimes, she would find a tomb owner; the undertaker; someone uselessly sweeping the dust with a broom or people with boughs visiting the dead. After a first glance at her, they would ignore her, keeping to their routines. She knew many of these people living there considered themselves dead already too. She'd talked to some years before, listened to how suddenly, caught in a strike of misfortune, they'd ended up there leading such a wretched life that their only desire was to die. Now, there was no need to talk anymore.

When the sun started its descent, firing its last incandescent rays, she was having a break sat on a stone, her hands cupped above her eyes, she glanced up, to where the splendour of the Al-Azhar mosque roosted on the top of the hill like a magnanimous eagle, spreading its wings in full resplendence. She'd thought of climbing up there, but she gave up the idea. She was feeling too weary for such a climb and not at all in the mood to face either the residents of the cemetery or the tourist crowds congregated up there like a bunch of sheep sheltering from the sun to be dazzled in silence by its untouchable luxuriousness. There they would be, keeping their side of the bargain, complying with the impossible chore of learning the history of the religion, while staring quietly at such an exquisite eagle; though it was on that condition that they could be admitted. Tough that one, but the tourists loved it. Better than to trail

along in the dust, around the stones, or to be stuck inside the claustrophobic tombs of the Egypt of the Pharaohs, so that they could put one more tick on the list of things to do and boast about their feat to all their friends and tell them it was a must, obviously only because the Pharaohs and the life of ancient Egypt had disappeared completely off the face of the earth.

Back at the hotel, Pat took a shower, put on a strap dress and went through her set of relaxing exercises. It consisted of a choreography she'd put together from an assemblage of movements, for the most part belonging to Chinese martial arts and Oriental meditation schools. Every inch of the body and mind should attain utter relaxation, so as to become light, empty and ultimately non-existent. Almost without exception, the exercises lulled her into the sleep of the just.

About 11 p.m., Pat's phone rang. Surprised, she picked it up.

'Yes?'

'Pat?'

'Yes,' she said slowly.

'It's Fred.'

'Yes.'

'You weren't asleep, were you?'

'Yes, I was.'

'I'm sorry, I was wondering if you'd like to come down for a drink. There's a nice cool breeze outside.'

'I'm already in bed and I'm very tired, I'm sorry.'

‘Well, see you tomorrow then.’

‘Yes. Good-night’ and she hung up.

Early the next afternoon, when Gamal saw Pat was finishing her breakfast, he called Fred’s room to let him know.

‘Hello. There you are. I’d thought I wasn’t going to see you anymore.’

‘You wouldn’t have missed anything.’

‘Why do you say that?’ he asked, sitting down at her table.

‘Why?’ she started, but then paused for a moment, at a loss for words.

‘Just forget it,’ she replied in the end.

He didn’t, but carried on as if he had.

‘Do you always take your breakfast so late?’

Back to the questionnaire, Pat thought. What a pain.

‘Sometimes I do and other times I don’t,’ she said sighing loudly and adding:

‘And what about you? Do you set your alarm clock for breakfast, like very early in the morning?’

‘Well, I do have an alarm clock to wake me up. I have to make the most of the day.’

‘Good for you,’ she snapped.

Fred laughed, amused by her sudden briskness. She turned her eyes towards the desert’s mounds. Fred, thinking maybe he had upset her, explained:

‘I’m not laughing at you.’

‘You don’t have to bother about that. You can laugh at whatever you want. That’s up to you, it’s not my business.’

‘What’s your business, anyway?’

‘I’m out of business.’

‘Are you going to stay long in Cairo?’

By now, Pat was really impatient and dispatching him at one blow she said:

‘I don’t know. What I do know, it’s that I have to get going now. So, good-bye,’ she finished getting up.

‘See you later,’ said Fred when she was already out the balcony.

What had happened? Fred asked himself. He couldn’t understand.

After a while, when Pat stepped outside the hotel, Fred was behind her.

‘We could share the taxi, at least...’ he suggested.

Pat turned around. She opened her mouth, but she refrained from saying what she was going to in the end. She wasn’t in a good mood. If she started to get rude, she knew she’d only feel worse. Instead, she said:

‘Let me do the talking to the driver.’

‘Of course.’

Once in the taxi, though, she said to him, as politely as she could manage:

‘Do you mind not speaking? I have to do some thinking.’

‘Ok.’

In spite of that, during the entire ride, Pat and the taxi driver talked without stopping. Apart from ‘yes and ‘no’, Fred didn’t understand a word about their conversation. Sometimes they seemed to be arguing and Pat looked to be the one in charge of the situation. At least all the windows, except the driver’s one, were shut after something she’d said, or better, ordered. To him she didn’t say a word but after the taxi had stopped, she’d paid and they were out on the street.

‘Here we are: the city centre. Is this place ok for you?’ she asked then.

‘I have to give you the money for the fare.’

‘Forget it. It was cheap.’

‘I’ll pay you a drink, then.’

‘Ok, you’ll get me a drink at the hotel. Well, see you later.’

Fred was still hoping that she would agree to walk with him and so was left at a loss when she brusquely took off. However, after a few seconds, he decided to follow her.

She walked as if determined; there was no halting or hesitation in her movements and it was amazing the way she managed to get through the crowds without being deterred either by the chaos or the heat. Fred trod carefully, tailing behind her at an ever-increasing distance, until he saw her entering the bazaar.

‘Oh no, not the bazaar!’ he said to himself stopping.

Only then, listening to the riot of his heartbeat and wiping the sweat dripping from his eyebrows, was he able to ask himself what the hell was he doing, anyway.

He had been in the bazaar the previous day, included in a guided tour, but he didn’t know how to get back now. Fred waited to recover his breath, first. He was going to need it to deal with a Cairo taxi driver.

During the following days, Fred didn’t see Pat at all. He didn’t ask about her either – he was busy with his work, and, besides, he had decided to give it a break, not to let himself be sidetracked, and perhaps to give her the chance to approach him next time.

Very early in the morning, Pat left the hotel carrying a backpack she'd packed mostly with water bottles, a bit of food, a blanket, a few broad pieces of cloth and a sleeping bag strapped on the outside. She wore several layers of clothes: a vest, a thin t-shirt, jeans topped by a galabyeh below a hooded cloak. Covering her skull was the usual headscarf, which was becoming a permanent garment as her boots. Naguib drove her to the edge of Wadi Digla. After that she started walking through the dry riverbed, first meandering through boulders and rocky sand looking for a small cave where she could put her stuff and take off the thick cloak. In this desert, just outside Cairo, she was on her own under clear blue sky, clean air and able to see sharply far into the distance. With her back to the fog of Cairo every tiny detail in the dry landscape, unfolding endlessly, was clearly visible. She walked on and on, now and again, slipping on the mounds. Soon the heat would be fierce. She was already feeling the heat wave of the desert slowing her stride and turning her small load into a heavy burden. Her throat was getting continuously parched and her vision was becoming fuzzy. At least she didn't sweat easily, even if she was far too hot only a couple of hours after she'd started. She stopped for a moment on top of a small hillock trying to recall to herself the rules of the desert she'd learnt, trying to remember the landmarks of the place from years ago. She'd been there before, but now it was as if she hadn't. Pat was panting and while looking at the desert, the cliffs and canyons' vastness her mind was struck by panic for an instant. She didn't recognise anything. There was nothing but this dead silence all around. She sat, took off her backpack, closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe in short and regular intervals to relax and wipe away fear from her mind. When she opened her eyes she was calm again. Through her aviator sunglasses she searched the

ground from all sides and not long after she spotted caves at the bottom of a cliff. Having sighted a possible path she headed vigorously, but slowly towards the caves, thinking about nothing but to reach the spot soon so that she wouldn't exert herself too much.

By noon she was preparing one sandy cave to have a rest. With two sticks she'd brought she was able to prop a thick cotton cloth against the ceiling and the walls of the cave; she cleared away as much as she could the shale stones on the ground and laid the sleeping bag on it. Then she ate the only sandwich she'd brought and drank some water. Lying down she went through the basic rules of the desert she knew in her mind over and over - the golden one was 'let yourself go'. Amongst others, she enumerated: walk slowly when it's too hot or you'll drink all the water you have quickly; the desert will kill you mercilessly if you don't prepare yourself carefully and face up to its challenges; you have to go through every little and big thing you need to take again and again - the entire array of provisions and equipment - ; disguise yourself as a man and as Arab; keep on the lookout for checkpoints, for people, for snakes, for the weather, the terrain, the light, any marks and features of the soil, for everything and anything whatsoever. In the end, you do it or don't do it. There is no in between.

Pat was going to do it.

After some time, she fell sound asleep as she was tired not only because of the walking, but also because she'd barely slept the previous night. Throughout the dark hours, she'd been preparing her first excursion in the desert, after many years. It had been a painstaking task she was not used to anymore. Years before the huge part of this chore had been done by Peter, her husband. He was the one who'd stock up and calculated thoroughly how much of this and how much of that was necessary or useful to carry, as well as studied the maps combing through the area and in libraries, bookshops, ministries, offices searched for any possible detail he could, as information

was scarce, difficult to find, to extract from people and only came piecemeal. A detailed map of the desert was more valuable than a treasure map because the map was itself the treasure – it could save your life or make you rich. Or both, as Peter used to say. Pat had been responsible for the clothes and cloths, the tent, creams, medicines, all the little bit and pieces and to pack everything as neatly as possible in order to make the loads to be the smallest and compact they could be. And although they'd worked close together and both knew a bit of everything, by now she'd forgotten most of it. That day she'd already realised she hadn't brought any map or fruit, usually dried dates – two important things in the desert.

When she woke up some hours later and looked at the space before her she was amazed at the beauty of the open land stretching limitlessly and at the brilliance of the sun inflaming everything into such a vivid life it almost brought tears into her eyes. As she walked around the cave she knew why she had come and that she'd come to stay. Pat could see herself disappearing onto that space, her mind completely free. Ultimately, she would place herself outside of the world.

She stayed in the desert, keeping her wandering only at a safe distance from the cave, up to the hour when the sun turned gold on the sand and rocks. It was then that she took some photos and jotted down a few landmarks so that on the following days her navigation, which was her weakest point, could improve.

She returned to the hotel when the sun was coming down. Naguib, an old friend, came with his 4x 4 for her. Again, he insisted that she stayed at his home instead of being at a hotel. Again, she refused the offer. He knew they'd inevitably end up by talking about the old times and that would have been hard for her to listen to adventures where her husband had been a leading character. However, she promised him she would visit him and his family.

‘I really need to talk to you, anyway. I’ve decided to trek in the desert and I need your help,’ Pat said.

‘What do you mean by trekking in the desert?’ he asked.

‘I don’t understand your question. I’m going to trek across some parts of the desert, that’s what I mean.’

‘And how are you going to do that?’ he insisted.

They both knew what he wanted her to tell but not to hear and what she wanted to say but didn’t dare. So, for a while the conversation skirted around until Pat finally told him, the moment they arrived at the hotel.

‘I’m thinking of going into areas in the Western Desert, to Farafra, to Dakhla, to Bahariya or, even who knows, to Siwa, Gilf Kebir or Uweinat. By myself.’

Naguib thrust his hands into the air and then put them into prayer position while calling Allah.

‘Naguib, I’ll be sensible. I’ll just walk across short distances.’

‘For the life of Allah, don’t go, don’t do it,’ he begged.

‘Naguib, I’ll go only after we talk, ok? I’ll follow your advice.’

‘Death, more death...’ Naguib moaned thinking about her husband’s death.

At this moment, Pat stepped outside of the car, turned to him and shouted:

‘Stop!’ adding, ‘If you help me, I’ll be fine. Trust me with your secret ways around the desert or not even now will you let me have the full picture? Is that it?’

Embarrassed, he eyed her sadly without saying a word.

‘Please help me. Think about passable routes I can do, not too long, with buses nearby I can catch. I’ll be fine. Is that too much to ask?’ she almost pleaded.

‘It’s very dangerous land. Why don’t you go on a tour? I’ll recommend you good guides.’

‘That’s good. I can do that too,’ she said just to please him, ‘I’m going to give you Peter’s maps. When I come to yours’ I’ll bring them over, ok,’ she continued to convince him by trading with him. She knew how precious those maps were for anyone, let alone Naguib who’d always envied them, as the insatiable explorer he was.

‘You are coming to spend a whole day with us. Not just a meal.’

‘I promise I will. Is Saturday all right?’

‘Saturday is good.’

‘We’ll talk then, ok? You’d better go before people start thinking you’re haggling with me.’

‘You’re the one haggling.’

‘Well, you know...’ she suggested.

‘Ok, ok. See you on Saturday.’

Pat smiled to him and waved him goodbye.

The following days, she went to Wadi Digla to gain more experience and train her body to adjust to the desert, but she didn’t ask Naguib to drive her anymore. She just took a taxi from the hotel and to return she called back for another taxi. It was amazing to realise how fast she adapted herself to walking in the desert. On her last night, she even opted to spend the night there without a tent and in the morning she remembered to get up carefully watching out for vipers under her sleeping bag, as they liked to crawl to get warm under sleeping mats or blankets.

One morning, when Fred was reading on the balcony, Gamal came and expressed his disappointment about the departure of Pat. He was startled. He couldn't believe it at first yet. The clerk assured him that she'd already left two days ago. Plus she'd made sure her destination was not to be known. Of course, Gamal's information was not to be dismissed.

'Well, I suppose it was my fault. She seemed not to like me.'

'Oh no, sir. You know, women are very slippery.'

Fred laughed.

'It's true. You never know where you stand with a woman. They're very dangerous,' concluded Gamal.

Fred went on laughing, while thinking 'he sounds like he's talking about a snake'. The next minute, however, the laugh had been replaced by a sour feeling in the pit of his stomach. He stared at the desert mounds, eyes casting an indefinable and unbearable shadow on the horizon.

2. OASIS

Slowly, as Pat advanced, again walking on her two feet, Dakhla, Cairo, buses, taxis, people and places receded in her mind. Now there was nothing but her and the desert. Despite the weight of the big backpack loaded with all the provisions and equipment, a sense of lightness permeated gradually as she found herself alone and away.

At first, it was hard work. Walk. Walk. Walk. That's what she kept thinking, saying it over to herself. It didn't matter how slowly. Just put one foot after the other, stop and then again trek. Remember to record how long you follow in one direction up to the moment another is taken and so on by writing down on the pad hanging from a string round the neck. Better than looking at maps, which are meaningless on the terrain. The route is in her head. It's not too long, this one, but it is tough.

The plateau is wide with sand dunes interspersed with small mounds like little crests of waves, some soft, other stonier. On the sandy part, now and again, long ripples cover the ground. She keeps as much as possible on the firmer soil, easier to walk than on the sand where her boots sink in and then moving up to along a froth of grains that slip back on the surface, almost completely erasing her footprints. Now, she had to concentrate on nothing else but finding the pass which would allow her to get through in the right direction heading North. It took her much winding around, but by noon she finally discovered the path. Although she'd covered only a tiny piece of land to get to the pass she was already exhausted. On top, under the scorching midday sun she was forced to make her first stop. And without any shade in view it was necessary to put up the tent. It didn't matter. After the break, she would progress steadily, having overcome probably the most challenging obstacle.

Then she walked on and on along endless dunes, setting into a flexible routine

amidst complete silence, infinite space, limitless views during the day and utter darkness in the nights. It was impossible to keep to a strict routine in such an overwhelmingly changing space where the light and ground were innumerable variegated and always new – the hues of yellow, red, violet, blue and even of green of the scarce and meagre plants unexpectedly emerging singly. Looking ahead was just like staring at the sea. Sometimes the horizon and the earth were just an ocean ceaselessly swaying as the sun blazed, in other moments the waves were still there in the undulating land against the apparently immovable clear blue sky. Looking down you could see exquisite stones, fossils now and again. Pat would stop whenever she caught sight of some delicate or unusual object and, for a while, scoured the ground nearby. Once, on top of a steep dune, she threw herself sliding down the sand onto the bottom and every now and then, if the ground was soft, she would take off her boots and socks. It hurt her soles as, not long after, the soil would turn stony once more and she carried barefoot, because she didn't want to break her stride. Still she couldn't resist from the unspeakable pleasure of feeling the warm sand on her feet.

Pat reached the oasis she'd set as destination for this short trek about a week later after she'd started, or better, the edge of the oasis on a place where there was a spring. Here she camped for the night, before entering the small town, to bathe in the next morning with a full view of the desert. She splashed in the small warm pool and screamed with joy. Now that she'd accomplished her first trek, entirely by herself, not only she was entitled as reward to take a regal bath completely naked and alone in the open air for the first time in her life and to indulge in a good hotel in town, as well as to expand her walking into much long, wider and treacherous journeys across the desert. After putting on clean clothes, she turned towards the oasis and sighed thinking of the only drawback at that moment – having to talk to people and being Arabs that meant to talk at length. But, almost immediately, she dismissed that thought and headed for the

village where the hotel was.

This time the desert expanse was murderous. There weren't any roads close by Pat could resort to in case of emergency. Also, the territory was almost uncharted, so that she didn't know how many villages or waterholes nor how far apart they were, even if without using the water on the way she couldn't survive till the string of oases to where she intended to arrive.

Pure sand was punctuated by dazzling white chalk, which rose from the ground into spires, into huge ancestral shapes of the sphinx, of obelisks, into varied formations resembling dogs, camels, Bedouins and any kind of figure your eyes could materialise or just into immaculate puddles, shining like diamonds in the distance, alternating with immense lakes as skating rinks, sharply criss-crossed by the different winds. Some time later, she changed her direction and the soil's features transformed themselves almost suddenly and her trek turned into a meandering course. The icy bareness of the sand and chalk changed to hard compact grey shingle and then to hard underfoot piling up to razor-edged ridges where she wandered trying to find a way across. Her pace followed the haphazard lines of the ground, reflecting elevations and depressions as in a mirror, advancing painfully through its irregularity. Under excruciating naked light, across the stripped land below she saw a 4X4 in the distance. Instinctively she crouched down. There she was as exposed as if observed under a microscope, but no one came. Again, she restarted walking up. She wouldn't stop until she'd reached the other side, despite being so tired that taking one step was as difficult as grasping another breath of air, which thumped through her body like one more boulder she had to carry. It took her a

long time to get to the top of the mountain. Now, the sun was coming from everywhere, it seemed. Not just from above, but also from beneath and around. The furnace was all over, flooding each and every thing, dead or alive, filtering and exhaling through, piercing in and out, crashing and clashing in a maze, discernible by glimpses or flashes, only. After many miles there wasn't anything anymore, but that charring heat and an endless sea of dunes from the foot of the mountain. On her way down the slope on the other side she dragged herself blinking through the slits of her eyes. Her boots trampled over rough stones, weaved through some more unwieldy sharp rock and unformed boulders. Patterning the dirt and scattered about there were meagre spiny blades of thorns, scraps of loose weeds like wisps of hair lying together with the ground scars. Downhill, it was a disastrous course, steering between stumbling, falling and standing up all the time.

Once at the bottom, unrolling her eyes, it was like being wiped by sudden blindness. Panting, she headed for shade and sprawled onto the dirt. Almost instantly Pat drifted off to sleep, unaware of her drained and drenched body, turning into more of a broiling mismatched mass of bruises, scars, new and old, ingrained by the stench of the heat and of the cutting rubble where she remained stretched out, oblivious to the almost unperceived lifting of the wind, moving to a light blow, coming up to a steady rush, settled down for the rest of the day and sinking in throughout the night.

At dusk she plodded across to reach the next spring as soon as possible. She needed to wash and take care of her scratches and cuts. She would have to save the water she was carrying for after that spring. From there onwards there was just another stretch of arid desert, a merciless territory where she could go for days and days without finding a waterhole. On her map there was just one more spring marked in the middle of nowhere else sketched and even that one was a secret well kept with no clear position, except the vicinity of oil drums. In between these two springs three white gaps

loomed empty, a space like a black hole, where people had disappeared mysteriously without a trace. Apparently, there weren't even guards or checkpoints to go through. Usually she managed to skirt them without being stopped by carrying on as if it had nothing to do with her, but when she had no choice, especially outside villages, and was asked for the permits and identification, Pat had to show a forged passport and act like Mohamed Bakir from Alexandria. Only someone coming from the coast, having an enormous mass of sea and plenty of water would go into the desert. The Bedouins drove across it in 4x4s, mostly, only to make money with the tourists, often leading them to the oases, to the water, the sign of life, against the death of the desert. The checkpoints and patrols were a nerve-racking ordeal every time, but if the guards found out that she was a woman and on top a foreign one, she'd be escorted by police to the nearest town.

Step by step she observed the sky as it went through the shedding of all its colourless shade, until what she reckoned was the dawn, when a misty grey was clutching at the earth, from where she could yet feel the spilling of its bitter cold. Even through the package shielding her, she felt the pervasive chill all along her body. It seemed to hit her face and from there, spread all over. Its echo, creeping in till it reached the very tip of the toes. Across barren land, as days went by she settled into the routine, walking mostly when the sky went through the always different metamorphosis of hues, shades – at dawn, dusk and night. Then, strange shapes would start to emerge. At first light as air veils; next as liquid smudges and turning finally into solid rock, into pulsating darkness or white blaze. She had stood on one of those first days still, staring into all that immense space evolving endlessly into movement. But that was the moment of the day when she had to walk, she'd learnt. Under the glaring sun, it was painful to walk. At night, the darkness and the cold stung her as a needle piercing deeper and deeper each nerve. Every night was a battle she thought she was not going

to survive. The entire journey in the desert was to prove cruel more than anything else. Even Pat was surprised to last one more day, as her load became heavier and she weaker.

She ploughed on and on. Her walking, even if slackened by the grip tightening the flow of movement, taking hold not only of the physical motion of her members, but also of her brain, was arduous. Soon, every muscle and bone turned so heavy that instead of transporting her they were weighing her down, snapping her mind too. When she lay down for a rest inside the tent, she began to imagine that she wouldn't be able to stand up again and this thought frightened her so much that she couldn't sleep or relax anymore.

It was in one of those moments that a sandstorm struck. She felt an oppressive heat as if the air had been completely shut off and, struggling to breathe, Pat came out of the tent to take some air. As soon as she stepped on the scalding sand and looked out she saw the yellow wall of air advancing violently and she knew it was too late to do anything. Instinctively she grabbed at the fabric of the tent and lay flat on the ground. In a split second the tent collapsed, started to be torn apart and ultimately was swept away. Immediately she was being hit by tons of stinging grains of sand and before long she was completely covered by it. Pinned down deeply to the ground she eventually loosened her grasp and passed out. The storm lasted for about twenty minutes, but she didn't regain consciousness until the rain of the slashing downpour permeated through her clothes. She quickly remembered the sandstorm and started trying to move. However, it wasn't easy. She was entangled in a rag of the tent tarpaulin and the soil was so muddy that it was a struggle to get to the surface. Now she was chilled to the bone and under the pelting rain she didn't know whether to cry tears of joy or despair. She'd been saved by the rain most probably, but she'd lost her tent and almost all her provisions and equipment would be ruined. For the moment she just lay down and

shivered. Finally the rain stopped, but the gusts of cold wind kept slapping against her body throughout the night. It was impossible to sleep although by dawn she must have dozed off for a while for in midmorning she faced a clear and calm blue sky above an impassive landscape and her clothes were already drying. She looked around at the mess of all her scattered things and started searching for something to eat and drink. Only after she'd eaten some crackers she'd found, she went hunting on the ground for the objects she could salvage from the wreck left by the storm. In the meantime, Pat had spotted a clump of green at the distance. An oasis, she'd said to herself surprised and unsure. She didn't remember having seen an oasis or any oil drums the day before. Maybe it was a mirage, she thought. Still, once the stuff gathered, she walked towards it. It was there all right and closer than it had seemed.

Pat walked up to the edge where the palm trees started and the sand stopped unfolding as if forever. For a moment, she stood there, under the trees looking at the desert. Just a few steps away and from there it was as if it had been softly smoothed by a gentle hand, slightly touching the grains. A God's hand, leaving no trace on the eternally ethereal land. And not by the thrusting of Aeolus, blustering in his raving fury. Pat still had granules of sand ingrained on her skin though.

Stepping back on the soft sand, her feet slithering every direction like into a swamp and sinking as she halted, she turned her head round towards the oasis and she saw the swirling leaves. She retreated into the palm grove fleeing from the scalding sand. Even there, seated on the leaves under the green apexes amidst the shredded shade, the heat was fierce keeping everything immovable. The sandstorm of the previous afternoon, its power to uproot every single trunk and utterly sweep the very last vestige of brown and green trace had gone. Like a high-speed train violently cutting across some little station, where it's not going to stop, where there is no way it can ever stop.

Pat stood up unwillingly. Suddenly, she felt so tired and sleepy that it was hard just to think about moving and now she didn't have the tent anymore.

She camped there under an acacia for a few days. She wandered around and slept for long periods overwhelmed by the desert. Pat had lost the stamina to see and walk – she succumbed to lethargy alternated with numbness.

At night, in the numb periods, she smoked a cigarette or two, drifting off back again to sleep effortlessly. The clean silence, the appeasing breeze in the darkness and the smoke lulled her, until she ran out of cigarettes. Her provisions were dwindling fast. At first when she lazily stretched her hand for the cigarettes and realised she'd finished them, she closed her eyes and said to herself that it didn't matter, that if she just stayed calm in that emptiness without thinking, time would pass and she would fall to sleep again soon. It didn't work.

So, once more, she put one foot first then the other, one step at a time, again and again, over and over. Sometimes, almost crawling. The rhythm was erratic. However, as she kept going she stopped thinking about it to feel nothing but the movement through the grinding of her muscles. She knew it wouldn't be the same as before when the moment that exertion thinned to the point of disappearing altogether, she'd stopped feeling she was walking. She could see herself walking on water, so easy, flowing. Then, she would go on and on, no effort at all, anymore.

Now, her knees cracked and she was down on the ground, in her head an endless whirling noise. For a moment, Pat stayed there, sprawled on the dirt, until she realised she had fallen and had not been knocked down by someone. Hanging heavy on her hands, she managed to creep against a boulder at the reach of her fingertips and take off her backpack. She just lay there while the spreading pain got hold of her body from top to toe, her eyes closed so that she didn't notice the couple approaching the place where she was, but when she saw four feet coming to a halt just next to the border of

her scarf spread on the dirt.

They both greeted her and she looked up at them. They were very young, a man and a woman holding hands. They asked Pat if she knew where the tomb of a saint called Al-Hajji was. Still she didn't say a word. Instead, she was keeping her eyes on them, as if looking through them, seeing something else beyond.

'I think she's blind,' whispered the man to the woman.

The woman knelt down and looked into Pat's eyes. Pat spoke then, apologising for not having heard what they'd said. The woman repeated their question.

'I don't know how to explain the way. I can take you if you want. I think I can find where it is. I think I passed it not long ago.'

'Yes. We'd like you to show us.'

She picked up her gear and got up. Taking the lead, with the couple behind, Pat meandered through the dunes, head down and speechless. The walk extended over many directions. Hesitant, uncertain, her steps rambled about the sand this and that way with Samira and Hassan following.

Once at the tomb, Pat sat at a distance. The couple went around the tomb, knelt and prayed. Pat felt devastated by the strenuous wander and a moment later she crouched too. Both Samira and Hassan noticed and the woman included her in her prayers, but when they stood up they found Pat still hunched up, though now toppled over the ground as if someone had kicked her. As they reached her, they discovered she was crying silently too. Tears fell down copiously. They managed to sit her up again, but despite their attempts to get her to speak, she didn't say a word. Only the tears kept flowing, even as the couple laid her down first on the jeep and then on the bed, in a room at the back of their family house.

Samira told the family she was very ill and asked them not to disturb her. As she was a doctor, they all left Pat alone. Nevertheless, at dinner almost no one talked about

anything but the sick woman. And in turn, one by one, each member of the family presented their story for Pat. They had to wait for two more dinners to hear Samira say:

‘Her name is Latifa and she’s having a nervous breakdown.’

Though there was really nothing more she could say it didn’t stop everyone from bombarding Samira with questions of all sorts. And then came the re-inventing, adjustment and discussion of their stories.

At first, Pat was so frightened she didn’t speak or move out of bed. Only as time went by, did she relax, even if she still didn’t comprehend what had happened. The moment she’d given up striving to grasp what was that all about, she felt somehow better. The only thing which had troubled her was the idea that she should have known better. Yet again, as she dismissed that thought altogether it was as if she had solved the problem. Then as the gentle pressure of Samira’s voice filtered through her, she finally started saying a few words. The pills Samira brought her must have begun to kick in. One night, she even wanted to have a peep outside at last.

The door leading to the lower floors was shut, so she headed towards the stairs going up. There was another door closed on top, but this one had the keys in the lock. She noiselessly opened it. As Pat had guessed, she found herself on the garden-terrace. There were pots everywhere, neatly displayed according to different motifs and a maze of linen hanging on criss-crossed lines throughout the entire place. Luckily, there seemed to be no live animals.

She went through the linen labyrinth and sat on the edge of the building, her legs dangling from the roof. The night was chilly, but she wanted to stay there for a bit; feeling the cool wind was to feel something at least.

Hanya knew someone was out there, so she proceeded as carefully and as silently as she could. She saw the bulky silhouette of Pat’s blanket and the smoke rising up. From a safe distance, Hanya asked in a hushed voice:

‘Latifa...?’

Pat staggered caught by surprise, the blanket dropping to the floor. She turned round her head, but didn’t see the girl.

Hanya stepped out from behind a sheet and approached Pat.

‘I’m sorry to scare you. You are Latifa, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Pat answered slowly, pulling the blanket awkwardly up to her head.

‘I’m Hanya,’ the girl said, moving still closer and sitting down a few inches away on the edge too.

‘I’m sorry, I’ll go,’ said Pat perturbed by the girl’s curious eyes.

‘Don’t go, please.’

Pat remained, embarrassed, not knowing what to do. She only looked at the young girl’s long wavy hair flapping about and at her thick fleecy robe. Hanya’s eyes instead were absorbed in Pat’s face. She was puzzled by the few rebel strands, sticking out from the awry short hair.

‘Is it true that your mind is like numb?’

Pat was not expecting her to say something of this kind at all. It was always her look, which drew people’s attention. Bewildered, she asked:

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t know. When aunt Samira explained your disease, I thought your mind should be like a white sheet twisting in the wind.’

‘I guess you could say it’s like that,’ she replied hesitantly, lowering her head.

‘Can I have a cigarette of yours?’

Again Pat felt at a loss. Samira had got her the cigarettes but she doubted that she would allow Hanya to smoke.

‘It’s all right, if you don’t have. I really don’t smoke. It’s just that sometimes it’s nice to have one.’

‘Do your mother and father know that you smoke?’

‘Oh, no.’

‘Here,’ said Pat giving her a cigarette.

Each smoked in silence. Then, Pat stood up and said goodbye.

‘It was nice to meet you,’ called out Hanya when Pat was already by the door.

Pat held her hand up to the girl and returned to bed.

Once more, Samira tried talking to Pat. Always with infinite patience, little by little, each time Samira took a step forward in the conversation. Nevertheless, even if the scope of the topics she explored expanded, there seemed to be no way the response would go much beyond yes and no. And more often, there was just plain silence.

Words were Samira’s only probe. Used to touch, to feel, to see, to poke; her hands trained to dip underneath skin, she felt powerless.

By now, she had realised there was nothing she could do, but handle a sealed body. She still talked to Pat all the same; she had just given up all hope of getting through.

At first no and then silence was Pat’s answer to Samira’s appeal that she see a psychiatrist. It didn’t deter Samira from saying it again. It didn’t move Pat from her position either.

‘I brought you a book, today,’ said Samira.

‘It was Hanya who asked me to give it to you,’ she continued.

‘I believe you two met on the terrace two nights ago.’

‘Yes,’ said Pat smiling, as she read the book’s cover: *Letters To A Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke.

‘She’s been pestering me all the time to let her come to see you.’

After a pause, Samira decided to push ahead:

‘Maybe, she’ll be better taking care of you than me.’

‘No, Samira. You’ve been brilliant, but I need to go. I feel better and I’ll be all right on my own now,’ she said as she held Samira’s hand.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Anywhere. It doesn’t matter,’ she concluded reclining on the pillows.

Samira knew that that meant she had finished by now, that her energy supply had broken down, turning her back again into a stone. Before leaving her though, Samira asked Pat if Hanya could come in.

‘Maybe later,’ whispered Pat closing her eyes.

Samira put the book on the bedside and left. Pat seemed to have forgotten it entirely, after looking at the cover, as she did with food.

‘Hello,’ greeted Hanya cheerfully entering Pat’s room, late in the evening.

‘I got hold of some proper cigarettes. Here, but we cannot smoke inside,’ she continued sitting on the bed.

Pat thanked her. Hanya picked up the book and holding it said:

‘I thought you must like reading. This is my most recent beautiful treasure-reading.’

Pat couldn’t help looking at Hanya, as if she were someone from outer space.

She had the allure of a gazelle, moving about happily curious and sweet. She was talking about the book, like a journey of exploration she'd gone through. Pat wasn't quite able to follow all the way the everlasting passages, but was enthralled by the rhythm of the narrative. When, Hanya, in the same taleteller tone asked about her, Pat didn't understand at first.

'I don't know how to talk about me.'

'And you don't want to, either.'

Surprised, Pat stared at her. Hanya sighed, saying:

'That's all right.'

After a moment, the girl stood up.

'Let's go to the roof. It's very hot tonight and it's too suffocating in here. And there we can smoke the cigarette.'

While Hanya went downstairs to get tea, Pat settled on the floor of the terrace. She was right. Everything was still. There was no way of feeling the air. Yet Pat felt the rush of a million tumbling things in her mind. No, she thought, go away, leave me alone.

'I've got an idea,' said Hanya sitting close to Pat, 'a sort of a game. I'll ask you things and all you'll have to say is yes, no or finish a sentence with a word, ok?'

'Ok,' replied Pat smiling and thinking she must concentrate on this now.

'You're not Egyptian. Right?'

'Yes'

'You are...'

'American.'

'Oh! American?!' and Hanya laughed for a second, before continuing:

'I'm sorry. We have to make this fast. You cut your hair yourself?'

'Yes'

‘It needs trimming. Can I do it?’

Pat burst out laughing. Hanya pressed her to be quick.

‘Yes.’

‘You have travelled a lot?’

‘Yes.’

‘You had a hard life?’

‘Yes. No.’

The girl stopped, startled by this answer, thought for a second and then shot again.

‘You like reading?’

‘Yes.’

‘You have a boyfriend?’

‘No.’

‘You’re happy?’

This time, Pat didn’t answer and her eyes fled. Hanya saw the return of the weariness on Pat’s face.

‘Game over?’

‘Game over.’

The next day, Samira found Pat seated on the edge of the bed, all dressed to go out and with the backpack by her feet. She looked as if she were on some airport lounge, ready to stand up, as soon as the gate number came up on the screen.

Samira knew her intentions, right away. Nevertheless, she acted as if she hadn’t noticed anything. There was no way she was going to let her go through with it.

‘You’re going for a walk? That’s an excellent idea. It’s beautiful outside.’

‘No, I’m leaving.’

‘A walk would do you good. A step further and you’ll fall flat on the ground. You’re much too frail.’

Pat tried to gather some strength to fight against Samira’s stern hand. Samira had already put her backpack in its corner and was checking if Pat had taken the tablet. Then, she sat across from Pat as if the fierceness on the other’s face was nothing but a child’s tantrum and as such to be completely ignored.

‘Listen to me, Pat. In fifteen days, Hassan and I are going to Cairo. If you put on some weight up to then, we’ll give you a lift if you want, all right?’

Pat agreed. Unwillingly, but she did, for she knew she could not turn her back on Samira. She’d fallen on Samira’s territory and she had to live up to it to keep going. There was no other choice for both women.

‘Why don’t you go for a walk with Hanya? She doesn’t stop speaking about you.’

‘All right.’

‘Just do something for me, Pat. Please, don’t lie to Hanya.’

‘No. I know.’

When Samira and Pat got to Hanya’s room, they found Hanya and her youngest sister, Zuleika, dancing to the sound of Egyptian music. Pat stopped Samira from calling Hanya. They stood by the door watching. Pat was mesmerised.

The girls giggled, sang stressing to the full power the refrain, but it was their hands and arms swirling about in elaborated spirals that nailed Pat’s eyes. Effortlessly, they floated and swooped in every direction. They were flowers, leaves and branches swimming and flying. The joy was solid. You could see, hear, feel, taste and smell it. Only after the music stopped did the girls see Pat and did Pat see that Samira had gone.

‘Do you like dancing?’ asked Pat.

‘I love it. And you?’

‘Me too. I was a dancer.’

‘Really? You’re like a box of surprises.’

Pat thought, an empty box, but she didn’t say it.

‘And you? What do you like best?’

‘I like all sort of things. But what I really want is to be a poet.’

‘A poet?’

‘Yes, but I still have so much to learn...’

‘You will, don’t worry.’

‘But it’s too much. There are so many books to read, so many places to go, so many people I want to talk to, so many things to do...’

‘You’ll see you can do all that and much more. There’s no need to run. To walk is enough.’

‘This year, I’m going to travel. My aunt convinced my mother and father it would be best for me, before going to the University.’

‘I think it’s an excellent idea.’

‘That’s what I wanted, but now I’m not so sure anymore.’

‘You feel nervous?’

‘Yes. I don’t know what it’s going to be like.’

‘Don’t think about that. A step at a time.’

‘That’s what you do?’

‘Yes. If I think too much about things they become heavy. Then, I just feel tired and don’t care about anything anymore.’

‘Is that what happened to make you sick?’

‘I guess it was something like that.’

‘And now your body became light and you cannot walk because it is too light.’

‘Funny, isn’t it?’

‘Where are you going, Latifa?’

‘My name is not Latifa. I lied. It’s Patricia, but everyone calls me Pat. I don’t like Patricia.’

‘One more surprise! I wonder how many more you’ve got.’

‘None, Hanya. I’m just like you and everybody else. Besides, a name is just a word, a tag. Pat, Latifa, Hanya or Samira; it doesn’t make any difference.’

‘But it does. It makes all the difference in the world. A word is something alive,’ protested Hanya.

‘Well, I guess you know better than me. I’m not a poet. I just see words changing all the time.’

‘Yes, they do love to play tricks on us.’

Whatever Hanya meant, Pat wasn’t able to reach anymore. Her concentration had switched off. So, lost, she changed the subject:

‘Where are you going?’

‘First, I’m going to London. My aunt is staying there to work for three months. Then, I’ll go to the United States, where one of my brothers lives. I’ll have to choose where I want to study.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘You’re tired now, aren’t you?’

‘Yes. Do you mind if we go back in?’

The day before Pat went to Cairo with Samira and Hassan, Hanya insisted on cutting Pat’s hair.

Pat didn't feel like doing anything much yet. Nevertheless, she'd given herself up to domestic chores. She'd washed and ironed all her clothes; now neatly folded on her backpack. Also, she'd taken herself to have a bath and eat every day again. And so, she let herself go into Hanya's hands too.

To the sound of a melancholic song playing forever, coming out from the little stereo Hanya had brought up to the terrace, Pat closed her eyes while the girl concentrated on cutting her hair.

Hanya kept going round Pat's head; the scissors pruning here and there and pausing then, as the fingers raked through the scalp and her eyes scrutinised carefully. She was not pleased with her work, but as much as she tried again and again, the hair seemed to look worse and worse. Discouraged, she stopped cutting and didn't say a word, until she finished brushing off all the tiny wisps off Pat.

'I'm sorry. It's terrible,' she muttered then.

Pat noticed that tears were almost sliding down the girl's face.

'Hanya, let's go and have a look. It cannot possibly be worse than it was.'

Uneven, her head resembled something like a staircase. You could see how the wisps had been clustered, following each straight cut edge. Altogether they scrolled in steps where you had to tread zigzagging, for everywhere there were pieces missing.

Pat looked at the mirror, holding back both her hands and judgement.

'It doesn't matter how it looks now. It had to be done to grow properly. And that's all that matters. Hanya, there is nothing else you could have done better,' said Pat soothingly, after a while.

Hanya thought for a moment, but she seemed not to be able to find anything to say.

When Samira and Hassan dropped Pat, outside the entrance of a hotel in the outskirts of Cairo, she stayed there still for a long moment, watching their car driving off and vanishing from sight. Again, she felt at a loss.

3. STOPOVER

The doorbell rang whilst Kate was immersed in her cooking. Startled, she promptly wiped the palms of her hands on the apron as she made her way to the front door.

There was Pat.

‘Oh, I can’t believe it’s you!’ her sister, Kate, said.

For a second, Pat thought she was going to collapse right then and there on the huge wet mat. Yet Kate caught hold of her arm immediately, pulled her inside and, at the same time, propped her up.

‘Come. I was in the kitchen cooking,’ said Kate quickly, still gripping Pat.

In a flash, Pat was moved out of the gloomy day outside where a thin film of rain drizzled from a grey sky, past the dark front room of the house, to the bright and warm kitchen. Her eyes blinked as she stepped into the lit-up space.

The kitchen was spacious and everything seemed to be shining in there. Even with the long wooden table and the lengthy cramped worktops, displaying an immense array of bowls, plates, glasses, knives, forks, tea towels, cups, sprinkled with other more sophisticated kitchen utensils, ranging from tiny to quite substantial ones; all mixed with smatterings of vegetables, fruit, trickles of cream, ponds and drops of water, milk and mountains and speckles of powdery goods.

‘Well, I’ll turn this cooker off now. That should do it. Can I get you something to eat, would you like a glass of wine?’

Pat just shrugged her shoulders. Her sister looked at her for a moment, smiling slightly and keeping quiet. Then, Kate hesitantly suggested that Pat went to lie down for a rest. She could see the tiredness around Pat’s eyes. Also, she hazarded to herself that they showed a vacant look, though anyway no one had the right to say anything

really.

Alone in the guest's room, Pat regretted that she'd come as she looked round the bedroom, just before nodding off almost instantly, stretched on the top of the quilt.

Downstairs, Kate lowered the sound of the CD playing in the kitchen and gathered all the soiled cutlery and crockery by the sink to start rinsing and cleaning it.

When Tom came in, she didn't hear him because of the noise of running water, she jumped as she turned her head and saw him by the table. He put up his arms:

'I am unarmed and come in peace.'

Kate laughed and, wiping her hands on the apron, came towards her husband and kissed him.

'I'm just finishing these dishes. Do you want tea or a glass of wine? I got some nice white wine today.'

'I'll have a glass of wine, then. But you finish that. Do you want some wine too?'

'Oh, yes, please.'

'Do you want a hand?'

'No, I'm all right. All I have to do now is to clean the worktop and that table.'

'There. Done,' Kate said a few minutes later, sitting down at the kitchen table, across from Tom.

Relaxed, she took a sip of wine and after they asked about each other's day, she told him that Pat was there.

'How's she?'

'I don't really know, yet. She looked exhausted, so she went for a nap as soon as she came and I barely talked to her.'

'Did she phone before?'

'No.'

‘She just turned up then?’

‘Yes. Never mind. I didn’t want to pester her with questions. She probably travelled directly from some faraway place, I don’t know.’

‘Umm....’

Kate left Tom taking care of the dinner in the oven and setting the table to eat and went upstairs to call Pat.

She switched on the staircase light and called her sister as she climbed.

There was no answer. Outside the room where she’d left Pat, she paused, waiting for noise. Carefully, Kate opened the bedroom door and poked her head through the slit. Apparently, Pat was asleep. She went inside, walked around the bed and crouched to have a better look at Pat’s face, but her eyes were helplessly diverted by Pat’s hair.

Lying on her side, completely stretched out, Pat was sound asleep. She seemed to have only taken off her boots. The little backpack remained zipped up, her clothes were still touched with flour by Kate’s hands and she hadn’t even taken off her loose leather jacket. And that hair: it gave her such a strange look. Though she had held back from saying anything; it was even shocking. Yes, it was her sister, but she seemed to be someone else, not Pat.

Pat had always kept her hair long, almost invariably tied. Throughout the years, her hair had only really varied in the way it was tied. She’d seen her wear every style of pony-tails, plaits, buns, all kinds of buns, but never like that. Now, it was a mess: a mix of tiny spiky with wild and thin fluffy locks. Kate couldn’t work out if the hand that

had done such a job had been cruel or limp. Maybe it had been cut in two different moments by incompatible hands or by some very weird useless avant-garde stylist. To make things worse, the hair was all entangled and dishevelled; unless that was the way you were supposed to exhibit it. Looking at that aggravated so much Kate's feeling of anguish towards her sister that she almost touched that hair to comb it neatly. She had to stand up quickly to refrain herself from stroking it.

She decided not to wake Pat, after all. Maybe, it wasn't the right thing to do, but who knew how Pat felt when she was awake. What went around her mind, once her eyes were open, realising once more that she would never again see the man she loved. She didn't know what to do, she felt at a complete loss now, though she was glad Pat was there. At least she could see her. She was there and alive, she wasn't vanishing anymore.

Already at the door, Kate doubled back and went to the cupboard to fetch a blanket, which she spread on top of her sister.

'She's still asleep and I couldn't wake her up. We'll eat now. She'll eat when she gets up,' she said to Tom as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

After eating in silence for a while, Kate said:

'You know, she just brought a little backpack.'

'Well, she's probably planning to do some shopping in England...'

'Maybe...I don't know...'

'She might want to get a new wardrobe.'

'Oh, don't be silly, Tom.'

'I'm not joking. It can be a way of starting a new life.'

Katherine thought about the idea for a moment, instead of instinctively dismissing it.

'Yes, I suppose it can...'

‘It’s been months now, since Peter died. She must be pulling out. Just think. She came all the way here from the States. Surely, she’s coming out of mourning.’

Possibly Tom was right, except that her sister hadn’t come from the States, Kate reasoned with herself, and let the matter drop, as her husband didn’t know that Pat had come from somewhere else, some place she herself wasn’t aware of.

Pat opened her eyes, sometime in the middle of the night. She looked at her watch, which had made fierce marks on her skin, and sat on the bed, indecisive whether to go to the kitchen and eat something or not.

Finally, as she couldn’t fall asleep again, she went downstairs.

Kate heard the familiar creaks some wooden planks let out in particular spots on the steps and got out of bed.

‘I woke you...I’m sorry.’

‘No, no. I was awake. You must be hungry. I’ll warm you your dinner. You sit down.’

‘No, Kate. I just want a sandwich and a glass of milk.’

‘Are you sure? I just have to put a dish in the microwave; it won’t take a minute.’

‘No. I’d rather have something light, Kate. I’m sure the dinner is delicious, but I don’t feel like eating a proper meal.’

‘All right then. I’ll make you a sandwich.’

Pat knew Kate wanted to talk to her, she would want to hear what had happened all those months and, although she wasn’t up to it, she understood it would be rude to

tell her to go to bed and leave her alone. So, she just sat down at the kitchen table.

Kate sat across from Pat, while she ate, but they barely spoke. Pat pulled out the cigarette pack and the lighter, from her trousers pocket, without realising, for a moment; she was in a non-smokers' house. Kate, though, said she didn't mind if she smoked in the kitchen.

'That's a relief. You can't smoke anywhere, these days.'

'I never saw you smoking...'

'I never did. But now, I'm already an addict.'

'Your hair...' Kate faltered and then stopped for lack of words.

'I know... but I can't speak now. I'm suffering from jet lag, I guess. My head is pounding; I'm confused and no good for anything.'

Soon, they both went to their rooms. Kate stayed awake for the best part of the night. Her limbs were tired by an entire day of shopping, cleaning and cooking, but her mind wouldn't let her go, busying itself in revolving an amalgam of thoughts, sentences interspersed with the poignant vision of her sister's hair, which now appeared out of all proportion as a ferocious and savage mane.

Pat couldn't go to sleep either. She stayed still, staring at the ceiling, trying to think about nothing and just listening to her own breathing. Again and again, her mind would divert from one thought to another brusquely cut by the one that she mustn't think at all, but concentrate on hearing her heart beat amidst the golden silence.

The next day, Pat didn't get out of the room until afternoon. Looking at the mirror in the bathroom, while she was washing her face, she was again surprised to discover the way her hair was now. She scraped her hands over her wet scalp in an attempt to straighten it. The hair stayed rebelliously dishevelled all the same and she gave up instantly, turning her back to the mirror. It was even worse after poor Hanya's efforts. She tied a scarf around it, as usual. Now she uncovered her head only to sleep

and to take a bath.

Kate was having her lunch when Pat appeared in the kitchen. They talked about Kate's little daughter, Annie, who was staying with Tom's sister, about the new baby Kate wanted, about the redecoration of Kate's house, and then, they fell into silence.

To break the silence, Kate got up and started cleaning dishes. Pat walked to the door of the conservatory leading to the backyard. It was pouring down like it was never going to stop, but Pat opened the door and stepped outside. It didn't take long for the cold, the wind, the rain and the blackness to get to her skin, through the fast growing specks printed on her T-shirt and trousers. She came back inside, shivering.

'It's horrible! You can't even go outside for a second.'

Kate couldn't help laughing, remembering how Pat hated England.

'As a matter of fact, I have to go out. I have to go to the post-office to send a birthday gift for a friend. Don't you want to come? I'm taking the car, so we won't get wet.'

'No way,' Pat burst, then added, more contained:

'I really don't feel like going out. Do you mind?'

'Of course not. You stay here. I'll be back in a minute.'

Kate left and Pat went for a tour around the house.

Slowly, she roamed around the place, casting only a glance at the bedrooms, taking her time scanning through the spines of the books covering the study's walls.

Hearing the front door unlocking, she retraced her steps downstairs, towards the darkened living room.

'A cup of tea, Pat, I mean, of coffee, of course?' asked Kate as she took off her shoes and put back on her red velvet mules festooned with tiny bright pink flowers.

'No, thanks.'

'A glass of wine, then?'

‘A glass of wine sounds good.’

‘All right. Sit down on the couch. I’ll bring the wine.’

Nevertheless, Pat followed Kate into the kitchen and sat at the wooden table.

Kate sliced one ciabatta, one loaf of bread with olives, took out a board displaying a selection of fine cheeses, arranged on a plate a few pieces of pancetta and of Milano salami, put all this on the table, together with a bottle of a well-chosen red wine and two glasses and installed herself the opposite side from Pat on the kitchen table.

This time, Kate waited for Pat to speak. She thought to herself that she knew her sister was there because she needed to talk. And she was sure it was going to happen now. That was why she’d wanted to sit in the kitchen and not in the living room. It was an old habit between the two. They always ended up talking for hours in the kitchen. Throughout their infancy and adolescence they’d done everything in the kitchen. The living room was their mother’s territory to which they’d only go if absolutely necessary, firstly avoiding to be subjected to their mother’s bouts of rage and nasty hangovers and then the room became closed off, since Kate’s father had entirely forbidden them to enter. The door was kept locked, till their mother had smashed the window and gone never to return, in the end. Finally the room had been rented and so the door remained shut for good. Pat had even knocked down the wall between the dining room and the living room in her house in New York and Kate, herself, didn’t make much use her living room. Maybe, she should transform it too. She was definitively going to talk to Tom about it.

Pat interrupted her sister’s thoughts, saying after having touched her headscarf:

‘What do you think of this hair? It’s terrible, isn’t it?’

‘Where did you get a cut like that?’

‘I did it myself and then someone else tried to tidy it up a bit,’ she revealed laughing.

‘You must be joking: two of the finest artist, no doubt. How did you do it?’

‘With scissors. At the back as I couldn’t see, I had to use an electric clipper. It took me ages.’

‘I can imagine...’

‘I don’t care. It’s easy to wash now and I don’t have to bother about it. I don’t even see it. So, it’s perfect.’

Kate’s intuition had been right. In the same breath, Pat went on. She cut a long story short. The details didn’t matter anymore. It all came down to one only fact, actually. Pat had sold everything. Her house, the furniture, the cars, the paintings, the art objects, the books, the endless knick-knacks from the interminable places she and Peter had been, the kitchen stuff, the bathroom stuff, the bedroom stuff, the clothes, the shoes—all gone.

Kate hadn’t even been able to put into words a question, a comment or express a sound. It was like a hurricane hitting with its gusts of wind blowing away not only the hair as a life too, it seemed.

And that was it. What her sister owned was what literally was in that little backpack.

Both had been drinking steadily throughout Pat’s account and when she finally stopped talking, because she couldn’t help herself laughing, Kate started laughing too.

Still smiling, Kate asked:

‘And what are you going to do, now?’

‘Nothing. Absolutely nothing,’ screamed Pat ecstatic.

They broke into an unstoppable giggle, as the anecdotes turned merry-go-round.

‘Yes. I’m off. Off. Off. And gone. I’m not going to stop ever. I won’t give a moment’s rest to my feet. I’m on the move.’

‘To seek out new worlds and civilizations...’ Kate carried on exhilarated.

Pat opened her arms dramatically and vigorously shaking her head, exclaimed:

‘No! No! No! I won’t have time for that... I don’t care about that!’

‘Vroom, vroom... *Vitesse!*’

‘Yes!’

They were free. There were no limits. No boundaries. And so they went on.

Early in the evening, Tom came in, carrying little Annie asleep in his arms, to find them still talking in the kitchen.

‘Well, it seems like you two had a good day.’

The sisters looked at each other and concurred on the answer:

‘Hah, hah, hah, hah,’

Tom sighed and headed to the stairs. Wearily, he climbed to Annie’s bedroom and tucked her into bed.

Shortly after, Pat made her way to bed too, followed by Kate; and Tom fell on the sofa in the living room. He had turned on the TV with the sound barely audible, but he didn’t pay any attention to whatever was on.

He took a sip of his cup of tea and painfully swallowed that cold and nauseating sugary small mouthful. How could Kate have been able to do that? She was not just drunk; she had to be absolutely plastered. Briskly, Tom got up to pour himself a drink. Irritated, he couldn’t help from wondering how long Pat was going to stay. It was not that he didn’t like her, but not that he liked her either. ‘Miss Perfect’, his name for Pat, seemed to keep her strange effect on her sister. Even now that almost all her glamour looked to have been stripped off her. Somehow though, despite her disease and obvious drunkenness just before, she still struck him with her tall, lean and plumb figure; the

spitting image of the classic ballet dancer she had fought so hard to become. If anything, in Tom's mind, the drama incarnated in her in the past, was emerging now rather as tragedy. However, at this point, becoming conscious of his thoughts, Tom realised he must have got drunk too and went to bed.

The following day, over dinner, Tom said to Pat:

'So, Kate told me you've been travelling...'

'Yes'.

'A road trip, eh?'

Kate, at that instant, turned to him a reproachful face, warning him about the dangerous territory he might get into by remembering Peter to Pat. After all, Peter, Pat's deceased husband, had earned his living writing about places he travelled to. But Tom showed her a so-what defiant look.

'Something like that,' replied Pat dismissively.

'Whereabouts have you been? Somewhere exciting?'

Pat calmly thought for a moment.

'No place in particular. Just walking to see where life takes me now, you know?' she answered facing him to make sure he understood she would tackle his characteristically slapdash remarks with snap replies.

'It's a luxury to be able to do that.'

'Yes, one I have worked long and hard for' she snapped back, letting out an angry tone on her voice.

'Yay! A toast to that!' Tom exclaimed vigorously.

‘A toast to us,’ cut in Kate, eager to ease the tension, while lifting her glass.

They all toasted; each to a different thought on their minds.

After coming from work, Kate poked her head through the door of the conservatory, to find her sister exactly in the same position as she had seen her on the day before. Pat was stretched out on the sofa, half dormant. The blinds remained closed and the air was heavy with smoke.

‘Hello,’ said little Anna, her head between her mother’s legs.

‘Anna, I don’t want you here, you know that. Be a good girl and go to put your rucksack in your room,’ said Kate.

‘Any better?’ she asked Pat.

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘You could come with us. Anna and I are going swimming.’

‘I can’t Kate,’ she replied in such a sad tone that prevented it her sister from insisting.

Of course Kate had no idea of how serious Pat’s injuries were. The aches all over her body were so atrocious that Pat had to resort to an array of potent chemicals, which left her practically numb always. The pain was extreme and, in spite of the tablets, she couldn’t sleep. She lay so prostrated by pain that she could scarcely walk, although she forced herself to stand up for meals, only to put on a brave face in front Tom. Fortunately, her little niece was always fed earlier and then put to bed. At those moments, she’d pull herself into a straight angle, her feet and legs so laden with the bruised mass of flesh and bones that she felt her brain screaming through every pore of

her body.

Still now, she could see it was not going to work for long. In the end, Kate's constant invitations to do this, that and the other would fast break cracks in the wall she was holding as much as she could. She thought about swimming, the water, like a long forgotten thing that had suddenly come into view.

Kate's head poked again through the door.

'Come on Pat, come and sit here with me in the kitchen,' she said.

'That was fast swimming'.

'I just left Anna with a friend and decided to come back. Tom will pick her up. After all you're here and we've hardly spent any time together.'

'Give me just a minute.'

Throughout their conversation, Kate's mind revolved about something she was wondering whether or not to tell her sister. She clearly thought she had to, but she was so scared of Pat's reaction, which she could imagine, that she'd started to doubt herself.

'I haven't cooked for so long that I think I don't know how anymore,' said Pat observing Kate going round the kitchen busy.

'That's a shame. You were such a good cook.'

'Humm...'

'I'm sure that the Smith's Orphans are at this moment crying for not having your Friday dinner.'

Pat hadn't even realised it was Friday, but she rarely knew what day it was anyway, recently. She didn't reply to Kate on purpose. She was aware it was one of her sister's strategies to remind her of what she should be doing with her life. Again and again, she'd heard so many people with that plan for her life – to dedicate herself entirely to the orphan's institution, which she had helped actively.

'There's Anna and Tom,' said Kate listening to the car's engine stopping.

‘Well, I’ll leave you to them, then. I’ll go into my cavern for a rest before dinner. I’m tired just from seeing you work.’

Kate sighed. This was what happened all the time. When you would think that finally perhaps she was coming through depression, Pat would obliterate herself unexpectedly. She seemed almost like the negative of the person she’d been. Now, sometimes, Kate didn’t recognize her sister.

The next afternoon, Kate found Pat facing one of the glass panes of the conservatory. At least today, she’d opened one blind. Pat didn’t notice her sister was there, until she spoke:

‘Hello there. Feeling better?’

Pat turned to her.

‘I hate this country,’ she said with such determination that Kate was taken aback.

As Pat saw Kate’s expression and her visible loss for words, she tried to calm down. Yes, she hated England as she always had, but there was no need to restart an old and pointless argument.

‘I’m sorry. I think I’m reacting like a caged animal.’

Kate sat on the sofa next to her.

‘Don’t worry. It will go away,’ Kate said without knowing exactly what would eventually go away. The pain? No. Pat? No doubt. The country? Not likely. And again, she remembered what she had to tell Pat. Certainly not now.

‘Anyway, if you’re reacting to something, that’s good,’ Kate continued, after a pause, trying to uplift the mood.

‘Just think about that. Forget the rest. You’ll get stronger soon. Just think about the little things,’ she insisted, once more not really knowing what things she was referring to.

‘I feel a bit better today,’ Pat finally said.

‘Good! That’s good. That’s what you have to think about.’

‘Well, I think that I have to go, Kate,’ Pat uttered sadly.

Kate had foreseen this announcement.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Kate asked.

‘Of course.’

‘Keep me posted. Write; phone me, now and again. I just can’t stand...’ and she couldn’t finish. Tears started to come down her cheeks.

‘I promise. I will keep in touch. Don’t cry, please,’ she said taking the back of her hand to her sister’s face to wipe the tears.

‘Oh, I’m sorry. I’m so stupid,’ Kate said still whimpering.

‘You’re stupid, I’m stupid, we’re all stupid.’

Kate laughed.

The evening before Pat was leaving; Kate’s anguish had reached its peak. There was no more time. She had to tell her sister now. Her distress had built up so much that, at the moment, she couldn’t even consider not to tell the news to Pat anymore. Somehow, without knowing, it had got out of her control. She felt her hands trembling, her heart

palpitating so violently it was like it could come out of her parched throat any minute. Kate took another sip of wine, although she was already tipsy, and picked one of Pat's cigarettes. Pat looked at her sister surprised, but didn't say anything. She sensed Kate was broody and knowing how emotional her sister was, she decided to avoid touching her feelings by the tiniest remark, enough to make her cry. She couldn't stand seeing people in tears. After Peter, her husband, had died, only much later Pat had burst out crying and even then, just triggered by anger. It had been an insane screaming.

Through the cigarette smoke, suddenly Kate looked Pat straight in the eyes with her cloudy eyes and blurted clumsily:

'Henley, your father, died.'

Pat averted her eyes instantly and, after a minute, shrugged her shoulders. Kate shook her head vehemently, like a puppet, and continued plunging on aggressively:

'You need to know, whether you like it or not. Also, the thing is: he left you a house. You do whatever you want. It's not my business. That's all,' she finished, feeling both drained and relieved.

'That's absolutely ridiculous!' said Pat flustered.

Taking a gulp of air, but still nervous, Kate replied:

'Ridiculous or not, he did it. He's dead, Pat. Dead.'

'I don't care!' Pat shouted.

Kate took her hands to her face. She didn't know if she was going to scream or to cry. Instead, she stayed still and said nothing.

'The bastard!' Pat roared.

To her the man, that scumbag, as she called him, who had left her behind to a crazy mother, had been long dead. Hadn't he understood that, despite all his attempts to come near her, over the years? Never, never, had she allowed him to step close to her or would ever allow it. He would not pull her back, he would not hold on to her. Never,

never; even dead.

Finally, Kate let her hands fall on her lap. Now, she was sick and tired of all that business. All the adrenaline brought by anxiety from before broke down abruptly to leave nothing but a feeling of complete exhaustion. Also, once on her feet, she realised she was nauseous. Carefully, but swiftly, she got out of the conservatory and headed upstairs without a word or a look towards Pat. For a split second, Pat watched her dumbfounded. Nevertheless, she immediately followed her sister up to the door and screamed:

‘To hell with Henley and his house. I don’t want to hear another word about this!’

As soon as Kate entered her bedroom, she went straight to the bathroom. Tom who was reading in bed put his book away and waited for Kate. However, as she hadn’t got out of the toilet after a couple of minutes, he got up and knocked on the door. There was no reply, except funny noises from inside. He opened the door to find his wife kneeling by the bathtub with all her clothes covered in runny puke.

‘Oh my God, Kate! What happened? All that shouting and now this!’

‘Turn on the water. In the tub. The cold water,’ Kate managed to say.

Pat, on the other hand, continued drinking steadily until she passed out.

Early the following morning, Pat picked up her backpack and put it by the door. Everyone else in the house was still asleep. Despite her first instinct to leave without saying goodbye, she was hesitating now. Yet she was in no condition to make use of her head, which was filled by loud thumps, not to speak of her limp body. Although, she

had already eaten something and had a cup of coffee, she decided to have another coffee, stronger this time, and headed for the kitchen. Then she opened the front door and lit up a cigarette, while she waited for the taxi.

At the sound of the door opening, Kate got up and rushed downstairs. Pat turned to her.

When they were next to each other, Pat hugged her sister.

‘I’m sorry,’ she muttered.

‘Forget it.’

‘We’re good, aren’t we?’

‘We’re good, we’re good.’

‘Good.’

At seven in the morning, Tom woke up to the sound of the alarm clock as usual, but when he was getting out of bed he noticed that Kate was still lying there. By then she should have been up already.

‘Kate, wake up. It’s seven o’clock.’

His wife didn’t open her eyes. She turned round, mumbling:

‘I’m off today.’

Off, asked Tom astonished into space. Since when was she off? If there was one thing for sure it was that Kate was never off. On the contrary, there seemed to be no limits to what she could do. Yet she still always got herself into another thing to do. Half of the time, he didn’t even know where she was or what she was doing, so many were the activities she engaged in.

All right then, he said to himself, and rushed out to take care of Anna and set out for one more day, as fast as he could. Better not to count on Kate for the entire day. Surely, once past the hangover, everything would fall into place. Now that Pat was gone, the air would clear. Actually, he thought, it would be a good idea to go out for a meal and so, as soon as he arrived at work, he phoned to book a table in a nice restaurant.

At home, Tom found Kate sitting in the kitchen staring at the washing machine's tumbling.

'Where's Anna?' she asked him.

'I left her with my sister. I booked a table for us at that Chinese restaurant you like. So you can drink tea, instead of wine.'

'I wasn't really drunk.'

'No? Well, you sure fooled me, then. You looked absolutely plastered.'

'I was upset. I didn't drink that much, but it was enough to turn my stomach.'

'Never mind that now. Let's get ready to go out. Come on.'

Kate ordered tea anyway at the restaurant. She still felt a little indisposed and downhearted.

'You had a fight with Pat, last night? Is that why you're like that?' Tom asked.

'No, we didn't fight. I just told her about Henley and she got mad, as I knew she would.'

'I really can't understand why she is like that. I mean, I don't blame her for refusing to accept her father, but the man is dead now. Any way I don't give a damn,

but there's no reason to rage at you. He wasn't even your father. Have you ever seen him at all?'

'Once. He showed up at the laboratory. He wanted to know where Pat was to go and see her. And I bloody told him.'

'Anyone would have done the same, Kate. And did he go all the way to the States to see her?'

'Yes.'

'Anyway, how long ago was that?'

'I don't know. A couple of years ago, maybe.'

'You didn't say anything to me. But don't tell me that your sister is still angry because you told her father where she was, after all this time?'

'No, no. It's not that.'

'Yes it is, Pat is crazy.'

'Don't say that,' Kate said irritated.

Tom sighed, thinking 'there we go again. I've touched on the confidential file of their family's past. Pat would shoot me on the spot'.

'Ok, ok. I know she's very sick and all that, but I can't get this paranoia you both have about the past. You had a hard time, like millions of other people. Yet they deal with it and get on. At least you, Kate, should have the sense to stop this absurd business.'

'You know very well that Pat was a mother to me. I admire and respect her. There are many things I don't understand either, but I owe her the right to keep certain matters she wants buried, six feet under. Those issues involving her will stay as they are and that's it. I have no problem with the past, but a lot of it belongs to Pat too.'

'And she's the sovereign guardian.'

'So be it.'

Tom let out a loud laugh.

‘What?’ Kate asked.

‘You sounded exactly like your sister just now. You just needed one of those killer looks. It’s all that money she has. Big money does strange things to people’s minds.’

‘Come off it. She acts like that, because of the spontaneous thoughtless things you come up with. And she’s not a millionaire. She has money because she has a good pension, earned through tough work, ok? Plus, the money she from Peter’s life insurance. Money that came through hard labour and death. What a jackpot that is! Did you invite me out for a meal just to speak against my sister?’

Tom thought that actually maybe he had. It was so refreshing to attack ‘Miss Perfect’, but he restrained himself from speaking these feelings out loud.

‘Ok, ok, calm down. You’re right. Let’s talk about something else.’

‘I just hope she’ll be all right,’ Kate confessed.

‘So, what did you do today, anyway, besides staring at the wash?’

‘Nothing special. Just tidied around the house.’

Later, Tom watched Kate taking off her clothes. She was so beautiful and so different from Pat. Kate was *‘mignonne’*. That was the best word to describe her. No English word could capture that sense of delicacy, prettiness and funniness in such an innocent way. It was not just her little, well-proportioned body, her roundish features, her fair wavy hair and those large wet blue eyes that conveyed that appeal, but also her spirit. How on earth two such contrastive beings could keep that enduring and unbreakable

bond, he didn't know. There were many things in there he couldn't make out and that got on his nerves, really.

Though, at the moment, contemplating Kate, his most pressing thought was to make love.

4. IN THE AIR

'Pat,' Fred called in a hushed voice, reaching already a stringy metallic note. It was about the fourth or fifth time, he was calling her to no effect.

He looked around and stared either into space or at people, alternatively: people walked up and down, round and round, sat down and stood up as the characteristic dim drone of the multitude of disparate sounds, voices and languages, restrained, as people, into the artificial and enclosed space of an airport, moving and passing from side to side, as if unaware of the sense of emergency permeating the air or the constant blinking on screens, displayed everywhere, or the endless announcements pouring out: flight 575 to Rome is now boarding; all passengers, please proceed to Gate 10; attention, please Mr. and Mrs. Karema go to Gate 7 immediately; we inform passengers of flight 310 to Cape Town that this flight is delayed by approximately one hour due to the late arrival of the aircraft. Everyone seemed oblivious to the roaring of the planes' engines.

Airport lounges are nervous places. Fred always felt compelled to pace restlessly back and forth, forth and back; no matter how small they might be. It wasn't that he didn't like to fly or that he liked it. Somehow, it was more like wearing the wrong kind of shoes and that got under his skin, in an inexplicable way; a way he couldn't escape from. It was an altogether uncomfortable experience.

'Pat,' he called again, not in a quiet voice anymore. Still Pat didn't budge. Fred looked up to the screen one more time, to check if the gate to his flight had come up. He scanned the different destinations of the planes departing, but each time he changed his guess about where Pat was going. It could be anywhere. However, there she was in

Johannesburg Airport the same day and time as he was.

He'd arrived very early at the airport, had already strolled round, gone for something to eat and a cup of coffee and entered the stage of boredom. Suddenly, he'd found her, just as still as she remained, all crumpled in the two-seat chair, sound asleep. Surely, she must have got there later than him or he'd probably have seen her before, he'd walked up and down so many times, gazing at peoples' faces, hair, clothes, languages, gestures.

Half an hour had gone, without moving from the seat across from Pat's; his plane would soon start boarding, but so far he'd only got more stuck every passing minute, impotent before that immovable figure of her.

She was different now. Her hair had grown a little and it looked a bit better, even if Fred couldn't see much of it without prying at her, crouched down – only a patch was discovered from the baseball hat, which was caught at an angle hiding her left eye completely. She was even more tanned, although she was wearing dark brown trousers, a black cotton top with long sleeves and the thick, tough leather boots, when the temperature outside was about 30° C outside. He wondered whether she came from or was going to the North Pole.

On the screen, the Go to Gate 3 on his flight row popped up, right while he was gazing up to check. Time had run out. Fred felt stupid and exasperated. That was it, now. He stood up, put his rucksack on his back, looked round to see what direction he had to take and then turned his eyes to Pat. It was ridiculous. Fred stretched out his right arm and shook Pat on the shoulder, calling her name out loud. Her eyes opened instantly and her body vibrated, without changing its position. Where am I? What...?, she thought for a few seconds, before realising where she was.

'Pat!' Fred kept calling out.

She tried to move her legs, but she found she was jammed. And only then, she heard someone calling her. She adjusted her body to be able to get loose and sit. She looked at her watch and next to Fred. It was that man again. What was his name?

Fred was baffled. She didn't look surprised or angry. If anything, her face just showed tiredness or numbness or both.

'Hello,' he said, sounding more like a question.

'Hi,' she answered slowly, while stretching her legs and arms.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes. I need to go to the toilet...' she said as if talking to herself. 'Can you keep an eye on my stuff, for a second?'

'I have to go...'

'I won't be minute.'

And she took off, without even waiting for him to finish his reply.

Fred's anxiety had been accumulating for far too long. He had had it now. He snatched briskly her rucksack and unzipped it. Hurriedly, he searched for a voucher, a plane ticket or some paper to see where she was going. It was easy. When she came back shortly after, Fred didn't hesitate:

'I'm sorry. I have to go now. Bye.'

'Thank you. Bye.'

Fred ran to the gate, no more than about three steps away and halted at the queue to board the plane.

All through the one-hour flight, he kept going over and over what had happened at the airport. Nevertheless, every time he reached the same conclusion. It was like it hadn't happened, really. It was completely absurd; no matter how he played it back again in his mind. She'd acted as if she'd never seen him before and at the same time trusting him to take care of her things. Was it possible that she'd forgotten him

completely? They'd met about three months before. It was a while, but not ages ago. He couldn't believe any of it. Was it even reasonable that they'd been at the same airport at the same time? And then, that it had been like they hadn't?

As the plane started attacking the runway, Pat opened her eyes. Out of all the boredom that taking a flight involved, including the most insignificant formalities -- showing the boarding pass, queuing on the plane to start moving towards the exit, storing the luggage in the overhead compartment, the explanation of the emergency procedures for the umpteenth time - the only thing which still kept something of its original character for Pat was the take off. Feeling the hard tarmac being devoured faster and faster and then plunging on the runway at the unreal high speed of the commitment point, together with the roar and vibration, to the point of not leaving the ground behind completely, but of even being propelled up, just in a matter of seconds, triggered in her some kind of mechanism, whereby she could sense letting everything go, suddenly and independently of her will – it was as if a gate had unlatched by itself. As the wheels of the plane were gathered up, somewhere inside her it was as if a trapdoor opened onto the sky and through it the past was emptied out of her, immediately. It was a confusing and nebulous feeling or thought she was unable to unravel. For some time, she felt immensely relieved; that's all she knew.

Fred didn't even care about exploring his accommodation, as he usually did. He was exhausted and it had been such a nerve-racking experience that all he wanted was to shout out loud or [do something wild](#). As that was not going to happen, he went to the bar, got a bottle of whisky and settled on the bed. He needed to forget the whole thing; and needed to forget fast. He drank the first gulp and felt nauseated, as the nasty sharp stinging tang hit his stomach. It was revoltingly horrible, the unmistakable trashy beverage especially reserved for tourists, but he was going to keep drinking.

Why was that woman upsetting him so much, again? Why? Where did all that anguish, desire, allure come from? Why hadn't she acknowledged him, at least? He wasn't a ghost. If there was one, it was her, not him. Why did she have to be there, in the same airport, at the same time, as him? He was happy with his research and his travels. He wasn't looking for anything else. What was this strange woman, this clone of the writer he was working on, doing with those sudden appearances in the middle of his way? If only she had been like everybody: normal. He didn't want anything from her, but to speak like he did with everyone else, related to his project. Was she reincarnation of Carole, coming to stop him from writing about her? It was all so stupid, stupid, stupid.

Not long after, he staggered to the toilet and back to the bed. He lay down and almost immediately was sound asleep.

After that, he refused to drink anything but water. He didn't drink much anyway and he wasn't going to start drinking now, he decided. That was just a part of the strategy he resolved on to stop thinking about Pat. There were no such things as apparitions and ghosts and all that nonsense. Pat was just something weird, a blot on a page, that he didn't need on top of all the gaps and blurs he had to work on and make clear about Carole. He'd come to work and that was what he was going to do. He did not have money to travel around, following every fleeting whim that he happened to

stumble upon. Neither did he have the inclination to pursue chimeras or mirages and to dedicate himself to muse on the contemplation of ethereal dreams. He could not understand why it seemed that he had been possessed by a woman he didn't know anything about, except that she was rude, unattractive, lunatic and rich. In short, she was nothing but a selfish rich bitch and he was not a dreamer.

The classic image of paradise was right there, before Pat's eyes. Once, Pat remembered, she had declared that Paradise was here. Now, though, she doubted it was. 'Paradise', she said aloud. Her voice sounded flat, when she pronounced the word, with the wide open sea rolling endlessly across her, a blue lulling mass interpenetrated by smooth scales of emerald waves under silky sunshine. Around her the earth was lushly covered by green brilliant trees, vivid plants, lively colourful flowers, where little birds called and frolicked about and huge spider webs clung on to one another. There below the Equator, in plain open Indian Ocean she was free from the western winter. At least that was clear. But she was also enclosed in a tiny island where the abundance of water was so pervasive, even in the most infinitesimal particle of air, that you were engulfed by it. It was strange to be there. She felt as if she hadn't landed yet and, at the same time, as if she was already adrift in the ocean.

The next morning she felt defeated, but that wasn't anything new to her, anymore. To get out of bed had become a gruelling affair. Always. She dragged herself out of bed in time for breakfast and stayed seated at the table for a long time. Again, heaving her body, as if her feet were clamped together in irons, she trailed towards the room and then to the sand, settling on a lounger, just a few feet from the sea.

It was hazy and maybe later it would start drizzling, though it was warm. Anyway, she wasn't bothered about the weather any longer. She'd brought a book with her, but she didn't feel up to reading. She just gazed out to sea and without resistance let thoughts invade her mind. That's when she finally remembered his name. Fred - that was the name. She'd met him in Cairo and then again at Johannesburg airport. No doubt he must have thought she was a loony. She'd been so swamped with pills that she hadn't realised what was going on around her. Somehow, she must have recognised him as someone she knew, but that had been all. Yes, then she hadn't been able to remember his name or his face. Now, though, she'd found it, out of nowhere. Fred; that was it. Funny thing, that they'd seen each other again, by chance. She guessed it was just one of those things; it happens. The world was big and small and small and big.

A trip to town was unavoidable to buy a couple of clothes to wear. Apart from what she had worn on the flight, the old black slip dress and a few scarves, she had nothing else as she'd discarded all the garments she'd used before. When Pat moved from one place to another, she got rid of everything that was not strictly necessary. A change of clothes, three pairs of shoes and her impressive array of toiletries and scarves were the only items of her luggage. Now it was essential to get something to wear, at least at night.

Fortunately, there was only one town, advertised as the smallest in the world, and it was close.

On her way to the capital, the ramshackle bus progressed laboriously and slowly up the winding and narrow road, twisting round the continuous sharp bends. She looked out the window at the precipices opening out right by the edge of the road, at the clear blue and turquoise sea and at the evergreen hills looming everywhere. The encompassing view of the landscape only deepened further her sense of stupefaction. It was as if looking at something which was out of focus, which refused to be seen clearly.

Even in town she felt uneasy. Hence, she went quickly around, though so disorientated that she often had to retrace her steps on the streets.

Eventually she marooned herself on the island. Days were indistinguishable. After breakfast Pat resumed her place on the chaise longue on the sand, where she was almost always alone. She took a book she never opened. It was soothing, just lying there, looking at the sea and the sky. There were always so many changes happening; slow and fast at the same time; it was impossible to capture them with your eyes, ears and all senses altogether. Her eyes could never get the drift of the movement of the clouds; all that merging into each other's shapes; constantly emerging new silhouettes; always disintegrating and building simultaneously. Or of the movement of water; all that swinging mass, cradling itself endlessly. In the water, Pat also stayed forever, to the point of her skin seeming to be about to detach itself from the body. Her hands waved, floated dancing with the algae, moving with the flashy coloured fishes, almost touching the reefs, the fishes, the submarine flowers and weeds. She was almost nothing,

fluctuating to the rhythm of the current: a dot on the surface, along the sea and skyline. Sometimes, closing her eyes and turning upwards her opened palms, she felt total abandon. The sea was warm, calm and soft. As each flower; each palm leaf fanning out from the stem; each dreamy spider in its endless spreading web; each little bluish bird tilting back and forward on the ground within Pat's fingers' reach; even each feather; each grain of sand or each bit of green leaf. Everything either floated, sank or glided smoothly about in an all soft atmosphere; **still** utterly incomprehensible to Pat.

During the nights she roamed around the coast. She paddled, for a while, along the shore; meandered through the edge of the island and went into the hotels for a meal or a drink, which she sipped for ages on the balconies. Even in the few rainy days she took a stroll on the beach by her hotel. The natives smiled politely at her and she smiled back at them, but that was it. She rarely spoke with anyone. Occasionally, in a hotel, there'd be a lonely tourist who tried to engage her in conversation. After whatever was the first sentence they pronounced she asked the waiter for another drink for her husband or yawned ostentatiously, whilst saying that she couldn't believe how very tired she was, and left immediately. She barely slept at night time, but that didn't bother her. Then, for some unfathomable reason, the sea air became tangible; that's what you breathed, what you saw, what you heard, what you sensed, when the fingers touched the invisible pellicle of moisture impregnated throughout. The bed had been dragged up to the French windows, against the balcony. The windows were never closed and, sometimes, you could brush the thick mist-white flying drops on the black background wall. In the still of night, she stayed placid on the bed as on the chaise longue, either asleep or awake.

One day, she felt so unhinged that she decided to leave the beach, as she'd kept fidgeting on the towel, turning round and round; standing up one instant and lying down the next; starting to walk one minute to stop the next, and she went for a walk into the forest. She followed a path, heading for a village, but, to avoid stepping into the village, veered off the track and moved through the dense vegetation. However, as she advanced, she felt even worse. The atmosphere was so dark and everything was so oppressively clinging to her body that she soon started to return. While she tried, almost desperately, to see where the path was leading to the main road, a thin film of rain began falling down and before long turned into hard sheets of spray. There was no way she could find the track as she could even barely see the ground beneath her feet. At each step she took the earth was becoming more and more slippery and muddy. Her anxiety had been mounting so much that now she couldn't stand it any longer. Pat screamed at the top of her lungs and instantly fell onto the ground through which she slid down the bog into a huge tortoise.

Early the next morning, half sleepwalking, half terrified, she took the first flight out of the island.

Just over a week had passed, since Fred had landed in Mozambique, when passing on one of the busiest streets in Maputo he saw a crowd of people staring at a TV

screens, outside an electrical shop. He joined the crowd to see what was happening. On the screens, of the televisions displayed, images of a plane wobbling in the air, circling a runaway in Jordan, were everywhere. He could see that one of the wheels of the plane had not come down. Finally, the plane landed unbalanced and stopped with one of its wings scratching the tarmac. From another TV set, someone was repeatedly shouting, inside the plane, 'Stay down, stay down, stay down'. On the next screen, you saw the passengers running away from the plane and then a different image showed reporters questioning the passengers. One of them was Pat. Fred pushed his way through the crowd to peer at that particular screen. There was no doubt it was Pat. 'We're all right. Please leaves us in peace', that was all she said, turning her back to the reporter. The camera though stayed with her for a few more seconds, showing her walking clumsily. She ambled completely uncoordinated, worse than a drunkard.

Back at the hotel, Fred sat on the bed, still baffled with what he'd watched. A moment later, he got out and booked a flight to Jordan.

Yes, he was ridiculous and stupid. He didn't care. The next day, though, he cancelled his flight booking.

As much as she hated to admit to herself, Pat was aware it was hard for her to resume her walking. She couldn't do it. She got tired and nervous, almost as soon as she started to move around. Had something changed? But what? She felt lighter and much fitter. So, logically, she should be prepared to carry on her rambling. She seemed to have shed some more layers of herself and nothing had been replaced, instead, at least as far as she was aware. Actually, she was even finding that a rather suitable state to proceed on her

journeys; better than she'd ever experienced. Still it was extremely hard to walk. It was not because of her legs, muscles or physical ability; it was not because she'd changed her mind. There seemed to be no reason at all for that unexplained languidness and confusion.

Patience, she told the clerk of the car hire company that yes, she was only interested in a 4WD, that no, she did not want a guide. It was not advisable for women to travel on their own, through desert places, and of course it was very expensive to hire a car. The discussion went on over an hour in circles. Both parts took their time, as if there was nothing else in the whole world for them to do. It took another half hour was set to get down to a price, from which neither would budge finally. By that time, Pat was completely exhausted. Yet, she had to pay a lot for the car and a guide. A guide and the company of tourists.

Leafing through a Jordan travel guidebook, Fred decided that Pat was staying at the Ali Gate Hotel. It was near the airport and close to Azraq, where he betted she would go. Under the entry of the Hotel Ali Gate, he read: thoroughly clean, warm staff and flawlessly splendid bathrooms. Then, on another page - Azraq: meaning blue in Arabic, because of its once pure fresh water. In the past, it had been one of the biggest oases, where birds used to feast abundantly on their migration route. Also, in the old days,

home of deer, bears, cheetahs and gazelles, as well as a major caravan route by which T.E. Lawrence passed on his trips between Aqaba and the Azraq castle, where he located as his headquarters.

Now, the castle was still there, very much unchanged, although the transparent large sheets of water were reduced to a modest pool size, only visited by about five percent of the birds that you could have found ages ago. And no more graceful swift limbs of wild animals played, ran and flew enlivening the landscape, now turned into a mere film set.

There was more. Petra, the Red Sea and so on and so on. Nevertheless, that seemed to be the bulk of it to Fred. Without seeing it, just by reading words the place sounded like a million others all over the world. Why had Pat chosen to go there, he didn't have a clue. And then again maybe he had. She seemed to take pleasure in scorching places. Preferably without any trees, plants or any kind of vegetation.

He looked at the map, focusing on the red strips marking the roads, staring at the broken lines showing the tracks and it was as if he could see her right there.

The car gained speed on the straight stretches of the road. At the same time, she gazed around at the landscape, taking her time to look beyond both sides of the road. She smiled in the silence. There was no music playing; there wasn't a radio in the car. All the windows were completely shut, because of the air conditioning and she didn't hear the fast swish of the wind rushing, as she cut through the air. She just saw the undulation of it, imprinted on the place; she just saw the place waving itself incessantly. It felt like water. It wasn't, but that didn't matter. It didn't matter a bit. It didn't matter

at all. Her eyes were so mesmerised by the desert's mountains and the sand planes that she had even managed to obliterate almost completely the chatter of the other tourists. The noise was still there, but now it was as if she no longer recognised what language they were speaking. It was as if she were under water. The flesh, the earth was liquid, the bones, the stones floated and the spirit, the language was flooded. You plunge yourself into the water, forgetting the moment water turns into earth. The whole world is nothing but a handful of grains floating about. Only when you choke you realise that you cannot flow forever.

Fred closed the guide book about Jordan. He definitively, he wasn't going there. He wasn't going to Jordan or Azraq or Petra or after her. His bout of lunacy was over. He couldn't understand where these impulses came from. It wasn't in his nature to think like that or take rash decisions. He couldn't believe how he'd even been able to tell a lie to the hotel so easily, pretending to be her brother. Brother?! He hardly knew her. No doubt that climate was having an effect on him, a much far greater effect than he could perceive. Fortunately, the outbursts were only temporary, at least so far. Besides, he knew where she was, he could see her. He was winning. What he was winning he didn't know.

As soon as the small group of tourists arrived at the site where tons of others were, Pat began straying from them. First, she ambled in a kind of circle around the car to shake off the torpor. Then, she gradually removed herself from the crowds, slowly but in a confident manner, as if knowing where she was going. She had to be wary of the several guards whom she knew she would have to face.

Deep down in a valley, she looked around, not for people at last, but at the ground and the sky. It was a beautiful day. It was so perfect it felt unreal - it was as if she didn't exist too. You had to be invisible to avoid taking the risk of breaking the reigning beauty of the place.

The sky was utterly blue: a still luminous blue. The ground was yellow, brown, pink and red. The dust was scintillating gold. The air was thoroughly warm, the sky incandescent, the earth hot and the stones scalding. And except for the sound of her boots stepping on the dirt, there was nothing but a sheer silence throughout.

Higher up, Pat sat on the hard earth and took the scarf off her head. Dust and dirt fell off, all over her. Walking there meant being under a constant shower of tough dust as the wind was fierce. She touched her hair with one hand, then the face. Her skin had ingrained grime everywhere. She looked at the dusty grains on her hand and wiped it on her trousers. She lingered there for a moment more, not moving.

Finally, following one path, she saw the road was not far. After all, she hadn't got lost entirely, as she thought. The compass she'd kept glancing at, as an amulet you look at but don't understand, must have worked. Again in the car, back to the hotel, this time she gazed at the road. After a severe reprimand from the guide for having disappeared, he made her seat at the front by his side. He drove without stopping or saying a word. It was exciting the easiness and freedom the tarmac offered. They overtook cars and trucks, desert, scrub and greenery, fast. And she wished the road wouldn't end for a long, long time. Especially, when she thought about the hotel,

practically in the middle of a big road.

At that hour of unbearable heat, she went up to her room, closed the door, turned off the air conditioning, didn't bother to wash at all or to eat and lay down on top of the bed.

Only at dusk, as she took a walk round the hotel grounds, did she shake off the coat of dust.

The buffet was already full of people like a swarm of vultures attacking the food. Still she decided to go in for it too, right away. She wasn't up to taking a shower or dressing up.

By the time she returned to her room, she looked at it smiling. After the ordeal of the meal, the room presented itself as an old friend, a long-gone friend, a friend that you love with the same intimacy of years ago, whom you spent so many moments with. He might have been away for centuries, but the moment you see him again, it's like nothing has changed; it's all there, intact and fresh, at that initial glance. Unfortunately only at that initial glance in this case. Despite the hour, the traffic continued ferociously.

Pat put the hot tap of the bath running on maximum and sat on top of the toilet with the bathroom door closed. She was not going to be able to sleep with that racket of cars, trucks and coaches. But it was her fault. She was coming back to places she had been with Peter, her husband, and that was wrong. It wasn't enough to stay in different hotels. After all, what was she doing in Jordan, except to crawl in the dirt? Seychelles had already been a mistake. Actually, that was where she had diverted and began, unconsciously or consciously, to retrace her past. Her wounded body had tricked her, leading her to a comfort zone. She was furious with herself.

Outside, the continuous din of the cars and trucks gushing out on the highway seemed never to let up and Pat's senses never seemed to stop hearing it, even when she

fell into a state of reverie, not asleep, not awake. Yet she picked up every swish and swoosh, and she even had the impression of the rush of air, as the traffic slashed through. Along with it, memories streamed in an uncontrollable commotion in her mind. It was like the crumbling of the Tower of Babel, prompting the confusion between the languages; there were no more different ones anymore; they'd all turned entangled.

There were American highways with cars speeding by; restaurants by the road; people waiting in bus stations; the hotel in Sri Lanka; Jody swearing at the bank clerk in Marseille; the red Renault 4 breaking down in the middle of rice fields; the boarding for the first time on the plane to New York; Jalil, the taxi driver, telling the news of his endless family as they were stuck in a traffic jam on the way to the cinema; Kate, her sister, laughing unbridled at dinner in her house the day her husband had been caught by a snow storm in Banff, not being able to come back home; her husband pointing with his finger at her and smiling, saying, you don't want to do that; Fred's elegant and transparent hands on the table. And so on and so on. It all kept coming and going out of her, as if she'd swallowed so many worlds she couldn't take it anymore.

When Pat left the hotel, she felt broken and sad. She hadn't been able to sleep at all. She felt as if she'd been crushed by all the zigzag images, which had tossed around in her mind, throwing her back and forth like a toy and pushing her into a dead end. Now, she had to wipe the slate clean, wipe everything out again, totally and completely.

5. CHANGING PLACES

Fred opened the door of his room, dropped his rucksack on the floor, took off his soggy and sweaty t-shirt and headed morosely to the sink. Nothing came out of the tap, which didn't surprise him anymore. Mechanically, he reached his hand for the bucket underneath, but there was no water there either. He stretched to hold both sides of the sink and looked straight at the little mirror ahead. He stood there staring for a moment. No tiredness, no angriness, no feeling at all. Nothing. His mind seemed to have been emptied. It's just one of those days, he thought. Another one, he said to himself. He felt so impotent he wasn't capable of working out how many of those days there had been. He thought of the hangovers and lost days, so many lost. The worst was it didn't disappear completely; the worst were those dregs it left; that helpless nauseating aftertaste.

Fred lay down on the small bed with his legs sticking out, trying to forget his body and concentrate on his work. It was hard; he had to blank out the stunning heat and overflowing continuous sweat from top to toe. It reminded him of Jordan, although he'd never been there. It reminded him of Pat in Jordan, in that hotel that he'd read about. She might be crazy for the flaming hell places, but she had the air conditioning, while he...He was a sucker. And thinking about those things was only making him feel worse: a moron.

He eyed the room. Like most of the ones he'd stayed in, it was drab, but all hotel rooms were dreary places to him. Maybe he was just tired of hotel rooms. Even the few more expensive ones he'd tried had been utterly dull. And he had been in so many, by now. Perhaps, he wasn't taking the right turns or wasn't turning swiftly enough. Now, he just felt that he was going around and around, lost in hotel rooms.

Again, he looked at that room. This time, examining it intently, for the lack of being able to focus his attention on anything. It did seem to have something different from the others, this one. What was it? His eyes went round the small space, stopping briefly on its few features without success. He closed his eyes for a minute and then opened them again. That moment, he saw. Everything was painted a different colour. The frame of the mirror was of a pea green, against a clear blue wall. There was a faded pink throw with an indistinct pattern of a yellowish red twisting all over, as a vine sprouting from nowhere, sprinkled by whitish yellow dots, a bright red chair, an electric blue wardrobe. It was nothing but this: the room had that peculiar dinginess. Well, there it was: the colour of the place, the typicality of the Tropic of the Equator.

Fred closed his eyes again. Now, because he didn't want to see all that garish clash of colours. Instead, he saw, smelt and heard the sea. The rough, profound and dense North Sea. The untamed power of the waves crashed on the rocks and rose above to the sky. He could feel the cold, wild and solid salty water hitting him. He breathed in and out that clean and vigorous air and water. All his senses were alert and every pore was stinging with life. Only, when he was entering his home, his family home, taking his shoes off in the hall, as usual, he stopped.

Sighing, he got up from the bed. He opened his rucksack and took his diary out. He had not been able to find anyone who'd met Carole to talk to for a week. He'd just been going from one place to another, and everywhere he'd encountered nothing but empty landscapes. All the same arid, bare and naked earth. Just one lingered vividly, for some reason he didn't quite understand: the endless stretch of sand by the sea in Morocco. There he had seen Carole, or placed her, wearing a long white dress, softly and idly paddling: a ghost. At the time, he'd sensed such an eerie feeling that he'd turned his back, afraid, and returned to the hotel immediately. How long ago had it been? He had to check his diary. It was impressive how his memory was failing. It used

to be so perfect. Those hot climates were turning it into a bog. He felt he was sinking fast. My God, Morocco had been three weeks ago, already. Since then, there was little he'd been capable of digging out. Except the places where she'd stayed, there wasn't much he'd come up with.

Now, thinking about Morocco, maybe he'd made a gross mistake there. He should have stayed. Actually, in afterthought, he was almost convinced that if he'd held on, he could have taken a step forward in his project. But as the name of Helena Bowles had been brought up, he'd fled the place after this woman. Another one, he thought. His life seemed to have been summed up in chasing women, like a character of a romantic novel, torn apart by consuming passions.

Damn, he said to himself. What was he going to do? Should he take off again? The evidences pointed to yes. He'd just arrived, but it was obvious that Carole had not been in that hotel. That hotel, the whole building, was fairly recent and it was nothing like something that could have existed at her time. The place had changed.

Fred pressed his hands into his eyes round and round. He wished he could stop. The smell of sticky sweat was becoming worse. If he could wash his hands, at least. And then, never mind the hands, the head. He didn't have a life of his own anymore. Every inch had been taken up by his work. So be it, he thought, leaving the room determined to follow the leads of people who'd met Carole or Helena there. He was going to knock on every door right now and get it over with.

There were times when he felt guilty like an intruder, but he had to be that way. If he didn't face up to guilt, it was impossible to write Carole's biography. If not, what was he doing there? Nothing. Not a thing. And those were the exact words that kept coming up to his mind throughout the insomniac night.

Early in the morning, completely exhausted and feeling like some stinking and putrid piece of meat, he dragged himself around, trying to find water. He asked

everyone. Most of the natives didn't understand a word of what he said; one pointed one way; another the other way; some looked surprised at him. A repetition of the previous day. After an hour of this, he took a taxi to the airport. For the first time, he was leaving without having booked any ticket or even clearly thinking what was he going to do or where he was heading.

When Kate came out the door of the airport in Palermo to face the people waiting for passengers, she found herself engulfed by a compact crowd of natives. Flustered and disoriented, she emerged out of the airport building into the dark night. Confused, she walked around trying to figure out the buses, but in the end opted for a taxi. It was too much chaos and unfamiliarity all at once. Anyway, not only that, but Pat hadn't come to meet her, as she had told her it would be best for her to sleep in a hotel near the airport, instead of coming to where Pat was staying.

Why couldn't they have met in Rome, rather than in Sicily? Kate could have driven to Rome, as she was spending the summer holidays in Abruzzo, close to Rome, but no. With her sister, everything had to be complicated. She'd never been to Sicily and, as far as she knew, neither had Pat.

There she was. Even if she couldn't really see her from that distance with the sun blurring her eyes, she instinctively knew that the silhouette seated on the *piazza*, under the scorching sun was her sister. Still she waved at her. Pat, though, seemed not to see her, even when Kate was already stepping on the *piazza*. Unconsciously, before proceeding, she halted for a few seconds. She stood staring eerily at her sister.

'Kate!' Pat called.

'Hello!'

'My God, I can't believe I'm finally seeing you,' she added, once she'd reached Pat's table.

'Is that why you were eyeing me like a spy?'

'Do you really want me to...' she replied, implying that if she wanted to hear a sermon she would.

'No, no,' Pat interrupted, sighing and rolling her eyes as she went on:

'I've got myself a spy, already. Thank you.'

'What?' Kate asked nervously.

'Forget it.'

'What are you talking about?' Kate insisted, slightly raising her voice, worried now.

'Nothing. It's just a joke, a *fait-diver*. I'm sorry I told you,' she said wearily.

'You know, I hate when you do that! You started, now you've to finish it.'

'Ok, ok, I'll tell you, but not here. Come on, let's have an ice cream.'

'Anyway, can you tell me what we are doing in Palermo?'

'That again?'

Kate sighed. Pat said quickly:

'Because I've never been here before. It's a new place, that's all. And you'll see: it's wonderful. You won't regret coming'.

However, as they stood on the pavement waiting for ages to cross the road where the cars sped by in complete disorder, disrespecting signs, traffic lights and pretty much everything, Kate doubted that she would like the place. Pat looked at her and pointing to the traffic, said smiling:

‘Sicilians have Arabic blood.’

Kate turned her eyes upward, as if saying here we go into madmen territory.

Once on the other side of the street, Pat said, provoking her sister:

‘Well, you like Italians, I like Arabs: so it’s the perfect mix.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ replied Kate, although she felt like laughing, also.

Her sister knew she didn’t have an ounce of her penchant for the Arabic culture. Actually, she felt the opposite towards it, corresponding exactly to the contrast between their physical appearance: Kate was blond, had blue eyes and fair skin, whilst Pat was brunette, had brown eyes and dark skin. Apart from that, they were almost a copy of each other.

In the café, Pat felt Kate’s anxiety mounting. She knew she was upset for her not having kept in touch for so long, so she told her about Fred in three short and dry sentences. It was better to tell her this story, than having to listen to her sister asking all sorts of questions and then to hear the inevitable self-willed tirade about how unreasonable, irrational and above all simply senseless, as she liked to put it, she was being with her life.

‘That’s it. An anecdote, that’s all.’

‘I don’t know...’

‘Oh, come on, Kate. It’s nothing.’

‘You should be careful.’

Pat burst out laughing. Kate shook her head.

‘I’ve decided to buy a car,’ Pat declared.

Kate enjoyed the smile on her sister’s face when she’d made that announcement. She smiled back at her and made up her mind not to speak about anything that could distress Pat. After all, she was tired of sadness, of worrying, of that endless depressing long time, of such wretched impotence going on, like interminable bands of rain sweeping a swamp incessantly. They were under the sun, her sister was in a good mood and looked revived.

At dinner, they sat silent for a while, amidst the lively chatter and busy movement around them. Both were tired of going up and down Palermo looking at cars, speaking and gesturing to people. Also, of arguing with them and between themselves about cars. So, they’d agreed not to say anything more on that subject, which anyway neither knew much about. And, at least, the matter had been dealt with and was over. Against Kate’s advice, Pat had bought an old 4WD. Kate had been adamant in her arguments. She realised now she actually didn’t even know why she had remained so unswerving. But then again, that’s how they had been always. It was like the old times. To Kate, Pat was both a mother and a daughter, either saying no, as to a spoiled child or as an order to keep respect. Or yes, sometimes. At the same time they behaved as two children having fun together.

While waiting for the dessert, Kate asked:

‘So, what is this fellow like, the one after you? Is he handsome?’

‘No. He’s Scandinavian.’

Kate laughed.

‘Like no, he’s ugly and on top Scandinavian or just ugly because he’s Scandinavian?’

‘Whichever way you want. Frozen fish.’

‘What?’ asked Kate giggling.

‘What else is there up there? There’s fish, ice, cold, snow, water. Frozen fish is the result, like those cheap slabs you get at the supermarket.’

‘Christ, Pat, I hope no one is listening to us,’ Kate said between laughs.

Pat shrugged her shoulders, showing she didn’t care.

‘And you don’t like frozen fish...’ Kate suggested, ironically.

‘I can’t be bothered with defrosting,’ Pat said swiftly.

Kate burst out laughing.

‘Look at you! And it’s me you’re afraid that people hear,’ Pat said provoking further her sister.

‘The things you come up with...If someone understand us, they’ll be asking what world do these two live in.’

‘I, none.’

‘Like a nun in a convent.’

And with this remark, they both started laughing themselves silly.

Fred woke up in India at six am, covered in sweat, to the sound of water. He'd slept though, a deep sleep. He got up immediately and went to the window. There was the water, water running against the windowpanes, as if an irate God was whipping up the whole earth.

About fifteen minutes later, the rain vanished and the sun shone merciless again. Fred remained with his face pasted to the window, staring at the steam rising from wooden chairs and tables outside the café across the street. Two little boys put their hands on and off the water vapour, laughing and running back and forth. No one else showed the slightest hint of paying any notice to the rain or its vestiges. Men, women continued to go up and down the streets, as usual, with their sandals and feet wet; their lively colourful clothes, displaying blots, splashes, specks in fleeting dark stains.

Quickly, he headed for the bathroom and took a long shower. In his room the fan was already spinning at full speed, so he managed to stay dry, up to the moment he stepped out of the hotel's main entrance.

Fred hadn't checked his e-mail far more than a week, so he went to look for a place with Internet, which, despite not being an always-straightforward task, he had got used to by now. Besides, he knew that there would be messages from his friends to distract him from loneliness. He felt better now with the idea of failure and frustration almost forgotten.

There were quite a few messages in his e-mail box, mostly from friends.

Erik, his closest friend, was sending him about a dozen strategies to 'pounce on' Pat. Almost all fooling around, veering towards absolute nonsense. Fred's face turned flustered, on top of the film of sweat, even if he was closed-in a plywood panelled cubicle, immersed in darkness. What had he told Erik? He remembered he'd written about Pat, but exactly what he couldn't recall. Anyway, that had been ages ago. He'd sent him tons of messages, since then.

He replied:

‘Erik, you must be out of your mind. I bet you’re drunk as hell. And all the time, too. I’m sure that’s why you haven’t e-mailed me for years. That woman, Pat, is history! I’m getting desperate with my work. I’m all over the place and completely lost. And how is yours going? Did you buy a car, after all?’

Next, he opened one from Rita:

‘Erik is turning into an alcoholic, if he isn’t one already. He does nothing but drink all the time. Anything will do. Last weekend, me, Erik, Stefan and Irene went up to Nil’s parents’ house in the countryside. We had a fabulous time. We swam in the lake and ate outside. The weather was so nice that we actually stayed outside all the time. And now, there’s a hammock in the back woods by the house. Everyone wanted to lodge there, it was so fantastic. But they’ve put a swing farther in the woods, delightfully hidden in the foliage, too. No one knew it was there. We found it the first afternoon when we went for a walk and heard the love moans of Erik in action with some girl he’d found in the village. It was so funny! We decided to let them finish and then after we gave them a loud applause. You should’ve have seen his face! It was the only time we saw him smiling. The rest of the time, he was always totally plastered and he was no fun at all. It’s getting quite frightening. We don’t know what to do. I wish you were here.’

And, then, another from Rita:

‘We had a fight with Erik. Finally, we talked to him about his drinking problem. That is, we tried. He wouldn’t listen to a word. He just got terribly angry and even aggressive. Stefan lost his temper and punched him. Now, Erik has disappeared altogether. What do you think we can do?’

Fred felt powerless. He was distressed with Erik’s state and with the sudden realization of how far away he was from that world, where they carried on living as

before.

There were more e-mails from friends, revolving around the same stories, more or less. His supervisor had sent a comment on his work, saying it was very good and urging him to continue. However, he couldn't stress enough the importance of talking to as many people as possible. There were a lot of places and not enough people. Also, meaning, do not amble around taking holidays with the University's money.

The last one he read was from the woman called Helena Bowles. She was replying to a message he'd sent enquiring about the relationship between her and Carole.

The e-mail was curt, but polite. She'd known Carole for about ten years and she might talk to him, if he was able to come to India, where she was living presently. She'd given the address and some directions of how to get there.

Back at the hotel, Fred pondered his options. Spread out on the floor, he'd put his notes about the people who had been in touch with Carole; those he was aware of. There was one card for Helena Bowles, but it was empty. Her name had come up in Morocco and then in Maputo, Mozambique, at least from a reliable source. He'd known about a Helena before, mentioned by Dave, the poor man shut in a psychiatric institution in the USA, who had been one of Carole's lovers. Surely, it was the same woman. He had tried to get some information from Dave, but he hadn't managed to get anything except the first name: Helena. How was he supposed to find which Helena was the one he needed?

Before he'd left Oslo, he'd written letters to several people around the world who'd met Carole. The first reply he'd received came from a sanatorium for people with mental disorders. Fred had barely been able to understand the letter, but, Dave, the author, was proving to be a helping hand, for he'd dropped the names of a few people that Fred had no previous information on. He'd spoken with a couple and they had

provided a valuable contribution. Now, there was Helena. He went back to Dave's letter. Nevertheless, he couldn't make out any sense at the point Helena's name appeared. It stuck out precisely in the most convoluted part of the writing, where Dave was utterly incomprehensible.

The research work was extremely difficult, given its subject, never mind having to deal with nutcases and broken pieces of a faded puzzle. Anyone would go bonkers!

So, once again, he set out to prepare himself to board another plane. This time, to Thiruvananthapuram or Kozhikode or Kochi. The names would have made him laugh, if he weren't in Mumbai. My God, so much misery and filth was appalling. He hoped the South would be a bit better, but he was hoping against hope.

To Kozhikode, the flight was both cheaper and earlier, so Kozhikode it was. And then, a taxi to Kochi.

Once more, he settled into his new and umpteenth hotel room. For the moment, he piled his papers in a muddle and went to get something to eat.

Later, he started walking around the little town, but soon Erik's messy state dawned on him. He cut short his walk and returned quickly to his room where he installed himself with a bottle of vodka.

Pat hung up the phone and turned to her sister in bed by her side.

'The car is downstairs. Come on, quick. Let's get ready and go for a drive.'

Kate took her hands up to her face.

'Pat, tell me something. When was the last time you drove?'

'I don't know. I can't remember.'

‘Oh, my God, Pat. You have to take some refresher lessons before you start driving. Plus, European cars have gears. Do you know what that means?’

‘Of course I do. Don’t be ridiculous. And I’m not going to take any lessons. I’m through with lessons. I’ll be fine.’

‘You’re out of your mind. Not even I would be fine driving here, amongst these mad drivers.’

‘We’ll take the car out of Palermo. We’ll head to Trapani on the West Coast. Up to there, there’s a highway and then I’m sure the roads won’t have much traffic.’

‘In August, the roads by the coast won’t have much traffic? You’re completely nuts.’

‘It’s not crowded with tourists on the West coast.’

‘Anyway, don’t be such a spoiler. You’re on holiday, have fun, a bit of adventure,’ Pat added.

Kate just shook her head. She could see that nothing she might say would make any difference. Pat was determined and in an upbeat mood, especially at that time in the morning. In Sicily, she had found her sister even exuberant. She wasn’t going to upset her. Although, she knew that, in the end, it will be her who would have to drive the car out of Palermo.

Pat sat behind the wheel, adjusted the seat, the mirrors and smiled to Kate.

‘Try the gears. First, put your left foot on the clutch and the right on the brake pedal,’ Kate said.

Pat looked at the gearstick.

‘I’ll show you,’ Kate hastened to say, as she saw Pat gazing at the gearstick.

‘Get it?’

‘Yeah.’

Pat switched on the ignition. The car screeched, jolted backwards and the motor died.

‘You’ve just put the gear in reverse,’ Kate said.

‘Right.’

She turned the key again and waited for a moment, before attempting to move.

‘Gear,’ Kate reminded her.

This time, when she slowly stepped on the accelerator, the car slid out of the parking space and clumsily proceeded, responding to the steering, almost crashing into another car.

Kate shouted:

‘Brake! Brake!’

Again, the motor went dead.

‘Listen Pat, it’s best if I take the car out of the city. Then you have a go on quiet roads, ok?’

‘Ok.’

Finally, after a while, Pat was driving. Still rusty somehow, but carefully, which was surprising. Only, when they found themselves on a stretch of a straight and empty road, Pat would put her foot down on the accelerator. Then, fortunately, for Kate, as her sister wasn’t capable yet of controlling the gears, Pat almost always forgot to change into fifth and, sometimes, fourth. However, to park the car, Kate had to take the wheel, unless there was plenty of space and the only thing you needed to do was to steer the car into a space.

They had four wonderful days, going round the West coast of Sicily, driving past olive groves, Salinas, lying on a small beach they’d discovered, where there were more rocks than sand, swimming in the warm Mediterranean water, visiting the cultural sites of the place and eating, mostly, the tastiest and freshest fruits they had ever had.

Kate convinced Pat to take her to the airport, saying it was good for her to practice driving on busy roads, which was partly true. Although what she wanted more was to stay with her sister as long as possible. Who knew when she would have another chance to see her? Despite Pat's aversion to going to airports to see people off or to meet people arriving, she took Kate.

After check-in, they went outside, so Pat could have a cigarette.

Kate said:

'I'm thinking about that poor boy.'

'Poor boy? What poor boy?'

'The one chasing you.'

'Don't be silly, Kate.'

'Well, if you meet him again, give him a chance. Think about me.'

'So, you want me to have sex with this guy for you? You want an extramarital adventure through me. That's shocking!'

'Pat! You know very well what I mean,' Kate protested.

Yes, Pat understood her. In spite of having taught her sister to read and write, which explained why Kate had always been ahead of the other children her age, she'd never been good with words. Or, at least, she wasn't anymore, to be more precise, even if she had married a literary man.

'You'd better go, before you start making up this tragic love story out of nothing. A timeless novel with characters who never met and don't live anywhere.'

Kate gaped at her.

'Come on. Off you go. You still have to pass security control and you know that can take ages,' Pat insisted, although there was still plenty of time before Kate's flight. However, she knew that way she would persuade her sister, who always liked to make sure to be ready and prepared well in advance for a trip. On the other hand, she couldn't

stand the anxiety for much longer. That's why she hated to go to airports to say goodbye or hello. Airports were places for people who travel and no one else, as far as she was concerned.

On Kate's face tears started to show.

'Kate! Don't! I promise I'll keep in touch. Please go now or I will.'

'Ok, ok,' said Kate mumbling.

Sitting on the floor, his back against the bed, Fred began writing a letter to Erik. He knew Erik had a strange aversion to computers; he read e-mails only sporadically and rarely took the time to reply or send any, unless it was absolutely necessary. It wasn't such a big surprise he'd chosen to respond to the one about Pat. He probably hadn't even looked at the date or checked any other message. Besides, it was the only one with a story which could trigger his imagination.

He was sure Erik would read a letter avidly. Fred had to apply himself to write it skilfully. Erik was a brilliant literary talent, but Fred also wanted to lure Erik out of the hole he'd fallen into. It wasn't exactly an easy exercise for Fred. Still, he devoted himself wholly, pushing on, while drinking the cold vodka.

When he finished, he was exhausted and drunk. He lay on the bed, thinking he'd better get something to eat. However, he wasn't hungry at all and not willing in the least to step out the room, to face strange faces, speaking a strange language, displaying strange expressions.

Despite the fan, he was sweating again, feeling extremely hot. He went to the bathroom, washed his face and went back to the bed to sleep it off. He couldn't fall

asleep, nevertheless. After trying to lie still, he started to turn restlessly on the bed and took up the vodka, again. He was going to take the weekend off, as if he were in Norway. It was neither Saturday nor Sunday, but the days had all blended in, a long time ago.

Eventually, he drifted into sleep.

The next day, Fred was shattered and, as usual whenever he drank, feeling completely miserable, blaming himself for being so fucking stupid.

He had to get out of bed to buy some water. He didn't bother to shower and tidy his unruly hair, which had the habit of sticking up pointing vertically upright to the sky in a long blond mane. After having a cup of strong coffee at the reception, he came back to the room, took a prolonged shower, swallowed a couple of aspirins and stretched on the bed numb.

Fred knew the day was ruined. He'd never been able to handle his drink. Erik could drink and drink and still remain perfectly clear-headed and stable. It would be just great if Erik arrived that instant, following Fred's suggestion in the letter to come and meet him. He hadn't posted the letter yet, but that didn't matter.

Obviously, he had picked the appropriate time to get drunk, especially after keeping off the drink all those months out there, except once, because of Pat.

He had a massive headache, a nauseated stomach and a disgusting taste in his mouth. Also, he was going through the same old feeling of guilt. Nothing new, really. One unaccustomed twist of an idea occurred to his mind though, through the predictable muddle of reasoning which inevitably issued from this condition. Through all day,

between getting up to go to the toilet and carrying on prostrated in bed, his mind had unexpectedly focused on his work. It was something that surfaced in Fred's mind many times, but not with the violence and stark manifestation it did now.

Why hadn't Carole stayed in the summerhouse by the fjord? Why hadn't she just stayed put?

This had been the icy top of the iceberg first to surface in his brain. At the beginning, as an angry thought, like a shout you can't hold any longer inside. Then dissolving into the ingénue wondering of a child, who cannot understand the reason for something, just because it isn't obvious.

Carole would have been a Goddess, if she'd settled in Norway, at least as her mother home, the core, the essential place to come back to always. Despite all the mystery she was deep into, or better, with the mystery as an unassailable ally, she would stand as a national heroine or even, perhaps, an internationally renowned author. But no. There had never been a home for her, anywhere. She could have been strong, tough and made that decision. She had been stern and robust, but also diaphanous and light at the same time. And so, instead of having become a Nobel prizewinner, she'd turned into an evanescent presence. Norway had certainly served her well as a retreat, so it seemed. He could be wrong there, of course. But that was the problem – he had to get it right; it was his job to place her. Or no? He didn't know how to go about it anymore, how to settle both Carole's and his own contradictions. The woman had even had two passports: one French, another Norwegian. And that, he suspected, only because her mother was French and her father Norwegian and she'd studied in both countries. But how could anyone have two nationalities? Particularly someone who'd been practically all over the world. She could have had all kinds of passports. Why? Why? Why? he repeatedly asked aloud here and there, breaking up his train of thought.

Fred forced himself to stop thinking about all this, twice, to no avail. He went back over the subject again and again, disorderly jumping to another direction.

He could listen to her blood, running resilient and thin. It was Scandinavian blood streaming submarine, yet so steadily. He could hear her voice, whilst looking at his favourite photo of her, that image capturing her steely eyes, which pierced straight through you, in their fixed and unswerving gaze. And that posture, my God! So icily determined with her arms crossed over her upper body, like a figurehead of a vessel, challenging you to dare touch a resistance that would never succumb.

It was an eerie picture. No one knew where it came from. She'd possibly had it taken when she'd stayed in New York. It was such a staged photo; he guessed you could only find people to produce something like that in the States.

He threw the picture away from him. He detested it, at that moment. It was a fake, an outrage. Just another trick to play with him, by enticing and leading him to delusion.

'You are evil!' he blurted out aloud.

The following morning, he was weak from not having eaten much the previous day and still somewhat dazed. He was slow all day. Yet he persevered going about his business.

Helena Bowles, the woman Fred had come to speak with in Kochi, lived in a small former colonial quarter, in a small ex- colonial house, in a small town in Southern India. That part of town still kept something of the quietness and the orderliness of centuries past, in a territory which had been in possession of the Portuguese, Dutch and English. You found few people on its streets, less rubbish littering the pavements and roads. The houses were humble, not the opulent mansions of rich and prosperous colonists or rich people. Maybe, Fred thought, they'd belonged to sailors, merchants or tradesmen. Kochi had been the queen city of the spices, he'd read, and of trade, arms wide open to the sea.

He hadn't looked around the town much, before his interview with Helena Bowles. So, just by looking at the streets and houses of that quarter, it seemed to lack a certain dimension he'd hoped to encounter.

Moreover, the houses were not only modest, but also displayed marks of decay. They weren't crumbling or disintegrating. Still they had an unmistakable air of lazy neglect.

Fred knocked on the peeling green front door without a clue about what he was going to see.

An old lady came to the door, wearing an impeccable long white Indian gown, without the corresponding trousers, as was customary, and thin leather strap sandals. She wore a flaming orange scarf to liven up the severe outfit, together with colourful bright earrings and bracelets flashing with an amazing fulgurous light. Fred wouldn't have noticed if it weren't for the clashing contrast produced there at the entrance between the blinding darkness inside after the bright clarity outside.

He introduced himself, unsure if he was talking to Helena Bowles or some kind of a servant.

'Pleased to meet you. I'm Helena Bowles. Come in,' she said unsmiling.

She led him straight across the front room, which he could barely see, to the back of the house, where there was a little outside area. It was just a narrow strip of cemented backyard, covered by a light Indian cloth serving as awning stuck to the walls of the house and of the house opposite. Underneath, against the wall in front of the house, was a shallow sort of tank running alongside the length of the wall with a wooden washboard on the left hand side corner. It was probably used to wash. The water however was transparent and clean. It occupied almost half of the space. The rest was filled with immense pots of plants, leaving only a small space free, on the right corner, for two old wicker chairs, overlaid by cloths, and a tiny semi-circular iron table, leaning adjacent to the wall.

She left him there waiting, while she went to make some iced tea. He felt uncomfortable for not knowing anything about her. Usually, he knew a bit about the people he talked to beforehand. Also, he felt uneasy because she had shown no trace of amicability, contrary to everyone else he'd spoken with so far.

He started:

'I'm sorry to take your time. You are very kind to receive me. And I'm afraid I have to confess to being completely ignorant about your relationship with Carole. Your name was mentioned in a letter I received from Dave Leland and then confirmed in Morocco and in Mozambique.'

'It doesn't surprise me. So you haven't talked to Dave, have you?'

'No, not yet. As far as I know in that part of the world Carole stayed only in New York, I was planning to leave my journey there towards the end of my field trip.'

'And what is it that you're exactly doing?'

Fred explained to her, he was working on a research project about Carole, as part of his PhD, in order to write Carole's biography; that he too was Norwegian like Carole; that it was very important to discover information, particularly about her writing, but as

well about her relationships... There was a great demand and curiosity to understand Carole in Norway.

‘That’s an awesome task,’ she said thoughtfully.

He didn’t reply. She continued:

‘I don’t know if I can help much.’

At this point, Fred put in quickly:

‘I’m sure you can. Believe me, at this stage, everything is important, even if it looks insignificant.’

‘You’re staying here, in Kochi?’ she asked changing the subject.

Successfully, she managed to turn the tables. Now, it was her who was conducting an interview about him and giving him advice, suggestions related to Kochi and the state of Kerala.

Finally, taking advantage of a small pause, he asked her:

‘May I ask why your name is Helena and not Helen? I thought you were English.’

She smiled cunningly.

‘Fred, where I am from is complicated. I’m not getting into that. But my mother was Portuguese, hence the name Helena.’

Then, she suddenly stopped talking; her eyes diverted from him and became absent.

Fred was determined to convince her to say something. After all, he’d come a long way just to speak with her.

‘You see, the way Carole travelled and all the people she met, makes her rather difficult to track down. It’s an immense intricate puzzle; so every little piece is precious.’

Now there was a slight smile on her lips, as she seemed to focus again on what

he was saying.

‘Yes, yes,’ she said very slowly.

Fred expected her to carry on, but she didn’t. At that point, he started to get impatient. He decided to provoke her.

‘Of course, I understand if you don’t wish to say anything. If you don’t mind I would like at least to know where you are from, what you do...’

Helena turned her attention to him again.

Her voice was smoother now, but firm:

‘Fred, don’t take personally what I’m going to say, but I really don’t know you. You have a noble task and you seem very committed to it, which I admire. Yet, if you excuse me, I’m not going to talk about me. And about Carole, I have to think.’

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. It’s just that it’s been so hard to find people to talk to.’

‘You weren’t rude. You were direct and I appreciate that. And I understand your problem well. Anyway now I have things to do, so I suggest we meet again another day.’

Disconcerted, Fred uttered uncertain:

‘Well, can I talk to you tomorrow or the day after?’

She sighed and took a moment to reply:

‘Is Tuesday ok for you? Around the same time?’

‘Perfect. And thank you very much.’

She nodded and got up.

‘See you on Tuesday, then.’

On Tuesday, both Fred and Helena took the places they had, exactly as on the previous meeting.

‘How do you get used to this heat?’ Fred asked her.

‘For me it’s good, because of my rheumatism. As you can see, I’m not anymore a young lady; so...Besides, I always loved hot climates, like Carole. With the difference that she always had to have her little bit of cold weather.’

‘Norway.’

‘Exactly. And you? Are you eager to go back to your country?’

‘Yes, very much,’ he replied keeping his answer as short as possible on purpose, fearing she would start leading him again away from the subject.

‘And you changed to the hotel I recommended you?’

‘Yes, I did. It’s much better indeed,’ he said thinking oh no, here we go.

‘So, what kind of things do you want to know about Carole?’

Fred thought to himself absolutely everything, but asked:

‘How did you meet her?’

‘I met her, just like you used to meet everyone in Africa or the colonies, the white people, that is. At a party. I don’t remember which party it was. She’d just arrived from Europe, I think, still so fresh, full of energy and curiosity. I think there wasn’t a single person with whom she didn’t talk to that night.’

‘What else do you remember about that night?’

‘That’s all. I don’t remember anything else. Those parties were always the same. And she was just one more novelty. We, I mean the white people living there, were used to seeing people coming and going. They arrived, and it was an excitement, and then many left a few days later. Someone else would come after, endlessly replacing one another. Others, obviously, stayed forever or until they were kicked out.’

‘So, with Carole was the same, as the first group. She came out here to have a look around and that was it?’

‘No. With Carole it was different.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She stayed longer. Then, we came on a trip, like many others trips we used to do, to South India and fell in love with this place and its people. After that, she always returned here.’

‘Then, you really did get to know her well?’

Helena’s tight lips opened in an amused and teasing expression.

‘We became very close, yes.’

Fred supposed she’d unblocked and was going to begin unfolding deeper her story. He was eager and thrilled to listen to it. Instead, she glanced at her watch and declared:

‘I am sorry, but I have a student coming in a few minutes.’

Fred looked at her surprised.

‘But we can meet again, can’t we?’

She remained silent for a while and then said:

‘I don’t know.’

‘Please...’ he started without being able to continue.

‘You must understand. It’s not easy for me. And then, I’m still not sure what good it would do to have a biography of Carole.’

For a moment, Fred stared at the floor, unwilling to get up and go.

Helena, seeing him so disheartened, changed her mind:

‘We can meet again Friday, if you want.’

‘Actually, you could come for dinner,’ she added.

‘Of course, I’ll come.’

‘You see, I still have to make a living. I used to teach English. My father was English and I did my university studies in England. I’m retired now, but with only a small pension. So I help some students, teaching English at home.’

There was a rap on the door then. She went to the door and opened it. A little,

thin Indian boy entered. She told him something in the native language and joined Fred.

‘I really like so much to talk to you, even if you don’t want to talk about Carole,’ he rapidly put in.

‘What else is there to talk about? You are still very young to tell stories and my life is a rather boring, but private, theme of conversation. See you Friday. We’ll talk then. Now, I have to work.’

‘What time?’

‘About seven?’

‘I’ll be here.’

When he arrived, the table was already set with food in an array of small dishes.

Helena was still wearing her hair neatly tied in a low bun at the back of her head, but she’d changed into another gown – a fine printed one, with exuberant flowers twirling and cut to follow the curves of her hips, again with no matching trousers. She’d put on new earrings, twinkling red, and a long necklace, shining red too. The sandals she’d swapped for black ballerina pumps.

Now that Fred could see the interior of the house, he found that the style was the same as the one he’d seen in the backyard. All the furniture was old and chipped and, although there wasn’t much of it, as the room was small and dark, the place appeared to be crammed. There were piles of books scattered on the floor, in every little niche. Even the table was filled, not exactly just by food, but by the lacy tablecloth, matching napkins and the variety of dishes, bowls, glasses and cutlery.

Fred couldn't take his eyes from the table; it looked like he'd stepped into a middle-class English home centuries ago. Helena caught his eye.

'I've inherited all this. It's all very old. It's starting to fall to pieces.'

'Still, it's very beautiful and you look beautiful too.'

'Do not be fooled. It's an old Indian trick for Europeans. Everything looks beautiful, when they arrive in India and they have sensitive eyes together with a childlike soul.'

Fred laughed.

'Have you travelled much in India?'

'No. This is my first time. I'm afraid I don't know anything about India. But I've been in some dreadful places before. All Carole's fault.'

'Oh,' she said with a hint of disappointment or irony in her voice.

'I just came here to see you, really.'

'I hope you're not trying to pressure me.'

'No, no. I didn't mean that at all,' he said swiftly.

They talked good-naturedly throughout the meal, without speaking about Carole. Only, after they finished, Helena said:

'I'm going to be frank with you. I am not sure about the substance of your work. Never mind if I agree or not with it. So that doesn't mean I'm saying I won't help you. You seem an earnest man. I have enjoyed talking to you tonight. But I don't know what kind of biography you're going to write. And to me that's crucial. I'm old; so I think I'm entitled to speak my mind like this, you see. On the other hand, just because I'm old it doesn't mean I have time to waste. And it seems to me that this work of yours takes a long time.'

'I don't know if it takes such a long time.'

'No? Say I'm willing to talk to you. How do you propose to carry on?'

‘Well, just by continuing to talk to you,’ Fred answered perplexed.

She sighed as a reply and kept silent. Fred anxiously tried to come up with something to say, for a few seconds. Finally, he said:

‘I apologise for not having a plan, but so far people just talked to me, whenever they could. I’m prepared to stay as long as required; that’s not a problem. And you are free to talk whenever it suits you.’

‘I’ll think about it, Fred. That’s the only thing I can promise you now. I must confess you disturbed me, bringing old stories back to my mind. Carole’s death was very hard for me to overcome, that is, if I ever overcame it. Tomorrow, I’ll give you an answer. Is that all right?’

‘Of course.’

Fred wished he could say something more, but he felt at a loss.

He returned to his hotel room, for one more sleepless night. He was powerless and angry with himself. Why hadn’t he been able to persuade her, to seduce her? This might well be his one chance to unravel the mystery of Carole’s life. And he had realised it. Still, he’d remained completely dumbstruck. Why was it that all the interesting women he engaged with were so overwhelming and distant?

His mind reeled. He recalled his first serious infatuation; dating from the time he’d been an undergraduate. Veronika, that superb beauty and supreme intelligence, who never had failed to cause his irrepressible quavering. The countless times he’d stammered and stuck speechless before her were so obvious that everyone at the University pulled his leg. Except Veronika. She didn’t even seem to have noticed.

Never, nothing.

It looked like the same old curse was back. Pat had refused to speak with him, as if he was a leper. Now it was an old lady. There was no immunity for him to any adult woman of any age. Only Carole seemed to offer the potential to be engaged by him. According to everyone's testimony, she loved to start a conversation with whoever it was. Each and every one had been delighted to join her in captivating chat or exchange or discussion. Surely, she didn't appear as a frightening woman. On the contrary, he liked to think of her as an alluring, genuine and generous-hearted woman. Needless to say, there was an insurmountable problem: she was dead.

Helena Bowles agreed to talk to him, according to a strict timetable, from then on. Only in the evenings, for two hours: from ten to midnight.

At first, it was not easy as she evaded the subject often.

Fred, once relaxed, let her speak freely. He liked to hear her. Her voice had an enticing cadence and she was a master modulating it in perfect harmony with the stories she told.

Then, she too loosened up gradually and recounted many tales connected with Carole, holding back episodes, which were secret. At the very start, she'd been clear: she would not reveal any details about intimate affairs, meaning, romantic entanglements. People wouldn't understand; they'd misinterpret it grossly and that she could never abide. Through her writings gifted people could perceive the pain and the love she'd lived and that was enough, she'd said. He had thought she was right, even if he'd craved hearing them.

In the end, Fred stayed for over a month. Practically every night he had gone to Helena's house for the late storytelling session. He had been right in his instinct. Helena was an indispensable and inestimable source. Without her, he could have never been able to do his work. Also, he was exhilarated to discover that all his significant hypothesis had been proved to be accurate overall.

When he parted from Helena, at the entrance of her house, he couldn't help crying. She was sweet and touched, but repressed the tears.

'After all, you are just being silly. You'll come back. And I travel too, you know. I'm sure we'll meet again and still have a lot of fun. Remember to tell me when you're going to New York to see Dave. Who knows if I'll join you,' she said.

'I will and I'll definitely come back. Thank you so, so much.'

Fred believed she was right. She was younger than he'd thought at the beginning. She'd seemed to him to be in her seventies, while she was only sixty. And she continued to travel extensively, as she'd always done.

Fred had received a letter from Erik a week before leaving Kochi, saying he actually fancied travelling and that it was not a bad idea to meet up. Fred had sent him an e-mail, suggesting they met in Goa, giving him the date and place where he would be.

It was very likely that Erik wouldn't show up. Nevertheless, he wanted to talk to someone in Goa, as well as take a week off to rest.

Helena had advised him to go up there, to at least see a bit more of India and relax, even if it wasn't so exciting as other parts of India, and it had been exploited by tourism. It had the advantage for him though to be an easy-going and laid back

atmosphere. Also, he thought it could be an excellent [for Erik to come](#), since he still sounded to be in a very bad shape. Maybe the place would help him to calm down too, if he really came.

When Fred checked into the hotel in Goa, no one knew about any Erik. So, it surprised him, as he came down from the room to the bar by the pool, to find Erik having a beer, beneath a mango tree, looking totally at ease and admirably integrated.

‘You thought I wasn’t coming, right?’

‘Well, yes, to be honest.’

‘Well, here I am, man. Sit down. How about a beer?’

‘Sure.’

‘Have you smoked all these cigarettes,’ he asked Erik pointing to the ashtray.

‘Yes, but I only had time for two beers so far.’

6. DERAILING

‘This is great!’ Erik exclaimed shouting to Fred, on the bus back to the hotel.

The little ramshackle bus jolted along the road, halting briskly wherever there were people to get on board, attracted by the birdsong whistle twittered by a tout, also charged with selling bus tickets.

‘So, what was the man like?’ Erik asked Fred, with his eyes on everything going on in the bus.

‘I didn’t speak to him. He’s in Margao, a place in the South.’

‘What were you doing for two hours then?’

‘I just stayed in the café, reading. And you?’

‘I went all around Panjin with this guide I bumped into in the street. It was fabulous.’

‘So you just went with this man who jumped on you on the street, like that? You have to be careful, Erik.’

‘He was a very learned and educated man, actually. His name was Serious, can you believe? And I tell you; I wished I knew half of the stuff he knows. He’d been all over India. It’s an amazing country.’

‘Really?!’ Fred said, overplaying excitement.

‘Oh, for you it’s nothing, of course: the big adventurer! For me it’s enough to see all this,’ he said, outstretching his right hand in mid-air.

Fred laughed and let him marvel alone at the spectacle which was novel to him too, though the exotic and faraway places couldn’t materialise dreamy visions anymore and bring out that overwhelming excitement so typical of his friend.

At the hotel terrace, where they settled, Erik asked him, matter-of-factly:

‘You’re very near finishing your work, aren’t you?’

‘I don’t know about that. But I think I’m almost done with the travels in the underdeveloped world. Unless this man I need to talk to here points me to some other godforsaken place, that’s it.’

‘Back to Norway?’

‘No, not yet, unfortunately. There’s still France, England and New York.’

‘I wish I was in your shoes.’

‘You don’t know what you’re saying. This place is paradise compared to most places I’ve been. And you? You haven’t said a word about your PhD, about what you’ve been doing all these months, except getting yourself drunk.’

‘Well, for that I need another beer and I advise you to get one too.’

After a pause, Erik looked into Fred’s eyes.

‘I suppose some day you’ll have to know. It’s just such a waste to go into it here, in the middle of this paradise, though.’

‘You haven’t withdrawn, have you?’

‘Right! The PhD has gone down the drain. I pulled the plug. I was sick of studying. I’m still sick. I want to get a living, you know? To travel and do my own things, the way I want, when I want.’ he spoke very fast - it was a line he’d memorised to deliver plainly and peremptorily.

Fred looked at him open-mouthed.

‘How long ago was that?’

‘Not long after you left. I don’t remember exactly anymore. About a month or something like that after.’

‘What have you been doing since then?’

‘I went to the States for a bit, stayed there with my aunt, but it didn’t work out. She was nagging me all the time, so I left.’

‘Yes, Rita and the others told me you’d disappeared without a trace.’

‘That’s right. I wanted to get away from them too. They were always preaching to me. Christ! I don’t get along with them anymore. Anyway, every one went a different way, so...’

‘And then?’

‘Then, I worked in the library as a shelf assistant and washing dishes in a hotel in the evenings. That’s how I got the money for this trip.’

‘You’re nuts, Erik.’

Erik shrugged. There was a moment of silence. Then Erik said:

‘And now I’m not going back to Norway. I’ll get off at London, where the plane does a stopover.’

‘What?!’

‘Listen Fred, I’m fed up with Norway. I need a change. I’m desperate for a change.’

Fred didn’t want to criticize him. He thought that was very easy and pointless and the last thing Erik needed. He only replied:

‘I see.’

During that week, Erik got into a frenzied state of going everywhere – the Taj Mahal; the fishing boat trip; the meal at the banana plantation. Fred tagged along with him, most of the time. He felt he should, not knowing exactly why. It was like a healthy activity that leaves you worn out. At the beginning, he’d forced himself to it, out of the old good intentions of camaraderie. Then things changed: his work retreated in to the

back of his mind, sinking as grains of sand little by little in a contained pocket and there they remained, instead of spreading all over his system, as usual. Only his body seemed to claim rest. So most days he stayed all day lounging by the pool.

The evenings were tough, though. Erik drank heavily throughout, from the minute he got back from his expeditions till he stumbled to his room. Fred had once said:

‘Come on Erik, enough.’

With a frightening serious look, Erik had replied:

‘Don’t Fred. Leave me alone with my drink.’

Fred hadn’t understood, but that look had frozen him and he dropped the matter altogether. Still, every night, Fred couldn’t help both his tenseness and the embarrassment, the moment Erik’s speech started to get tangled up. Eventually, he followed literally what Erik had said to him and, at that point, he left him drinking by himself.

Erik would get up late, but apart from that there seemed to be no evidence of his drinking. At least, he kept his rule of not drinking before seven pm, that is, not drinking steadily. Except the day Erik went with Fred to Margao.

The taxi driver left Erik on the beach and drove Fred to the professor’s house. Fred had thought to join Erik after the interview and relax on that large endless sandy beach practically empty, if you didn’t count the gipsy vendors. Hopefully this meeting would be the last one, the close of the chapter of exhausting and punishing places and people. To celebrate this all he asked for was to plunge into the sea, have a long and splendid swim and afterwards to relax on the sand whilst sipping a cold beer. Next, in his mind, he could already see himself comfortably sitting in a London taxi, passing through neat and green landscape.

Nonetheless, when Fred came back, he found Erik at the restaurant on the beach

beyond plastered. The only way he was able to get him in the taxi was to knock Erik out. After an hour of shouting, fighting and using force to drag Erik to the car, while he destroyed as much as he could of the restaurant, smashing glasses, breaking the wooden benches and tables with an inhuman violence, Fred, desperate, inadvertently punched him on the face and that's what finally had worked out.

Erik was laid on the back seat of the car. He slept the whole time on the way to the hotel and more. Once there, Fred and the luggage employee had to carry him all the way to his bed, where he fell like a rock, still completely in a deep sleep.

After this incident, Fred felt like a wreck. He'd reached the end of the gruelling travels, all right, but what a disastrous ending it had been. After all he supposed that such a catastrophic finish was only appropriate. His last interview had left a dark cloud hanging in his mind.

Later, lying on his bed at night, he thought about what the old professor of Indian History had told him about Carole, in the end.

'You know, I believe Carole could not have lived for a very long time. It was in her nature not to last long. There are people like that. There is nothing anyone can do. It's the way they are. We should not mourn them. We should be grateful for the gift of having shared a moment of our lives with them. Whereas, there are others, who are exactly the opposite. I think we don't know what happens, because we're not meant to. We'll never know. We should accept it. There are so many things we'll never apprehend.'

The interview had soothed and saddened him at the same time. Now, though, he was barely able to recall the soothing of it. Only the sadness persisted, growing more and more pervasive.

Where to turn to now, he asked himself. His work there was finished. To France, to England, to New York. He'd planned to start in France and end in New

York. Yet, for some reason, at that moment, plans didn't seem to make sense. And Erik? Now, he just didn't want to see him at all. That episode of the day had tarnished everything. But what was he going to do after? He didn't know. He couldn't turn his back on Erik, but he couldn't take him on either.

The next day, Fred didn't see Erik anywhere. Only the following day, just before dinner time, Erik knocked on Fred's bedroom door. Erik stepped into the room, with his familiar gangling manner, further stressed by his arms wagging. Fred didn't even have the time to think or say anything, before Erik handed him over the printout he was holding:

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

One month ago, a mysterious woman has been hospitalized at the *Hôpital Charles Nicolle* in Tunis, Tunisia, where she still remains unidentified. The woman is around 40 years old and suffers from severe burns due to a car accident. The only identification found was an engraving inside a ring she was wearing, with the name Pat S.

The Tunisian police are trying to establish what caused the injuries and appealing for anyone with information regarding the woman and or the accident.

If you have any information please contact urgently the hospital (XXXXXXX) or the Tunisian police at XXXXXXXX.

Fred read the printout and couldn't help turning instantly flushed. Erik impatiently asked:

'Is that your woman?'

'I don't know.' Fred answered disconcerted.

'What's her name?'

'Patricia Sibley.'

'Then, it's her!'

'Calm down, Erik!' Fred couldn't help shouting.

Erik made an effort to restrain himself and kept silent, even if he thought Fred was overreacting. He watched Fred going over to the balcony and retracing his steps back,

again and again. Fred's mind revolved the possibilities, recalling thoughts, images in a jumble. Then he stopped his pacing in the middle of the room and turned to Erik:

'Where the hell did you get this from, anyway?' he asked his friend pointing to the printout.

'From a missing person's website. Do you remember my project about missing persons? I gave up the PhD, but I still like to look up into these missing people's stories. Now, it's more like a hobby. I kept my subscriptions on some sites and I check them now and again.'

'Yes, yes, I remember. It's crazy.'

'What's crazy?'

'You, this woman, everything...'

'Ok Fred. I'm sorry about the mess I did the other day. I really don't know what got into me, but I know I got totally out of bounds. It won't happen again.'

'What's going on with you Erik? I'm sure that there's something wrong with you and you know it. Why don't you tell me what it is? I thought we were friends, for Christ's sake.'

'It's just a drinking problem, Fred. But I'm determined to control myself now, ok?'

Fred sighed.

'Come on, let's eat and we can talk about this woman. She's the mystery, not me.'

As soon as they'd sat at the hotel's restaurant in the open terrace, Erik said:

'You know how I love to solve mysteries.'

'Ok, but Pat S. can be anyone. S. can stand for God knows how many names. Besides, I lost track of her and I don't really know her, Erik, I...'

Erik interrupted him:

‘Listen Fred, let’s find out. At least we can give it a try. We can go to the net, check out Patricia Sibley and then we’ll take it from then.’

‘I suppose we can try...’

‘Right. Tomorrow morning we’ll go to town, ok?’

‘Ok.’

‘See, I told you – six Patricia Sibleys on the Net from the USA. God knows how many more there’ll be. It’s impossible, Erik.’

‘Not necessarily. Let’s do a little digging for information. We look these ones up. I do the navigation. You just concentrate on whatever comes up on the screen.’

After the names, Erik jotted down their jobs. Then, one after the other, searched to open their profile. Only two seemed to have one. From there he proceeded to the places where they’d worked. Windows upon windows opened up. Even when Fred said ‘I don’t think so’, Erik kept the pages minimised, except two that were dismissed because one woman was too old and another too young.

‘So, what do you think?’ Erik asked Fred.

‘From these the only possibility is the dancer, but it’s a long shot.’

Erik screened for more information about this one.

‘Look at the photos, Fred.’

‘I’m looking, but you can’t see the faces. They’re all photos from performances taken from a good distance.’

‘She’s retired. These dancers’ pensions must be a fortune, so she would have money to travel around the world.’

‘Yes Erik, but...’ Fred started discouraged.

‘Well, it’s worth a shot. So, we’ll e-mail a few people from this dance company and see what we get. Meanwhile, we can call the hospital too. What do you think?’

Erik looked so actively engaged, like Fred remembered him from years before - a lively and curious undergraduate student - that he didn’t have the heart to tell him what he really thought – it was a lost case. No way were they going to find out anything. So he just said to Erik:

‘I suppose so.’

At the phone point though, Fred insisted on calling himself and on doing the talking. Yet Erik glued his ear to the phone too. Then he had to grab the phone firmly out of Fred’s hands, for despite his repeated whispers telling Fred they spoke French in Tunisia, Fred seemed not to be listening at all. Then, Erik talked to the doctor at the hospital for what sounded like hours to Fred.

As soon as Erik hung up the phone, Fred asked:

‘Is it her?’

‘I guess it’s up to us to find out. To be more precise: there is no one else. No one appeared at the hospital yet. No one has rung; nothing. I’ll give you the details the doctor gave me.’

Even before hearing Erik, Fred was almost sure it was Pat. It was just a sudden feeling coming out of nowhere. Erik’s account and portrayal didn’t make it much clearer, except the same detail again: the ring. That was what had upset him in the first place. The description of the object was pretty accurate. It was a perfect match for the one Fred had been obsessed with at the beginning. But he didn’t tell Erik.

‘If it’s her, we have to go there, Fred.’

Fred looked bewildered at Erik.

‘If you don’t want to go, I’ll go.’ Erik declared steadfastly.

Even more astonished, Fred, barely audible, said:

‘But you haven’t even seen her. Why are you going?’

‘Because. I can send you a photo via e-mail. But we’d better go together. It’s the easiest way. Come on.’

‘Where?’

‘Now to eat. I’m hungry. You have a little think about it and then we buy tickets to Tunisia.’

The following day Fred was still out of it, as if dazed. They went to Goa airport. From there they were flying to Mumbai and then to Milan, where they had a flight connection to Tunis. About seventeen hours of flight, plus some ten hours of waiting.

In Bombay, they checked into an airport hotel, as soon as they arrived. Fred was uncomfortable with indigestion and besides he refused to stay at the airport for eight hours. Erik didn’t contradict him, even if he wasn’t tired at all, excited by the adventure. Anyway, they discovered the hotel was free and why - the hotel was only a pretext for the immense shopping centre encircling it.

So Erik decided to stroll around, while Fred went to bed. He was unable to sleep, but made an effort to steady his nerves, remaining very still. He heard Erik enter the room about 8 pm. Nonetheless he closed his eyes, pretending to be asleep. Erik had come back with a bottle of whisky and a book, he settled down on the bed. Sometime later, after much tossing and turning on the bed, Fred changed his position, sitting against the pillows.

‘Can’t sleep?’ Erik asked him, without turning his eyes away from the book.

‘No.’

‘Any e-mails?’

‘Just another one, saying the same thing. Patricia Sibley disappeared from the face of the earth, completely. Nothing from her sister, yet.’

For a while they kept silent. Erik continued reading and Fred stared at the wall opposite, glancing occasionally at Erik. Erik had the air of an intent student, relaxing with a book while sipping his drink. He was calm and quiet, so irritatingly peaceful and composed; Fred had to break the silence:

‘I think this is stupid!’ he burst out.

Erik closed his book and turned to him.

‘It’s not stupid. It’s just letting yourself go and follow chance. Chaos, hazard, adventure - call it what you want. It’s part of life, Fred.’ he replied as smoothly as he could.

‘But I don’t even know the woman...’ he said as if trying to convince himself.

‘Well then here’s a chance to know her. The woman does exist. It’s not a ghost and she’s alive whereas your Carole Lynn is dead. She might be the one you met or not, but that’s another matter and that is what we can only find out by going there.’

‘If it’s her she has family: at least a sister. So, eventually, maybe even by now, someone has turned up.’

‘Maybe yes, maybe no. We can go, so I think we’d better go and then we’ll know. You take things too seriously, Fred. Relax. Take it easy. It’s not such a big deal. After all it’s nothing but a diversion for you. Plus, you’ll be closer to Europe. From Tunisia in no time you can be in England or France or wherever you’re going, anyway.’

‘If my grandfather knew that I’d be spending the money of his inheritance like this, he’d turned in his grave.’

‘He was a sailor, an adventurer, he would understand.’

‘No, he wouldn’t. He loved the sea. He’d have killed me if he knew I’m treading my feet on desert places with his money.’

‘Money? Come on, Fred! Look at it as the transition to the civilised world. Tunisia is civilised. And Tunisia is by the sea.’

‘Tunisia?’

‘Have you ever been?’

‘No.’

‘Well, shut up then, Fred.’

‘Have you been?’

‘No.’

‘But you know all about it, right?’

‘Fred, let go. You’re getting paranoid. It doesn’t suit you.’

‘You’re the paranoid, here.’

‘I know. But I’m naturally paranoid. I was born paranoid. This is not about paranoia, though. Imagine that instead of this woman it were me or you lying on some strange hospital bed in a foreign country. Somewhere someone might know you or me. So do you think it’s stupid for this person to go out of their way and give us a hand?’

‘It depends if this person really knows you or me.’

‘Fred, listen. If you don’t want to go, it’s all right. You can stay in Milan and that’s the end of it. I’ll go.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I want to. As I said, I’ll send you her photo so you can see if it’s her or not and that’s it.’

‘You’re nuts. I don’t understand you or anything anymore.’

‘There’s nothing to understand, Fred. This is not a research project about a dead woman. It’s just chance. You can’t rationalise, analyse it. You take it or leave it.’

The conversation continued, around and around, up to the moment to go to the airport. After, however, the check-in and security counters and the take-off, Fred resumed it. Erik let him argue on his own. Then, once the trays of the first meal had been cleared, he resolutely got up to fetch a glass of water and a glass of whisky. In the glass of water he dissolved a strong sleeping tablet and gave it to Fred. In a little while, Fred fell asleep, only waking up with the brisk swerving of the plane on the airstrip. He felt fresh, except for an overpowering thirst and a strange sense in the back of his mind about time elapsing in a dream.

At the terminal, Erik halted and, turning to Fred, pointed with his thumbs to the left and to the right: flight connections, one way; exit the other. Fred veered his head towards flight connections. Erik gave him the thumbs up.

At 12.05 pm the plane landed in Tunis airport. By 3 pm, they entered the hospital. Only an hour later though, after waiting in the big drab courtyard at the centre, a nurse came with permission to lead them to the patient. It was Saturday and the doctor in charge was off. They could go in just for a moment to see her under the chief nurse's supervision.

Both Erik and Fred's hearts jumped about as they followed the nurse through busy corridors with crumbling the plaster and peeling paint.

The moment Fred stepped into the room, he begged let it not be her, for he could see, at the far end, as if on a stage, a still, bandaged figure with one leg propped up next to the windows, all with the screens down. The nurse paused at the foot of that exact bed, after taking off the flimsy sheet on top of the body. Erik advanced first to one side of the bed. Fred trod behind him slowly and solemnly, as if walking carefully into an unknown empty temple.

The woman's body was almost entirely covered by dressings. The torso was enveloped in thin transparent gauze, which let them see deep pink blotches interspersed

with red stains. The arms, legs and hands were fully hidden by soft white thick gauze, though. One of the legs was upright with its foot tightened on the heel by an elastic band. Apart from that, the feet were the only things that looked untouched. The face was the worst, criss-crossed all over by streaks. The hair had been shaved.

The nurse waited patiently, without a word, but Erik couldn't hold any longer:

'Is it her?'

Fred took his hands up to his face, covering his eyes while he mumbled:

'Yes.'

At this point, the nurse intervened, determined, ushering them out of the room. She led them to a small kind of kitchen and told them to sit down. While she made some mint tea, Erik and Fred were silent. Fred was plainly perturbed, whereas Erik felt dumbstruck.

When the nurse joined them, she explained the patient was asleep, for she was still in a state of shock. That was actually the most difficult problem, so that she was on medication in order to rest. The pain was only moderate and was being controlled. The burning was not as severe as it might look. It wasn't light either; yet she could heal. They would know more by talking to the doctor the next day. She was not allowed to say more.

Fred answered her questionnaire regarding the identity of the patient. At the end, she was visibly disappointed by the little information he'd given or possibly by the overall impression they caused, no doubt due to their appearance: completely dishevelled, profusely sweating and thoroughly wrinkled.

'Where are you staying?' she asked them.

'We came straight from the airport. We haven't checked-in to a hotel yet. Do you know about any, nearby, you can recommend?'

‘I think it’s best if you stay at the city centre. The patient needs to be transferred to a clinic, as soon as possible.’

‘Why?’ Erik asked.

‘We need beds all the time and her recovery is going to take some weeks, but I’m sure the doctor will explain everything to you tomorrow.’

Erik and Fred left the main entrance and halted as they looked to the streets. They turned to each other without speaking for a moment.

‘To the city centre, I guess,’ Fred said finally.

‘Right.’

Neither of them had any idea which way to go, but they started slowly walking. In a few minutes, a taxi drew near them, crawling along the sidewalk:

‘Taxi? Taxi?’ the driver shouted.

‘*Oui.*’ said Erik instantly.

‘Erik, you’d better talk to him before we get in or he’ll charge us the moon.’

The taxi driver had his hands already on the bags, when Erik said:

‘*Arretez. Un moment.*’

However, only when the man finished putting the luggage in the car did he look at Erik, saying:

‘*Pas cher. Pas cher. Venez.*’

Erik did manage to speak a short minute, but soon gave up and they entered the taxi. Fred didn’t feel up to even trying to understand the French. His French was only limited and he felt so depressed that he let Erik do the talking and more.

They ended up at the *Hôtel Maison Flamboyante*, which despite the name was a shabby place. At least they had a balcony, considered by Erik something on the plus side, though Fred thought that that was hardly anything other than an extra nuisance: a free way to waves of noise and heat. Yet, besides his language limitations, his overall

dismayed state numbed his brain. The only thing he needed was some rest. Maybe, after a good sleep, he could find his feet and open his mind to that whole situation. So he stayed in all day, while Erik took a stroll around town, just stepping out for dinner.

The next day, before meeting the doctor, Fred asked Erik, in case the doctor wouldn't speak English, to make sure he'd reply to some questions he'd jotted down on a piece of paper: how long the healing process would take; how serious were the injuries; how they had happened and so on.

Doctor Chenni answered a considerably greater number of questions than those and others they might have thought. He spoke at length about the patient's condition, not sparing them the minutiae of the past, present and future of the burns, scabs and fractures. Throughout his report, he maintained his grave demeanour, keeping his tone and speech sombre and in French, in spite of the ability he'd shown at the beginning of speaking perfect English. Both Fred and Erik soon surrendered to a stare so helplessly submissive that even when he'd asked them what they wanted to do in the end, they stood speechless. Only subsequent to the brief hiatus, Erik realised after, he had to say something, for Fred was by then looking intensely at him. Erik replied first to the doctor. And that was the end of it, Fred gasped, as the doctor lifted himself from the chair.

'Erik, can you please tell me what's going on?' Fred said slightly impatient.

'Fred, now we're going to see Pat. Then I'll explain to you the rest. Doctor Chenni hasn't got much time, so we better do this now.'

'Do what?'

‘I’ll tell you later.’

This time, when they got to Pat’s bed, she was awake. Seeing her eyes open, Fred almost took a step back. Instead, he was brought up short by those vacant eyes.

The doctor asked her how she was feeling, as he leaned over her. He continued saying he was very happy to receive her friends who’d come to see her and that she shouldn’t worry for everything was healing without problems. Now he talked in the most casual manner in English, slowly repeating each sentence he said. Pat, however, remained silent, barely moving her iris.

Switching immediately both to French and to his sober voice, the doctor proceeded his exposition to Fred and Erik, pointing to different parts of Pat’s body.

Fred had given up following his declarations altogether long ago. Past his initial moment of distress, he focused his attention on Pat. Her open eyes seemed to stress even further the state of weakness she seemed to have fallen into and they expressed nothing but confusion or anxiety facing some endless emptiness. She gave no sign of recognising him, but it looked to him as if her previous rage and stiffness had been savagely flattened to that haggard look, to nothing. She was not fighting him anymore; she was just there, as a wreck washed up on the shore.

Once out of the hospital, Erik said:

‘She is going to be moved today to a private clinic.’

‘Keep talking Erik. I didn’t understand a word of that doctor. Did he tell you at least why he didn’t fucking speak English?’

‘No.’

‘You didn’t ask him to?’

‘No. He isn’t exactly a fellow of the friendly kind.’

‘Great!’

‘You could’ve asked him, Fred! Christ!’

‘Ok, sorry, forget it. Just tell me the story.’

Erik summed up what doctor Chenni had told him. Pat had a mid-second-degree burn, that is, a mid-partial thick one. The legs and the arms were the most affected parts of the body with serious burns. The rest presented only a first-degree burn, which could heal in a week without leaving scars. On the legs and arms there would be most certainly scars, unless plastic surgery was done. The lines on the face were a vestige of scabs, a result of scratches, probably by contact with rubble or gravel. No one knew how it had happened yet. She’d been brought in by someone who’d left her at the hospital entrance and had fled the place before anyone found Pat. The police were on the case and according to doctor Chenni, soon or later, the authorities would find out.

The most serious problem was that Pat was still in shock. Even though a month had gone by already, she was taking an unusually extended period to recover from shock. She hadn’t said a single word. They couldn’t keep her longer at the hospital and she could get better treatment at a private clinic anyway, so they were transferring her to *Clinique El Amen*.

‘There aren’t any clues about what happened?’ Fred asked.

‘For that, we have to go to the police. Police Department, doctor Chenni says.’

Fred and Erik continued walking, until Erik said:

‘Here we are. *Clinique El Amen*.’

‘What are we going to do in there?’

‘We are confirming that we are paying for the patient.’

‘What? We are paying?’

‘I’ll use my parents’ credit card. I mean for now. You said she’s rich. So then she’ll pay.’ Erik declared.

‘I don’t know if she’s rich, Erik!’ Fred claimed.

‘Well, there’s nothing we can do now. We’ll go to the police and see what we can find out.’

‘To the police?’ Fred asked with a hint of fear.

‘We have to know what happened. The rest, well, we’ll think about it tomorrow. I’m starving! Christ! That doctor kept on and on. You don’t know the effort I had to understand what the hell he was saying. I’m not surprised you didn’t decipher one word. He used all this medical language. I’ll tell you: the sooner we get her out of there, the better. I think if I have to listen to him again, I’ll get sick too. It’s no wonder the poor girl doesn’t speak. I tell you: I wouldn’t if I were in her shoes.’

‘Erik, shut up. Don’t be stupid.’

‘You shut up. Come on. Let’s go into this *Clinique*.’

Kate arrived in Tunis later that afternoon. She’d only found out what happened to her sister Pat the day before, as for a few days the Internet service had been out of order. From the moment Kate had read the e-mail, she had set her mind to see her sister immediately and nothing else. She had been so unmovable in her determination to resurrect Pat, if need be, with the sheer power of her strong-mindedness. She argued her way through with Tom, her husband, the travel agency staff, the taxi driver, the nurses at the hospital, the nurses at the clinic and doctor Chenni, up to the point her body, burdened by a two month baby, succumbed to hunger, tiredness and an overwhelming lack of resistance.

In the morning, Kate woke up at 6 am and, for the first time since she’d arrived, she looked at the city, where she was, through the bedroom window. The sun was

already out there erupting; people were starting their daily routine busying themselves at a slow pace. A huge blue door opposite displayed the original golden light of the morning sun and the clear shadow side by side. She remained there, seated on the bed, gazing and caressing her little belly bump, for an instant.

One hour and a half later, she was knocking loudly on Erik and Fred's bedroom door. The porter, a young boy, who had been ordered to follow her, kept behind her, trembling.

Fred woken up startled by the noise went to open the door, shaking.

'Hello. I'm Kate, Pat's sister.' Kate said quickly.

He looked at her, puzzled, as he invited her to come in and then at the running porter, who disappeared as if by magic.

Erik continued fast asleep. Fred just realised it, when he was opening the curtains to let in some light.

'Sorry,' he said to Kate, as he pulled the sheets over Erik, who was completely naked.

'Are you Fred or Erik?' Kate asked unperturbed either by Fred's awkwardness or the circumstances.

'Fred. I'm Fred and he is Erik.'

'We have to talk,' Kate said.

'Yes, yes, of course...' Fred replied hesitantly.

'I'd better wait for you down at the breakfast room. You're coming down now, aren't you?'

'Yes, yes.'

'And him?'

'I'll try to wake him up. Do you mind if I have a shower first?'

‘No. I’m sorry I’m in such a rush and bursting in like this, but I’m sure you understand. I’ll wait for you downstairs. After your shower, of course. Excuse me.’

Fred joined her alone at the table where she was eating. He sat in silence and smiled at her embarrassed. Kate started, as soon as she finished chewing:

‘I’m very grateful for what you’ve done.’

Fred smiled again at her, slightly more relieved. Her briskness in the bedroom had instantly brought back his conversations with Pat. So he refrained himself from overt friendliness by remaining silent.

‘Please tell me all you know about Pat’s condition. I just arrived late last afternoon and there are lots of things I don’t know.’

Fred gave her an account as accurate as possible of what he knew. She interrupted him here and there with questions, to which the answers were invariably: ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I’m sorry but I don’t know.’ As a conclusion, he repeated that maybe only the police would be able to know more, that unfortunately they hadn’t had the time to go there and that he was sorry for not knowing much, really, but that was all that he knew.

Kate stayed pensive for a while. Her eyes looked beyond and her face saddened. Then, she said:

‘She must be suffering terribly.’

Fred looked at her, nodding. After a pause, she continued:

‘Her husband died of an electric shock.’

‘Oh, my God!’ Fred exclaimed aghast.

They both cast down their eyes and fell silent for a long moment interrupted by Erik’s appearance finally materialised by the table.

After the introductions, Kate dismissed herself to go to the police and then to the clinic.

Erik said:

‘We’ll meet you there in about an hour.’

The police had at last been able to track down the charred remains of Pat’s 4wheel drive in the South of Tunisia, in the desert, close to the border with Algeria. Also, they had found out that she’d stayed in a hotel in Tatoiune, just before the accident. However, the cause of the fire was still unknown. According to the police, it had been an accident; something in the car had ignited the fire. The investigation was being carried further, for there was some suspicion about a terrorist attack, though they assured Kate it was highly unusual in Tunisia. Pressed by her as to when was it probable to know more, the chief inspector told her that in the end it was very unlikely to find out much more.

‘That’s it,’ she ended, when she recounted to Erik and Fred what the police had told her.

‘That’s it. They won’t do anything more,’ she continued.

‘Well, I guess the big problem is Pat. I doubt whatever the police find out or not makes any difference,’ said Erik.

‘Yes, you’re right,’ acknowledged Kate.

‘And that is really a big problem,’ she said after a pause.

‘Why?’ asked Erik.

‘The doctors are against moving her from here. Anyway, I wouldn’t ever take her to the UK. She hates England. And I can’t stay more than a month. I’m expecting a baby. No airline will take a very pregnant woman.’

‘I can stay, if you want. We can keep each other company for as long as you can stay and then we’ll see,’ Erik declared.

Both Fred and Kate looked at him, astonished.

‘Well, I have nothing to do. As long as I have money to stay and eat, I’m all right.’

‘Are you serious?’ Kate asked him.

‘Of course.’

‘It’s very nice of you to offer. But I don’t know?’

‘We’ll see how it goes, ok?’

‘Ok.’

As Fred had decided, the moment he’d turned in Milan airport to the flight connections’ direction, not to interfere with Erik’s spontaneous way of living, he said nothing for or against this plan, even though he thought it was absolutely crazy. After all, Erik seemed to have improved his disposition. Who was he to tell if that wasn’t actually the best solution? And if it wasn’t, Erik would have to find out by himself. Nevertheless, he couldn’t help feeling jealous of Erik.

During the month Kate stayed in Tunis, she and Erik became good friends. They'd both moved to the same hotel and soon one of them would knock on the other's door throughout the day, despite meeting daily at the Clinic and going out together for almost every meal.

So, when Kate's departure was close, Erik proposed:

'I can take care of your sister after you go, if you want.'

'On the condition that you will e-mail or call me every day, will never let her out and never let her out of your sight.'

'Done.'

'Are you sure? Really sure? I have warned of what you'll have to deal with when she recovers.'

'Yes, I know.'

'No, you don't.'

'I promise that I'll tell you about the least problem or anything that happens.'

'Absolutely everything.'

'Absolutely everything.'

7. STUCK

It was the first time Pat stood up and walked out. Erik immediately heard the sound of scraping metal, turned his head and saw her the moment she stepped out through the French windows, awkwardly clutching onto both crutches. He stayed still, after his first impulse to jump up, and pretended to be asleep on the lounge, his eyes peering through the tightest slit.

Pat gazed around blinking, her hands uncoordinated around the handles of the crutches, her back arched, curbing further the slackness and disjointedness of her body, for a brief moment. Before anything else, all that she saw was a blurred image of an outside green space. She took two kind of steps, clumsy hauling one crutch and then the other, making them tilt into impossible angles and dragging them scratching the ground. Then, she gave up and slumped into a deckchair, letting her crutches tumble down noisily on the red brick floor.

As her eyes progressively caught sight of the place, she thought ‘what did this all come from’, without formulating it into words. Then, she clearly saw the sun setting; slowly it seemed, with its everlasting warmth: she stared at the sharp shadows and at the light, playing between each other ever so slightly. Was there a remote breeze? Or was it her eyes fluctuating? She shut them for a moment. No, there was a small garden just outside her bedroom and around the house that she hadn’t had any idea of. And she couldn’t understand it being there, not knowing why though. If she could have stretched her feet, her toes could be touching the thick rough grass, glittering under the sunshine. It was only a small green pool with a circular islet to the left side where flowers and plants were so enmeshed in each other you couldn’t see a grain of earth. A neat tiny island firmly rooted to the spot surrounded by dirt and a couple of fig trees. Erik was

lying underneath a fig tree, and seemed to be asleep. And again, she mused on where had it all come from.

There had never been talk about their lives to each other. No talk about their lives, no reference made to their past and even no curiosity expressed.

Erik had somehow come up with the idea of reading novels to her, at least one hour each afternoon. It was a way of filling the crippling void, as she seemed to have lost the ability to talk and he didn't know either what to say. Even if she showed no signs of listening at all, he persisted. At first, he had got hold of romance stories, because they seemed to be the only cheap and easily available books in English and also gave him an opportunity to peek into a genre proscribed by the academy. He remembered women borrowing them from the library in Oslo, sometimes a handful of them. And he recalled the staff's sneers. Why? They were books, like any other. People read them. Where or what was the appeal and the enticement into which they were drawn: he was curious to find out. It didn't take him long to quench his interest. A couple of chapters were sufficient to extinguish the journey of discovery he'd set forth. Nevertheless, he continued reading the *Desert Adventure*, or better, performing it, as by then he'd switched the reading to a full-blown play. It had all the best ingredients: wretched tragedy; absolute despair; hysterical dialogues; utter misapprehension; incontinent passion, tantalizing dreams. Better, you could mix and match all these contents and choose to use the tone of voice, the gestures, the pose, the mood, so that he could create a whole pantomime. Like that, it might be even more possible that Pat could respond to the outside quicker. The repetition of sentences, such as 'she was swept off her feet'; 'suddenly her mouth was so parched she couldn't utter a word', never mind how Erik happened to perform them, were the ones, which first, started piercing, drumming in her ears, whirling and whirling through her brain, taking effect. Barely audibly, she said 'Stop, please, stop', as she stretched her left floppy hand,

waving it about on top of the throw. Erik broke off and looked at her, dazed by the faint sound of her voice. It was the first time he had heard her actually responding to something, so that by now he was believing that she'd probably never speak again. No one knew; it was one of the possible consequences brought by a trauma, he'd been told, and only time would reveal whether it had affected her or not. Although frail, he sensed a trail of coarseness, which he wasn't expecting to find. He kept silent, both because he got stuck and was waiting for her to continue, but she didn't.

'Hello,' he finally said.

After another silent moment, he added:

'Do you want me to stop reading, is that it?'

'That book,' she replied.

'You don't like this book?'

'No,' and here her voice was stronger with its coarseness definitively palpable.

'It's not the kind of book I read. Actually, it's my first. But it was cheap and the first one I happened to find in English', he said quickly and suddenly ashamed. Carrying on, apologetically:

'I thought it might cheer us up.'

Pat sighed.

'What kind of books do you like?' he asked her.

'I don't mind,' she said dismissively.

'Do you understand French? There's a lot more in French.'

'Yes.'

'So, I can bring some novels in French, if you like.'

'Ok.'

'Right, so let's see what genres do you feel like. Classics, mysteries, contemporary?'

At this point, Pat closed her eyes and didn't utter another word.

Erik gazed at her for a while, bewildered. But she'd fallen asleep, or so it seemed, unexpectedly, as many times before.

Pat was lost in thought, in fragments of memories about driving in the desert. Since she'd recovered partly from amnesia, now and again, images and flashes of her journey manoeuvring the 4WD recurred to her mind, randomly:

She was driving as if she were actually flying through an endless cloud of dust.

She was driving so fast she didn't see the steep slope ahead and suddenly the car glided through the air for an instant. Then it plunged into the ground and got stuck into the sand.

On a hard and wavy track you either drive very slowly, carefully going up the mounds, using first the front wheels and then the rear ones or you just put your foot on the accelerator, flying over the mounds without braking. You cannot brake.

You cannot take your eyes from the track. If you look at the landscape instead the car capsizes. It had happened a few times at the beginning. You have to notice if there is a hole or a slope before you get there and veer immediately.

Both she and the jeep were badly battered.

There was a vast salt lake, she'd crossed. In it a myriad of bewitching colours – red, blue, white, purple.

Afterwards, her memory would come to a halt and she remained mute.

Thus, Erik decided to pick up a French classic: *Madame Bovary*. It was one of those he'd always wanted to read, but had never got around to and thought, from what he'd heard about it, that it might work as well as a trick to lead her to prick up her ears. In the end, if she wasn't listening again, it didn't matter. He continued, nevertheless. He enjoyed reading out to himself. It was far better than the cooking, to which anyway after disasters upon disasters and swearing upon swearing, he'd finally managed to find a magic formula as a way out. He bought food already cooked or at least prepared to cook. This was his hunting mission of the day, every day. It had turned out quite an exciting one too. He'd taken the risk of leaving the house, despite not being meant to go out, except for very short spells or emergency periods. Little by little, he'd ventured farther and farther, longer and longer, in his search for places where he could find food, then better food, and then more varied food and drink. It hadn't been easy in a strange city to get around on such an expedition, Tunis being not exactly a place displaying ready-meal supermarkets at every corner. Now, it was the peak of his day. He talked to

people whom he'd got to know, read the paper, had his cup of tea and smoked. He took his time too. Pat hadn't even blinked once, just because he wasn't there. Later, he'd confessed both his cooking problem and the solution he'd devised to Pat, worried that once he'd spoken out she'd start complaining. Instead, eventually, she had just told him not to be stupid in a tone which Erik had conveniently understood as don't bother me with such things. Following her breakthrough in the world of sound, she'd picked up speaking progressively. Still the power of speech never evolved into a regular pace, it always came out in a rather resistant and staggering way, which he would find was not going to change much.

Anyway, as time went by, the routine, details and all, had smoothed out. Or so, it seemed to both of them for a moment.

Erik carried on with his reading silently in the garden, after the reading period to Pat, and then sometimes drifted into sleep, dreaming on the lounge. The last few days, he had had an unpleasant mixture of dreams and thoughts. The most disturbing was the one he had had the previous night, where Pat had managed to go up all the way to the terrace, on the roof of the house, how Erik had no idea, and throw herself to the ground. At first, in Erik's mind it appeared as a violent flash, but the worst was that he saw himself unable to let out the scream clogged up in his throat. Not even upon seeing the torn-up body, ripped apart in all directions in an utter muddle of blood, flesh, skin, bones, so vivid in colour and light as if intensively alive, fit, healthy and moving.

Now, seeing Pat outside the house had instantly brought on a knot in his throat. Her apparition had brought up, like a flare, the sight of her body diving straight through the sky onto the hard ground. He had had to restrain himself from jumping on that frail, diaphanous contorted body.

Erik knew she wasn't going to hurl herself against the floor at that moment, obviously. Still, he couldn't help feeling tense, for somehow he sensed things were

going to change.

Pat stood there, sunk into the deckchair, and gazed at the open space, her thoughts rambling on without being formed, meandering in every bifurcation they happened to find, multiplying and dissolving, simultaneously, into absentmindedness.

Erik got up, so as not to fall asleep. He was defeated by last night's nightmare.

'How do you like it outside?' he asked Pat, as he sat next to her on the ground.

'It's strange...'

'Not like you'd imagined?'

'No. It's weird.'

'What did you think it looked like?'

'I'd just thought it was a bit of a backyard with nothing much but dirt.'

'The owners are French.'

'I see.'

They remained silent, while finishing their cigarettes.

'I'm tired...' she started slowly.

'We'd better go inside,' Erik interrupted her, standing up quickly and picking up her crutches.

Pat looked at him, straight into his eyes, for a still moment. He grinned back at her in a mocking open smile.

'I'm tired too. I didn't get any sleep last night. I could go to bed now. I'm so sleepy.'

'Well, why don't you go to sleep then? I think I need a nap myself.'

'And mademoiselle, what about dinner, night story, last session?'

'Night off.'

'Night off?'

'Come on, get me to the toilet. It's an emergency.'

Erik dropped the crutches on the floor and picked her up like a baby. He carried her to the toilet and then to bed.

‘Very good service, boy. Now, good night’, she said stretched on the bed.

‘You’ll remember that you have a sprained ankle, ok?’

‘Is it the fourth or third time?’

‘Third.’

‘Don’t worry. I won’t go far.’

‘Only to the fourth time, I guess. I’ll come and see you after I have some sleep.’

Pat sighed as a reply. He waved her goodbye and sighed, too, outside the closed door behind him. Erik was almost sure that she would probably start trying to move round the room once more. He understood, or thought he did, what she would be going through, paralysed like that. Maybe, one time she could escape spraining the ankle again. Never mind what the experts and everyone said, peremptorily forbidding those experiments. If she was going to walk, she had to do it. There was no point in denying it. There was no other way around it. The problem was that she couldn’t wait. How long? How long? She’d kept asking, repeatedly. No one answered her objectively. Hence, she mistrusted all explanations, conjectures, hypotheses. Perhaps, she even went as far as not to believe in them at all, refusing point-blank. He didn’t know for sure. He just had no vocation, or the least desire, to play master or prison guard.

They’d forged an unspoken agreement between themselves. The basic rule of which lay in no added restrictions to freedom, on top of the physical ones.

At the moment, their relationship was exactly like a marriage undergoing a flat, arid stretch. The only difference was that it had had no beginning and, very likely, was not going to have a denouement either, submerging as abruptly as it had emerged.

When Erik put his head round her bedroom door in the middle of the night, the stale and heavy smoke stink hit him immediately. He had to open the door ajar to be able to see what was going on. Pat was propped up against a mountain of pillows, reading and smoking.

‘Pat, you’ve been chain-smoking. There’s no way you’re going to sleep now. I have to open this door.’

‘Err...’

‘Pat, are you sure you’re still breathing?’ Erik said pointing to the ashtray.

‘Oh, sorry. I got distracted.’

‘Are you hungry?’

‘I think I am actually.’

‘Come on,’ said Erik sitting on the bed, his back to her, so she could grab onto him.

‘Did you sleep?’ she asked, as they ate.

‘Wonderfully. The problem now is that I’m not sleepy anymore. And you?’

‘I didn’t sleep. I crawled for a bit.’

‘You crawled?’

‘Yes. I’ve been crawling for some days.’

Erik burst out laughing.

‘You have to show me,’ he stuttered between his laugh.

Pat let him laugh by himself, without making any remark but a dismissive shrug of her shoulders.

After he finally had stopped and a long silent pause, he said:

‘You’re really a pragmatic woman, aren’t you?’

‘That’s the way of the Americans, they say.’

‘Yes, blame it on the land. There’s plenty of it, right?’

She stared at him, her eyes steady on his.

‘I think you have had too much to drink,’ she said bluntly.

‘Are you angry now?’ he snapped back at her.

Before replying, again, she gave him a prolonged gaze, which had turned vacant as she said, drawing:

‘I wish I could. I wish I could.’

And then she stretched her hands upwards, signalling she wanted to go to bed.

Erik put his hands on top of hers’, only slightly, looked her in the eye and said sadly:

‘I wish I was. I wish I was.’

Next morning, at the usual time, not early not late, Erik brought her breakfast tray and then his own, which he put on the narrow table at the foot of her bed.

‘The doctor’s coming this morning. So, we’d better do the exercises after he comes,’ Erik said.

‘Today? In the morning? Why?’ Pat asked agitated.

‘He’s going to a wedding outside Tunis. He asked me the week before if it was all right. I forgot to tell you. Actually, I just remembered now he was coming today. Today or tomorrow, morning or afternoon, what difference does it make?’

Pat, still anxious, didn’t reply.

‘You don’t seem to be in a very good mood today,’ Erik said to her as he was taking her tray back to the kitchen.

‘I’m tired, that’s all,’ she said dismissively.

'Hum' was Erik's only answer, as he continued, unperturbed, clearing the trays.

Erik was just finishing the washing up, when the doctor came.

Dr. Jendou entered Pat's room, showing his customary smile and optimism. He always started immediately by checking her foot and examining her body. Then he sat by her bed and talked a bit to Pat, constantly observing her attentively through his nonchalant bearing. He took his time, talking about this and that, not really concerned with the scrutiny of her physical condition. Erik was never present when they had their conversation. He got out of the room, as soon as the physical examination was over. In the end, Dr. Jendou spoke with Erik for a little while, giving his instructions and his brief account about the patient's state.

This time, however, the first thing the doctor said to him, after leaving Pat, was that he considered the trip somewhat risky for Pat. She was still rather vulnerable, even if he couldn't help sympathising with the motive so much that he admitted to being unsure and hesitant in taking a decision right of. After all, not to see your last grandmother, one more time before she died, was a paramount heartbreaking affair, as Dr. Jendou put it. Erik listened to him nodding now and then, saying yes, no, I see, I don't know myself, without having any idea what was he talking about. He thought he would look ridiculous if he'd confessed he didn't have a clue about any trip or grandmother in the USA whatsoever, so he swallowed his surprise and just stood there like a string puppet, repeating over and over the same evasive replies. Finally, again, he assured the doctor that yes, he would do that: try to dissuade her from flying, without exerting on her authoritative pressure, but influencing her with slow steering, as the doctor suggested, if he knew what he meant. Of course, Erik said, and then thinking the opposite, as he stayed put by the kitchen door opened to the garden, looking out, not waving any more to the doctor. His mind was split. On one hand, he felt downright infuriated; on the other absolutely abandoned, empty-handed and empty-headed. He

knew that she was lying to the doctor, but it wasn't so much the lie that shocked him. It was that sly way of hers coming into so brazenly, right before his eyes. He didn't storm into Pat's room, as she probably was expecting him to do. Instead, he kept away from her all morning.

He sprawled on top of the lounge mattress he'd put out on the lawn, wearing only his swimming trunks, to get some sun and let his thoughts flow wherever they pleased.

Now he realised quite suddenly why Fred and Pat had never really got on with each other. Of course, it was impossible. If Fred were in his shoes, he wouldn't have lasted long, even if obviously, he remembered, Fred couldn't be in his shoes. He had apprehended very soon, maybe even right at the start; Pat wasn't a woman to be controlled by anyone and with a serpentine and impenetrable personality. She liked rather to be in control herself, even if, to him, she didn't realise she was out of her control. But he hadn't perceived how far that will power went, its twist and turns. Only now did he see that what he'd taken as a talent to play games, was something else quite distinct or running much deeper than he could fathom. She had almost completely duped him. The game at play was another altogether. And the stakes higher than he could see, although he couldn't identify them. He had an uncanny feeling that this was a slippery and murky territory. He felt it, but he couldn't see it. She'd played so deftly and perfectly that she left him in the dark, trying to find his way out, blind. She was the boss, fair enough. It couldn't have been otherwise. And in the end, now or later, she'd still be the winner; he had no doubt about that. Nevertheless he felt puzzled. Why would she want to defeat him, or didn't she, what would she gain and what would he lose? She was even taking the risk of turning out as the loser, if he were to break into the game. But that, he guessed, was the edge that gave the ultimate thrill to each player.

As much as Erik's mind kept following each sinuous path that cropped up, he

didn't come to any clarification, except that it was stupid to get into a fit or to be upset with her. He was dismissed, true. Just like that, true. Still, that would have to happen one day. Meanwhile, he had had a precious stretch and, if anyone were going to spoil it, it would be her, not him, he decided. At least there he could have the upper hand. The rest she could have, even deeper than an abyss and enormous as the sky. Whatever the hell it was.

Finally, he returned to her bedroom, carrying lunch. Pat was sound asleep. Erik set everything, making the usual noise coming and going, putting down the dish, the glass of water, the napkin and the cutlery on her tray. Still she didn't wake up. Then he went up to one side of the bed and shook her slowly. She suddenly opened her eyes and sprang out of sleep, startled.

'Lunch,' Erik said.

Pat sat against the pillows and looked at him, heavy-eyed.

As soon as he took his place at the table, he asked her, flippant:

'So, what's the American patient planning?'

He said it so fast that she was taken by surprise and didn't reply straight away.

'Very funny,' she said then.

'Not for your grandmother, lying on her deathbed,' he snapped back.

Pat sighed.

'I don't have any grandmother dying.'

'So, you're killing one,' he exclaimed mocking.

'No, they're all dead.'

Erik gave her a puzzled look.

'Listen, I'm sorry I didn't say anything to you. There was no time. I've just started thinking about going to the USA yesterday. I didn't know the doctor was coming today and I had to tell him to see what his reaction would be.'

‘Happy with the result?’

‘I don’t know.’

They finished eating in silence. Erik was aware she didn’t want to talk about it and as he wasn’t sure if he wanted to hear what she had to say he didn’t ask her anything.

‘Well, what do you feel like doing now?’ he asked her after the meal was over.

‘We could play cards, if you’re up to it.’

Erik gave a loud laugh instantly.

‘What are you laughing about?’

‘Nothing. Private joke.’

‘Hum...?’

‘All right then. Let’s play’, he said.

Meanwhile, by chance, Erik had picked up the book Pat had been reading and read it. The story was set in the East Coast of the USA and he thought he discovered the reason why she wanted to go back to the States. Pat was homesick. Those ingenious descriptions of place must have pierced her through and ploughed into her. If they still kept seeping through was a different matter. A week had gone by and there had not been even the slightest mention of the trip again. He waited for the next doctor’s visit to find out. He didn’t want to press her, not just because he had no patience whatsoever to do it, but also because he hoped she’d abandoned the idea that most probably had been nothing but a sudden one, having only come out of her tendency to assert herself through vigorous impulses.

Erik was right and wrong.

On the evening the doctor paid his visit, Pat said to Erik:

‘I’ve decided to go to the States. I can’t stay still anymore. I’ve had enough.’

He didn’t reply. There was a long silence. She had more things to say, but felt awkward. She didn’t want him to think she was bossing him around. Erik wasn’t going to take any orders from her, she knew. As she respected and also needed him, she struggled to arrive at a way of telling him what she was planning, without getting into long explanations, which she was unable to stomach.

Erik was taken aback confused. He remained there, seated on the armchair by the side of her bed, paralysed.

Eventually, Pat started:

‘I mean, I’m not going tomorrow, obviously. I don’t even know when I can go.’

Then, after another pause, she continued:

‘I’d like you to come with me, but of course you have your own life.’

He felt even more puzzled, but now he responded:

‘Is that an invitation? I don’t understand if it is or not.’

‘Of course it’s an invitation,’ she answered straight away.

‘And what am I going to do in the States?’

‘The same you do here and more. There are lots of things to do. I need to find a house, for starters. You can help me. The state I am in, I cannot look for a house alone and settle in and all that.’

‘A house?’ he asked amazed.

‘Yes. I think I’d better get a house. I don’t have any place to go back to. Then, I can always rent it when I move out or something.’

‘You don’t have a place of your own in the States?’

‘No.’

‘But you do have a place somewhere, I presume.’

‘No. I don’t see why is that so surprising.’

‘Well, maybe it isn’t. I don’t know. I’m a bit confused, I confess.’

At that moment, rain began to fall. Soon, it was pelting down, coming at a slant hitting the windowpanes, together with the loud sound of erratic gusts of wind.

‘Rain?’ they said almost at the same time, as if they couldn’t believe it.

‘I had heard a sound like a faint trickle on the ground, but I thought it was just the wind tumbling things’, Pat said.

‘I didn’t hear anything. I was beginning to think it didn’t rain in Tunis.’

‘Yeah, it’s amazing.’

‘Oh, this is going to be brilliant. To go asleep listening to the rain. Come on; let’s put that cream on, quick, so I can go to bed, before it stops.’

They laughed softly, both wearing a smile on their faces, even after they’d finished laughing. As fast as he could, he scattered dabs of lotion all over Pat’s body. Then Erik rubbed it, massaging her with vibrant movements. At the end, Pat turned around, holding the little towel on top of her breasts, still with a smile on her lips. Erik took his right hand up to her hair and smoothed out the rebellious wisps, as he did sometimes. Then, he held her face between his hands and said:

‘You know you’re very beautiful.’

Pat looked at his eyes, frowning half in disbelief, half bewildered. He took his hands off her face, but stood there, a few seconds, gazing at her embarrassed expression and, as she was about to speak, he instantly laid a finger on his lips, so she wouldn’t speak, and slowly lowered his face to kiss her on the mouth. The kiss was only a fleeting one, but she returned it. Then he kissed her on both hands and said:

‘Good night.’

The rain continued falling, though it slacked off its intensity. It streamed down in its ongoing rhythm, a familiar and at the same time original resonance.

Pat listened to it as to a lullaby, sweet and forlorn. It was a singsong without stories or words. There were just blurs of images of places, where she remembered to have seen and felt the rain falling ceaselessly, it seemed. And why had he kissed her, she thought vaguely as if it had happened in a dream. It was the rain, no doubt. The magic of the rain in a mirage. But together with the rain, the violence and tumult of the wind brought back to her mind, finally, the day she had crashed and the engine of the jeep had caught fire. The sky was black. She couldn't see anything. Sand had completely invaded everything inside the car. She didn't stop or even slow down. Suddenly there was a loud bang, the 4WD was thrown through the air and the next minute it plummeted down on fire. After that there was nothing but a complete blank.

Tucked in his bed, Erik had forgotten the trip. There was no space left in his mind to think about anything but the kiss. Oh, what a glorious kiss, in the midst of a rainy night. If only, he had been courageous enough to slip into her bed, stroke her skin and touch her flesh beneath. He saw all the voluptuous gestures, swirls, first in slow motion and then soothingly spiralling, always more and more, until they broke the silence in unison – a scream of exaltation.

Outside, the rain lessened to little droplets, barely audible, so you could just perceive that light pit-a-pat sound. And then there was nothing else to hear.

The day after, it was not raining anymore. The sky was dull and grey.

Pat was anxious on seeing Erik to ask him what decision he had made. So, when he entered her room with the breakfast tray, she asked him immediately:

‘So, what have you decided?’

‘Decided? About what?’ he asked perplexed.

‘About going to the States.’

‘Oh, that! I didn’t think about it. I just had a good night. And you, did you sleep well?’

‘Yes, it was nice to go to sleep, listening to the rain’, she said slowly without hiding the disappointment in her face.

‘I don’t understand you. You stay locked in this room all the time, but now you want to travel to America!’

‘You know very well I hate the crutches. I can’t walk with crutches,’ she replied irritated.

‘So, you’ll take the wheelchair.’

Pat sighed impatiently. She felt like telling him to go away, to leave her alone, but she couldn’t. She had done it once. Erik, out of his mind, had shouted back at her at the top of his lungs: No! Don’t you shout at me!’ Almost immediately, she’d broken down in tears. They’d ended up both weeping convulsively, long after they’d lost track of the motive for their crying.

‘Get ready,’ Erik said leaving the room.

Pat reached for her exercise clothes and started putting them on. She was pulling the trousers’ legs, when Erik burst into the room all of a sudden:

‘Your sister had the baby!’ he exclaimed.

‘Is she all right?’ Pat asked worried, instantly taking her hands off the trousers.

‘Yes. Tom says she’s fine. It’s a girl. She was born yesterday at 19.45.’

‘Is she still in the hospital?’

‘Yes. Obviously. Do you think she’d be on her way just like that, as soon as the baby comes out?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said shrugging her shoulders.

‘I’ll have to see her, how am I...’ she muttered to herself.

‘The baby’s name is Sarah.’

‘What?’ Pat blurted out.

‘Don’t you like it?’ Erik said looking at her bewildered.

‘Err...’ she started, without finishing.

‘Never mind. It’s a long, boring story’, she answered hastily, after a brief pause.

‘Why doesn’t she call me? I need to talk to her. This changes everything,’ she continued speaking to herself.

‘Like what?’

‘Well, the plans,’ she said slowly, hesitating.

‘And may I know what plans are these? Or is it classified too?’

‘I need to think,’ she said absent-minded.

Then, she turned to Erik, who had leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed and was patiently waiting. At last, she asked:

‘Is it all right if we do the exercises in half an hour?’

Erik rolled his eyes, as he said ‘all right’. By now, he was used to these deviations from routine. They were frequent. Somehow either she or he would always come up with some unexpected diversion.

After a short nap in the afternoon, Pat told him roughly what she intended to do. Now that Kate had had the baby, she wanted to fly first to England and stay for some days with her sister. Then they would get a flight to New York.

‘But this depends on you, of course,’ she concluded.

‘I don’t see how. You’re not going if I don’t go?’

‘Well, I can’t go as fast and as soon.’

‘You’re a survivor, you know?’

‘A survivor? What’s that supposed to mean?’ she asked perplexed.

‘Let’s see,’ he said getting up and fetching the dictionary.

‘A person who survives, especially a person remaining alive after an event in which others have died; the remainder of a group of people or things; a person who copes well with difficulties in their life,’ he read out.

‘Hum... I was actually thinking more like a person who stops at nothing,’ he added.

‘But I suppose that applies better to ruthless, maybe,’ he continued.

‘You can call me whatever you want,’ she said dismissively.

‘You survive all kind of words too?’

‘Words, words, words... Words come and go like the wind. Actions are what counts.’

Erik’s face contorted into a repulsive smirk.

‘That’s the American spirit!’ he exclaimed jokingly.

‘Now, we’re discussing my nationality?’ she asked irritated, adding: ‘Christ! I am the way I am, there’s nothing I can do about that. And I am either alive or dead,’ she carried on, brazenly, her expression turned fierce. But she stopped abruptly, letting her arms drop on the bed. He wasn’t going, she thought. And perhaps, it was better that he

didn't. She felt tired.

Erik had turned his back on her, as she'd finished speaking. He too didn't feel like talking to her anymore. Not like that. Looking out to the wet garden disappearing before his eyes, as darkness took over, he thought about last night's kiss.

When he finally turned round, he saw that she was lying on the bed curled inside the sheets and covers. Her eyes were closed. Silently, he got out of the room.

As often happened, afterwards there was no more talk about the argument. They resumed their routine, as usual. At least apparently.

Pat settled on a plan of action, where Erik had been in every respect deleted. She would simply depart before he knew it. She would leave soundlessly and peacefully. It would be a clean and neat exit. There would be no regrets, no sorrows, no charges at the exact moment when she'd crossed the threshold. In a precise and deft hop, she would be out and off.

Erik was torn apart. For a few days, he endured the torment of the undecided, remaining wobbling on the edge, knowing nothing would ever be the same wherever he'd turn. That recurrent dream of her throwing herself from the sky to the ground resounded again and again, now as clairvoyance, then as complete nonsense. And that inexplicable kind of rapaciousness of hers that he sensed lurking beneath, what was it, exactly, where did it come from, where would it lead to. Maybe, it would be better not to know, he'd ended up by thinking almost every time. Was there any point in knowing everything anyway? There wasn't, of course. At least, he admittedly didn't want to know. So, finally, to put himself out of his misery, he opted for travelling with Pat. After all, sadness was irreversible. Never mind his feelings of hopelessness. Someway, they were already there present, taking part in everything they did and said. He didn't tell her though there and then. No doubt soon enough they'd be bound to come round to it again.

As two days later he realised that maybe that wasn't going to happen shortly and he was getting anxious, feeling again that unquenchable craving for drink, he precipitated both into the heart of the matter.

'So what happened to the plans to fly? You've never talked about it anymore. Are you getting amnesia again?' he said.

Pat looked at him, taken by surprise, without knowing what to reply. Since she remained silent, he pushed forward:

'When do we start packing?'

She noticed the *we*. Still she felt even more at a loss, words failing her completely. At that moment, Erik sensed something was wrong, but he didn't have a clue what was it about.

'Pat?' he asked awkwardly.

'I...I don't know what to say... I thought you weren't coming,' she finally mumbled falteringly quiet, while she lowered her eyes.

'I'm coming if you want. If you prefer to go alone, it's ok,' he replied carefully.

'No, no.'

'Have you changed your mind?'

'No, no,' she repeated in a firm voice now, facing him.

'So...' he started, trying to encourage her to continue.

Pat showed a shy smile and Erik saw her, once more, as a sphinx he couldn't resist.

'Now it's so beautiful in Maine, in Vermont and upstate New York with all the autumn leaves covering the ground. Red, purple, orange, gold leaves everywhere. The Indian summer, it's called,' she said dreamily.

'We'll go now, then.'

'Yes, let's start packing.'

'I think before we should have a glass of champagne.'

'Let's have one now and another after.'

'One bottle now for dinner; another before we go, just to be on the safe side.'

'You're really terrible,' she said miming a reproachful look.

'Me? I'm not the one who chugs champagne like water.'

'No, you just chug any alcoholic drink.'

'At least, I'm democratic,' he said on his way out.

8. GOING BACK

As the plane started the descent and then landed, bumping as it moved awkwardly on the tarmac, Pat held her gaze fixed on the endless white mantle blanketing the ground. She was mesmerised. It had come as a blow that sight. She quivered with both dread and bliss. It seemed an impossible landscape. And, for a moment, she thought of not getting out of the plane.

Erik by her side noticed her nervousness, but said nothing to interfere with the silence that had fallen upon them. He felt uneasy too. It had been a long way to come. That was the only thing turning over in his mind. How very long-winded the [recent](#) past looked. He was here, but he wasn't sure. He'd hoped when they stepped onto the ground to grasp the sense of it; that once, he had his feet on earth, some revelation would let him in. But it didn't happen that way. The place felt flat and empty.

The taxi went fast along the freeway and soon the scenery was overtaken by the impressive shapes and imposing Manhattan skyline, which wasn't a novelty for either of them. Nevertheless, they stared, dazzled and bewitched, as if seeing it for the first time.

'I want to go by Central Park,' said Pat to the taxi driver.

Her eyes shone as she stared at the ceaselessly passing images through the window. And her eyes ran about looking at everything, enticed by the piercing steely blue sky.

Erik too looked at the moving scenes and at Pat, wondering how she could be so still and quiet.

Her body seemed to have only started to move when the traffic got slower and slower, as it trickled through the streets. She buttoned the long overcoat she'd bought at

Heathrow airport and she passed her hands through her hair again and again to keep it out of her face.

‘Why don’t you put some pins in your hair?’ Erik asked

‘I can’t find any in this bag,’ she replied, as she searched once more, her hands and by then almost her entire head inside the bag.

‘I wonder how you can find anything in a bag that size. Why do you need such a big bag anyway?’

‘I found a scarf. That will do.’

She tied the scarf around her head and another around her neck.

Erik was about to ask her if they were arriving, but was left open-mouthed, when suddenly she got out of the taxi and ran to the park.

‘Oh my God! Please wait,’ he said to the taxi driver, as he immediately left the car to follow her.

Pat’s initial sprint quickly gave way to a hurdle race, followed by the successive sinking of her feet in the snow and ending in a full stop as she fell flat on the snow, while the cab driver was left cursing. First raging at them and then swearing up and down at the other cars.

When Erik reached the spot where she’d tumbled, she was still lying there, her body slightly dipped. He knelt and called her, putting his right hand to her head. She didn’t reply. He called her again and again. She didn’t respond. With his hand still on her head, Erik felt an almost imperceptible motion. She was either crying or laughing, he thought. But what now, he asked himself. His ears were getting frozen. The taxi was waiting or so he hoped it was. Otherwise, they’d be stuck and stranded in the middle of a massive traffic jam, right in the centre of the city. His right hand must have been tightening its grip, because now he was holding her scarf and the snow was slipping and dropping onto her hair. Erik threw the scarf away and grabbed her by the shoulders

firmly, as he shouted:

‘Come on Pat! Come on!’

Finally, he managed to get her up on her feet and take her back to the taxi, as fast as he could. And without even looking at her, the moment they were seated, he exploded:

‘Where do you want to go now? Where?’

‘Hey! What do you mean where? I’m taking you to the place you asked for and that’s it. I’ve had enough!’ cut in the driver furiously.

However, Pat just continued crying.

Only a few minutes later, she said to the driver:

‘Please drop us off at NICO’s café, next block on the left,’ her voice coarse and quavering.

‘Right. But that’s it. I’m not taking you two anywhere else,’ snorted the driver.

‘Fine!’ Pat shouted enraged.

‘Nuts, nuts, that’s all I get,’ mumbled the cab driver to himself.

On the sidewalk, Erik asked:

‘Is this where your friend lives?’

Trying to straighten up and wiping off the streaks of water from her coat, she said slowly, as if out of breath:

‘She’s at that building.’

‘Ok.’

‘Wait,’ she pleaded tired.

Erik put the suitcases down and looked at her.

‘I think we’d better have a coffee first.’

‘Here?’ he asked pointing at the café.

Pat nodded.

‘What happened to you back there?’ he asked struggling to be tender.

She made an effort to smile, but her lips failed her giving in to a tremble and her eyes filled up again.

‘You don’t have to say anything now. Just try to calm down. Take a deep breath. After all, we’re both tired. It’s a long trip. We need to rest. Yes, that’s what we need to do. We rest and...’ he said stopping without knowing what else to say and then resuming:

‘And that’s it. We rest.’

Marcia came to the door, even before they’d rung the bell.

‘Finally! Christ! I’m so nervous and you leave me here waiting for ages. I was about to collapse.’

Then she threw her arms around Pat, clutching onto her.

‘I’m Erik,’ he said, when Marcia turned her eyes to him, at last.

‘Of course you are. And a very handsome one too. Well done, Pat,’ she said examining him from top to bottom now.

‘Come in, come in,’ she continued.

They sat on the sofas, but as soon as they had, Marcia jumped up, shooting out of the room and exclaiming:

‘Oh no, no. I forgot.’

Pat and Erik couldn’t help laughing at her frenzied exuberance.

‘Pat! Are you sure your friend is all right?’ he whispered to Pat

Marcia returned immediately saying:

'Oh my God! I was so nervous I was smoking, imagine! And I forgot!'

They looked at her amused.

'So, you're still smoking?' Pat asked her.

'No, no! I stopped. I'm finally cured, but today it's been mad. I'm really losing it, Pat, you know? It's been one of those days!'

'Well, I've picked up smoking and Erik smokes too, so...'

'No, I don't believe you're smoking,' said Marcia genuinely.

'You didn't smoke?' Erik asked Pat, surprised.

'Pat? No way. She never smoked!' Marcia replied.

'I didn't,' said Pat looking at Erik and then turning to Marcia: 'But now I do.'

'God! And you smoke too, Erik?' asked Marcia.

'I'm afraid I do.'

'Oh, my God! This is terrible...' Marcia started, but Pat interrupted her brusquely.

'Marcia! What happened to you? You're hysterical.'

'It's Harriet, my mother. She's coming.'

'When?' Pat asked.

'Tomorrow, tomorrow. And I have this paper to write for this conference by tomorrow.'

'Calm down, Marcia. Listen to you. You're out of your mind,' Pat said.

'I know, I know, but I can't help it.'

'Listen, if you don't take it easy, I'm going out that door right now. You're freaking me out. Relax,' Pat almost shouted and then impatiently added:

'Have a cigarette.'

Marcia stared at her staggered and open-mouthed.

By now, Erik was completely confused. All of a sudden it was as if he'd been put in the middle of some crazy scene, where he didn't recognise either the characters or the language. He was trying to puzzle out what was going on at least. But he realised he couldn't at that moment.

Meanwhile, Pat had lit a cigarette and the ash was about to fall on the floor.

'Marcia, can you please get an ashtray?' Pat asked and as she finished speaking the ash fell.

Erik looked at Pat with a baffled expression on his face. She opened her eyes wide in a scornful grimace to him.

'I have to rest. Anyway, it seems you two have a lot of catching up to do. Can you ask her where I can lie down?' said Erik.

Marcia came back with a plastic cup, which she handed to Pat.

'Marcia, Erik and me are completely dead. We'd better get some sleep now.'

'Of course,' she replied, jumping again from the sofa.

'Here you go,' Marcia declared, as she opened the door of the main bedroom.

Pat and Erik turned to each other at once. There was only one bed in the room. They stood still for a moment by the door. Marcia looked at their faces, alternately.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

'Nothing,' Pat snapped.

'It's great,' she added as she pulled at Erik's left arm stepping inside.

Behind the closed door, Pat said to him:

'Forget it. Which side do you want?'

Erik just stared at the bed.

'Erik!'

'Err...'

But Pat decided she didn't want to hear anything after all. She went to the bathroom, leaving Erik in the middle of the small room, dumbstruck.

Eventually, he sat on the bed and started to take off his clothes.

When he got up late that afternoon, he found that both Marcia and Pat were out. They'd left a note on the coffee table in the living room: 'We're going shopping. We won't be long.'

Although he'd had a surprisingly good sleep, despite the circumstances, he still felt slightly drowsy. The apartment seemed to throw him even further off balance. Now that he could have a proper look at the place, he realised the luxurious slickness of the layout and furniture. There was something definitely wrong. But what, he didn't have the time to discover, because they were back soon.

'We bought Chinese. Do you like Chinese, Erik?' Marcia asked.

'Yes, it's nice,' and adding to Pat:

'Maybe that's where you should have gone – China, to go on one of those Zen Buddhists' meditation retreats.'

'I feel just as if I have. I'm so tired.'

'Go and sit down. Me and Erik can lay the table, right Erik?'

'Sure,' he replied.

'Well, come on to the kitchen then and help me out here,' Marcia called.

At last, once they all sat down at the table, Marcia seemed to have run out of things to say. Pat's eyes were bloodshot and her body seemed to move in slow motion. Erik could see exhaustion printed on her face.

'You have an amazing flat,' Erik said.

'Flat?'

'Apartment.'

'Oh, it's not mine, Erik! It's a serviced apartment arranged by the University. Why Erik, look at me and look at the place. This here is like something for a rich bitch. I live in Upstate New York. I thought Pat had told you.'

'No.'

'So, how's your food, Pat? Happy?'

'You tell me. I'm so tired I can't taste anything,' Pat said almost inaudibly.

'You didn't sleep, did you?' Erik asked her.

'No, not really.'

'Try to eat something and then go straight to bed. I'll stay a bit longer.'

She nodded.

After Pat had struggled to eat for a while, she got up and said she would have to get some sleep.

Marcia took her hands up to her face and sighed, when she heard Pat closing the bedroom door. Erik glanced at her.

'Are you all right?' he asked, concerned.

'I'm ok.' she replied slowly and added:

'It's been a day in hell, that's all. But tell me Erik, how is Pat? How is she really? I tried to talk to her, but she absolutely refused to say anything,' she said turning her face to him, her elbows on the table and her hands holding her chin.

'Not well,' Erik replied.

'But how?'

'I don't know. I just know that she's miserable.'

'Oh, my God!' she exclaimed letting her hands drop onto the table.

'I thought she wasn't all that bad. You know, considering the way she was when she left the States. She wouldn't even speak to anyone,' she continued.

'She doesn't speak too much now either.'

'Oh, but it's completely different. You can't possibly imagine the state she was in. It was terrible! And there was nothing anyone could do. At least now, she's got you, I mean... that's something...'

'Marcia, I have to tell you something. We're not together.'

'You're not together?'

'No. I'm just a nurse. I took care of her when she had the accident in Tunisia and then Pat invited me to come with her over here, because she's not completely recovered.'

'But, I thought...'

'Well, no.'

'The bed!' she exclaimed remembering.

'Don't worry. I'll just sleep here on the couch.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know.'

'Don't worry, Marcia. It's fine. I'm still so tired I think I could sleep on the floor.'

'Oh, my God! Oh, my God! And tomorrow? What am I going to do tomorrow? My mother is coming. I was going to take the sofa,' she said with her voice regaining the strident tone of the morning.

'Tomorrow, we'll see.'

Marcia shook her head in despair.

Harriet, Marcia's mother, rang the apartment bell at ten o'clock sharp, startling both Erik and Marcia who were just about to have breakfast. Marcia leapt nervously and looked at her watch.

'She's here! Oh, my God, Erik, I didn't have time to...'

The doorbell rang again, more persistently this time.

'Jesus!' she blurted, thrusting her napkin on the table and throwing her arms in the air, as she headed towards the door.

A few seconds later, Erik pictured Marcia and Harriet side by side entering the kitchen. At first glance of Marcia's mother, he got up from his chair, as if a general was coming in. Harriet put her small golden suitcase on the floor and smiled at him through her impeccable make-up and faultless blond hair. She extended her small bony hand, almost completely shielded under golden rings and bracelets.

She was only a tiny wiry old woman, but one look was enough to realise she had everything under control. Despite her age, her appearance was so scrupulously prim that it was hard to believe Marcia was her daughter. Especially at the moment, with Marcia still wearing her robe with her thick black hair dishevelled and the dirty socks on her feet.

'I'll show you your room now, mother,' said Marcia quickly after the introductions.

'Excellent. I need to change into something more casual. Can you prepare me a cup of coffee? That's all I need. I have to dash or I won't have time to do everything,'

Erik heard Harriet saying.

A couple of minutes later, Marcia returned.

‘Don’t say anything Erik, please. You’ve seen nothing yet.’

Erik laughed.

‘Look Marcia, I think I’d better check into a hotel. Do you know any nearby?’

he asked her.

‘And Pat?’

‘She’ll be all right. She’ll probably be glad to see me off.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I’m sure.’

‘Oh, this is awful. I wish I could move into a hotel myself. But I really don’t know what to do. Why on earth, did I have to have all these things fall on top of me at the very same time?’

‘I’m going to have a look around, ok?’

‘Ok.’

‘Where’s Erik?’ Pat asked Marcia, as soon as got out of the bedroom.

Marcia raised her head from the computer, her glasses on the tip of her nose.

‘He moved to a hotel across the street.’

‘Why?’

‘Because there’s no place for him to sleep here.’

‘That’s absurd! He could have taken the bed,’ Pat said irritated.

‘Oh yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘He told me you’re not sleeping together.’

‘We’re not, but he could have stayed with half of the bed.’

‘Pat, come on, have you lost all your marbles or are you interested in him?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, of course I’m not interested in him.’

‘Well, then you really did lose your marbles.’

‘Sex, sex, sex, that’s all you ever think about,’ Pat said angrily.

‘Me and everybody else who is right in the head. It’s human nature, animal instinct.’

Pat, furious, turned her back to her and headed for the kitchen.

‘Pat?’ Marcia called.

Pat didn’t reply. Marcia got up from the sofa and went after her.

‘Hey! Don’t be cross. I was just kidding. Anyway, like this I have a chance. But how are you feeling? Better?’

‘Fine!’ she replied almost shouting, as she hurriedly scrambled two eggs.

‘Listen, I’m sorry about Harriet, but you know what she’s like. She just decided to come to New York the day I arrived.’

At this point the doorbell rang.

‘Who can it be now?’ Marcia said adding:

‘Maybe, it’s Erik.’

It was Harriet, who’d come to take out Marcia, Pat and Erik for lunch and unload her shopping bags.

‘I’m just having breakfast, thank you,’ Pat said to her.

‘Breakfast?’ Harriet asked shocked.

‘Yes, breakfast,’ Pat replied bluntly.

‘How can you possibly have breakfast at this time? Even for lunch, it’s late. I tell you Pat, I know you’re not well, but it’s absolutely important to get up early. Getting up at these hours, all you’ll get is an incurable disease, dear. That’s called laziness,’ she declared.

Pat continued to eat rapidly, ignoring her completely.

‘Mother, I’m working. I can’t go out for lunch,’ Marcia put in quickly.

‘What’s wrong with all of you? And where’s that young man?’

‘He’s out,’ Marcia replied.

‘I’m late for an appointment too, Marcia. I’ll have to rush,’ Pat said suddenly, scurrying past them out of the kitchen.

‘An appointment? What appointment?’ asked Marcia, following her.

‘I’m going to the doctor.’ Pat shouted to her from the bedroom, as she was getting dressed.

‘Well Marcia, it’s you and me, then,’ Harriet said.

‘Mother, I’m only going out now if you promise to leave us alone in the evening,’ Marcia said exasperated, knowing that her mother was on her case, no matter what and that, as usual, she couldn’t face up to her.

‘Marcia! Listen to you! I’m your mother!’

‘Take it or leave it.’

‘It’s unbelievable! You know very well I’m going to eat with the Rogers tonight and you’re supposed to come too, remember?’

The argument between them carried on, as it always used to.

Meanwhile, Pat got out onto the street. She looked at the hotel across the street for a moment. The idea was to go straight to Erik and tell him off. Instead, she turned left and started walking, not knowing where she was going.

The streets were full of people, as always, she remembered. The shops were already all glittering with Christmas decorations. So early, she thought, dismayed. She walked slowly, trying to concentrate on the way her feet stepped on the ground, on the manoeuvres her legs and feet should adapt to, on the movement she needed to strike to arrive at the right balance between her body and her mind. Everything was so familiar and distant, simultaneously. Even that steely cold was like a customary friend, although it felt somewhat colder. Now and again, she had to enter a shop to get warm for a while, before continuing. Apart from the Christmas junk, the city dazzled her, revealing all the known streets and places that she'd crossed and criss-crossed so many times. Everywhere the city raised itself from the ground magnificent and proud. It stood solidly on the land only to emerge and shoot up to the sky, where its heart beat amidst the air and people couldn't see it. It was not to be seen.

She ended facing the house she used to live in. There were no vestiges of the fire. She sat on the sidewalk opposite and stared at the windows, at the greengrocer, at everything and everybody. She remained there, still and quiet, until her hands were frozen violet.

She'd tried to hold on to the image of that street, to fix it in her mind, but nothing seemed to have come out of that effort. On her way up, in the taxi, she could see nothing but a blank.

Back at Marcia's street, she turned her head to one side and another. She was tired and none of the places offered her any solace. Finally, she decided on the hotel. Erik wasn't there. Pat found him at Marcia's.

‘Pat, we were out of our minds. Where were you? How was the appointment?’

Marcia asked immediately.

‘There was no appointment. I was walking.’

‘Walking? Doing what? Going where?’ Marcia asked.

‘Just walking. I’m tired now. Let me have a rest, please,’ she pleaded.

‘What’s the matter with her?’ Marcia asked Erik.

‘It’s best to let her sleep. Believe me, sleep can work wonders. It erases like nothing else.’

‘Erases?’

‘It blots out the pain.’

Marcia sat on the sofa with a thud. Unlike her mother, she was stoutly built, tall and chubby. Her features were broad and large, but well delineated, clearly displaying her Italian origin.

‘Is your mother coming back soon?’ Erik asked her.

‘Don’t worry. She’ll be back late. She’s already out for dinner. And we? What are we going to do for dinner?’

Erik shrugged his shoulders.

‘Maybe it would be nice to go out. What do you think?’ she asked.

‘Fine by me. I don’t know about Pat though.’

‘I think it would do her good, to get out. You know, to clear out the air.’ Marcia said moving her arms as if waving smoke aside.

‘We’d better see what she wants.’

‘Ok. But now tell me about you Erik,’ she said, her vivid black eyes facing his.

He laughed.

‘Come on Erik. A life story is always a stimulating and inspiring adventure,’ she urged.

Erik laughed even more.

‘Come on,’ she insisted.

‘I was born here, right in Manhattan, thirty-two years ago,’ Erik started narrating as if reading the opening of a novel.

‘Really? See, that’s already exciting.’

‘It was an accident, my birth. My parents hadn’t planned to have a baby. Not so soon. They’d just got married a week before my mother discovered she was expecting me. My father was still studying. He had come to New York for his MA. He’d arrived only the day before my mother found out she was pregnant. She was working as a trainee lawyer in Oslo, then. And this day, she was walking to and fro between the offices of the lawyers, when she suddenly collapsed on the floor. At the emergency room, after she recovered her senses, the nurse told her she was going to have a baby. She said that when she heard it, she felt like fainting again and that she even tried to pass out, but she couldn’t.

A few days later, she appeared at my father’s room here and she broke the news to him. She thought it was something that she couldn’t say over the phone or by letter and besides she decided that she neither could have a baby away from the father nor wanted him to come back to Norway and lose his opportunity to do the MA in the States. So she came over and she stayed here till the MA was finished.

I was taken to Norway when I was two years old. After that, they tried over the years to produce a brother or a sister, without success. Finally, not long ago, they, sadly, resigned themselves to the fact that I was to remain as a single child.’

Marcia listened to Erik excited and curious, interrupting here and there, only sporadically demanding more detailed descriptions.

‘Fascinating,’ she declared in the end.

‘It’s amazing all you know about your birth and early years. It’s always much more exciting than the stuff you remember from recent years, actually. How come you know so much about when you were born?’ she asked.

‘I asked my parents.’

‘I’d bet you wrote it all down,’ she said, blinking at him.

‘I confess. Just as an exercise.’

‘I knew it.’

‘Ok, it’s your turn now.’

‘No way. I can’t compete with you.’

‘It’s not a competition,’ he exclaimed.

‘Some other time,’ said Marcia sighing.

‘It’s not fair. Just give me some quick large brushes,’ Erik suggested.

‘Born Marcia Tonino, from traditional Midwest American mother (persistently annoying, domineering and pushy) and traditional Italian father (hopelessly old-fashioned, kind-hearted and provincial). One sister, Francesca- professional skilled chef - living in Italy. One brother, Mat –businessman in a bank in Houston. Me, the youngest, known in the family, in Italian, as something like the thick-headed bookworm, with the title of Dr. of Italian Contemporary Studies at the University of Bloomfield, living alone in the small American town of Bloomfield.’

‘Likes and dislikes?’ Erik inquired.

‘Likes: to eat well, wishing to never get fat, which is really a dream; to lie under the sunshine...’

She stopped, hearing Pat’s footsteps approaching the living room. She appeared wearing a long black djellaba.

‘Christ, Pat! You look like a figure from a Greek tragedy,’ exclaimed Marcia.

‘Better than a wicked witch. Is she here?’ Pat asked.

‘No, Harriet’s not here. She won’t come back till late,’ Marcia answered.

‘Sit down. We’re having such a relaxing conversation about our life stories,’ she continued.

‘You must be out of your minds,’ Pat snapped.

‘I’m starving. Have you had dinner?’ Pat asked.

‘No. We were waiting for you. But it’s still early. Relax, sit down,’ Marcia said.

‘Is there anything to eat?’ Pat asked.

‘I got some nuts. That’s all there is. Sit down. I’ll get them.’

‘We were thinking we could go out for dinner,’ Erik said to Pat.

‘No way. There’s nowhere you can smoke in this damn place. Everything is so sterilized it makes me sick,’ she snapped.

‘I’ll give you that. There was something called the 9/11 just after you left, you know... And this city changed.’ Marcia admitted coming back with a bowl of mixed nuts.

‘It looks like a freaking hospital. I’m sure the patients are all demented. They’re all suffering from over-health, over-cleanliness,’ Pat said.

‘Everything changes,’ Erik intervened.

‘And you Marcia, did you find someone?’ Pat asked.

‘No, I am still the same old desperate single woman,’ she replied.

‘Some things change, but others never do,’ Pat declared.

‘No, Pat, I think Erik is right, everything changes, if even it doesn’t seem so for the naked eye. I gave up looking for Mr. Right, that’s a change.’

There was a brief pause in the conversation.

‘Well then, what are we going to do about dinner, ladies?’ Erik asked, breaking the silence, trying to uplift the atmosphere.

After a lengthy discussion, they decided to order some food to be brought to the apartment. But the meal was short. Erik left for the hotel soon after they were finished and Pat fled the minute the doorbell rang at 11.20 pm.

The next day, everyone left Manhattan all at once, leaving Marcia alone. At breakfast, Pat had declared she was ready to go to Upstate New York, to Marcia's house, that very minute. And this time, Erik concurred promptly with her desire to escape.

'So, have you known Marcia for a long time?' Erik asked Pat, once they had settled on the train.

'Yeah, for quite a long time, I guess.'

'Do you know you're speaking with that strong American accent, since we got here? It's funny.'

'It's contagious,' she replied shrugging her shoulders.

Now that Erik felt rejuvenated by all the talking of the previous day, he bombarded Pat with questions during the whole journey. He wasn't even much bothered by her short cut answers. Instead, they gave him an opportunity to keep asking further and widely, as well as a challenge to steer and follow at the same time. It was as if he was taking part in a hurdle race, along with the train.

Pat endured his never-ending questioning throughout the entire day. Despite her attempts to bump him off the track, he persisted restlessly and she made an effort to keep focused and not to explode abruptly. However, she managed a small truce, while he spread the cream and massaged her.

At night, he tucked her in bed, as he was used to and kissed her on the mouth. This time though, she didn't reciprocate. He looked into her eyes.

'No Erik,' she pleaded softly.

He put his arms around her body beneath the bedspread.

'Oh Pat,' he whispered on her ear.

'Erik, please...,' she pleaded again.

'Shush... let me be for just a minute. Don't say anything. Shush...,' he murmured.

She let him stay holding her, hearing his breath and listening to the silence.

A couple of days later, Marcia returned home.

'Hello. So how are you guys?' she asked Erik.

He was slouched on an armchair, a book in his hands.

'Hello. We're fine and you?'

'Where's miss?'

'On one of her rounds, looking at houses.'

'And you're here?' I thought you were supposed to help her to get around.'

'So did I.' he replied sighing and putting his feet down on the floor.

Marcia sat on the sofa and took off her boots.

‘God, I’m so tired!’ she exclaimed.

‘Have a rest.’

‘I didn’t want to, but I think it’s probably best if I just lie down for a bit.’

‘I’ll tell you what. I’ll run you a nice hot bath and you’ll go for a snooze. What do you say?’

‘You’ve got yourself really in the caring business.’

‘Not very successfully, but just because one patient doesn’t appreciate my work, doesn’t mean another won’t either.’

‘It’s a deal.’

Some hours later, Marcia found Erik in exactly the same place she’d seen him, when she’d come back.

‘Erik!’ she called.

‘Yes?’

‘I can’t believe you’re still there.’

‘Had a good rest?’

‘Excellent! Boy, I really needed that. But what about you? Hasn’t Pat come back yet?’

‘She’s in the room taking a nap. I’ll have to call her in a minute, actually,’ he said glancing at his watch.

‘Now, what I need is a good cup of coffee,’ she said, heading for the kitchen.

‘Do you want a coffee, Erik,’ she shouted to him.

‘No, thanks.’

‘A glass of wine, then?’

Meanwhile, Erik had got up and joined her.

‘All right.’

‘You seem a bit sad, Erik. What’s going on?’

‘I don’t know what am I doing anymore,’ he confessed honestly.

‘What do you mean? Come on, Erik. Don’t blame yourself. Pat has always been a hard nut to crack. You’re doing a great job. You should have seen her after the accident happened. Not one of her friends could handle her. One by one, we all crumpled. And we did everything we possibly could and more.’

‘How long ago was it?’

‘The accident?’

Erik nodded. Marcia tried to remember.

‘About two years ago, I think.’

‘Two years ago, Marcia. Two years ago was two years ago, now is now,’ Erik said with a hint of despair.

‘Well, Erik, for me and you two years ago might seem like ages, but maybe not for her.’

‘But she has travelled so much. She has spent more than a year travelling around, her sister told me,’ Erik insisted.

‘Even so.’

They stayed silent for a while.

‘You know, I think her notions of time and place got screwed up,’ Marcia said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t know. It’s just a vague impression I can’t pin down. And it was always there, latent.’

‘Even before the accident? Is that what you’re saying?’ Erik asked curious.

‘Yes, even before.’

Marcia made an effort to find a way to put what she sensed into words, but she gave up.

‘I don’t know how to say it. Me and another friend of hers spent I don’t know how long together, talking, studying and trying to figure it out, to see how we could help her. We didn’t get anywhere with her, of course, but we learnt that a severe depression doesn’t just erupt like that. It’s a pain, which accumulates, develops and can reach gigantic proportions, given the proper nourishment. But it’s already there, inside.’

‘I have to get her up,’ muttered Erik, slowly.

He remained for a moment more, sitting on the kitchen chair. Then, getting up, he said:

‘God! If this was meant to raise my spirits, Marcia...’ and his voice trailed away.

‘Sorry, Erik. I know that love is impatient, but in Pat’s case it is also complicated.’

‘Love?’ he asked her surprised.

‘Yes, you love her, Erik. Who do you think you’re kidding?’

Erik lifted his right arm in a vigorous dismissive gesture.

‘Nonsense,’ he said leaving, while Marcia laughed whole-heartedly.

‘Fool,’ she shouted, so he could hear her.

‘Nuts,’ he shouted back.

Marcia took a good look at Pat, when she turned up at the living room.

‘Don’t you have anything else to put on?’ she asked her, seeing Pat wearing again nothing but a djellaba, this time indigo blue, and leather Arabic slippers.

‘No, not really,’ Pat answered flatly.

Marcia shook her hand in mid-air, dismissively.

‘Hey Erik, what’s that in the fridge?’ she asked.

‘Our dinner. Seasoned young lamb to be served with dauphinoise potatoes and fresh salad.’

‘You cook?’ Marcia asked amazed.

‘Actually, I’m a terrible cook, but I couldn’t resist your kitchen.’

‘It’s practically brand new. You can’t possibly imagine the cost of it. This house is sucking all the money out of me, since I got it three years ago and I can’t see an end to it.’

‘And you, Pat, have you found anything?’ she continued.

‘No.’

At this point, Erik went to the kitchen. Marcia followed him, but he convinced her to leave him alone preparing the meal. She returned to the living room with two glasses of wine. Pat took hers, but remained with her eyes fixed on the television.

‘Tell me, Pat, why the hell do you want a house in Bloomfield?’

‘Eh?’

Marcia had to repeat the question, after having turned the volume down, evidently.

‘I don’t want a house in Bloomfield. I’m looking for something in the countryside.’

‘But you’re a city girl, Pat.’

‘Not anymore.’

‘So now you’ve turned into a cowgirl, just like that?’

‘I’m buying a house, not animals. I’m not having any animals.’

‘You could have chickens, at least. I’m trying to picture you feeding the chickens,’ said Marcia laughing.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ replied Pat with a hint of a smile on her lips, as she saw chickens on TV.

‘Oh, and a dog. You have to have a dog. A great big dog barking by your side,’ said Marcia laughing out loud.

As a reply, Pat threw a cushion at her, trying to smother her own snigger. Marcia threw back the cushion, giggling.

When Erik joined, they were still launching cushions back and forth.

‘Hey, hey, what’s going on here,’ he said picking up a cushion too.

‘Stop! Stop! Stop!’ screamed Marcia in tears.

‘Ok, ok,’ Erik shouted.

‘Time to set the table,’ he continued.

‘Oh, my God! I haven’t had a laugh like this for ages,’ Marcia said, wiping her tears with the back of her hands.

Sunday night, once Pat had gone to bed, Erik, after much hesitating, taking a chance on Marcia, said:

‘I’m thinking about going to California.’

‘What?’ Marcia exclaimed surprised.

‘You heard me, Marcia. I’m not doing anything here,’ he replied weary.

‘Wait a minute, Erik. You’re not thinking of going now, are you?’

‘Tomorrow couldn’t be sooner.’

‘No, no, no. Hang on, Erik. I can’t take care of Pat. You know that. And anyway you just got here.’

‘I don’t think she needs anyone to take care of her.’

‘Don’t say that!’

‘Marcia, calm down. Listen...’

However, Marcia kept saying no with her head.

‘Listen. I’ll have to leave one day. Actually, I shouldn’t even have come over here in the first place. It was a mistake. It doesn’t matter now; it’s done. But now she’s here with you; soon she’ll get a house and that will be it. The longer I stay the worse it is, can’t you see?’

‘Erik, stay for a while. What the hell are you going to do in California, anyway? What’s the rush?’

‘I want to see the sea, the light, I don’t know.’

‘Why don’t you talk to her, Erik,’ Marcia suggested.

‘Talk? Talk about what?’

‘About what you feel.’

‘No way,’ he replied adamant.

‘This is ridiculous. Don’t you realise she doesn’t see?’

‘Precisely.’

‘What do you mean? I don’t get you.’

‘She only sees what she chooses to see.’

‘But she’s sick,’ Marcia said begging.

‘Well, I’m sick of it too,’ Erik declared to put an end to the conversation.

‘Christ!’ Marcia exclaimed, as Erik was standing up to go to bed.

‘The weekend went so well, Pat wasn’t that bad, we had fun,’ she insisted.

‘Good night, Marcia,’ he said on his way upstairs.

A week later, Erik had packed his things and, while both Pat and Marcia were out, locked the front door and walked to the station.

9. IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

Past the Tropic of Cancer, on her way up from Mexico, Pat took the straightest and fastest route she could. As she crossed states, she barely looked around or stopped. Only when her eyes began blurring road signs and getting lost on road maps, she pulled in at some secondary road to get a little rest, usually by sunset. A few times, she diverted to a city and checked into a good hotel, not to bother with having to find anything that wasn't there. She didn't need much anyway – a proper meal, a decent bed, a clean and impersonal space, where needs were provided for in a manner-of-fact way. Her knowledge of US topography escaped her. Even west, southwest, northwest came about mixed up in her mind. Never mind she'd travelled all her life far and wide and that she'd learnt how to orientate herself on a big scale, around the world and in USA. On this trip she seemed to be driving in a state of numbness, almost as if she'd turned blind. Now space was just boring, it didn't matter anymore. She'd turned senseless to both geography and architecture.

Once arrived at her secluded new home in Upstate New York, Pat started to paint all the walls white, with the exception of the kitchen walls, as part of an experimental plan that she'd pictured for herself. It was only a rough sketch yet, but at that time the important thing was to keep her hands busy.

Then she strenuously sanded all the kitchen cupboards back to bare wood and applied a matt varnish onto them, even if their 60's style demanded paint. She decided

to keep them like that, showing their dull dark wood against the warm yellow ochre walls and white tiles. The result was not particularly attractive. However, her intention was not to entirely revamp the house, nor to submit it to plastic surgery. The house was old, small, plain (even unpleasant) and cold, both inside and outside. It would remain old, small and plain. The only major work she'd taken upon was to turn it warm. It had probably been just a hunting cabin or maybe some weird hermit's home. No one seemed to know. It had been uninhabited for ages. Actually, the estate agent had said, they didn't even use to show it to customers. Well, yes, now and then, someone would come up to see it, but people like her, looking for a small place. Unfortunately, they didn't get many people like that, he'd said, smiling apologetically, and then stopped talking suddenly, a tic of his, which occurred just like that in the middle of the non-stoppable fully-fledged-estate agent's babble. Pat had let him talk as much as he wanted; she just hadn't kept him going with replies.

While Pat had gone to Mexico, the estate agent had taken care of surveying the insulation and electric work. Apart from that and a new fridge, cooker, a bed, a sofa and the television, that she'd left him in charge of receiving too, she didn't do any more great alterations to the house. From Mexico, she brought two trunks and a massive lot of rugs, fabric panels and woollen cloths. The house had come with a table, 4 chairs and a tattered armchair together with a scratched small wooden cabinet, displaying its big scars bare, after being sanded. And that was how far the furniture went.

In between the sanding and the painting, Pat brought her pile of rugs and rags, as she called them and chose where to hang and lay them. At the end of the

groundwork, there were cloths everywhere. Every window was dressed in a different panel tissue. Some showed flowers, others birds or geometric designs. All these unveiled variegated patterns: diaphanous tones and silhouettes; garish colours and features; silk, almost transparent and stiff; cotton light and sturdy; wool soft and heavy. They all lived side by side, on top of each other, until they overcrowded all the space, taking hold of the entire house.

She was busy herself. Along with the painting, sanding, arranging her fabrics, she had had to go into the nearest little town repeatedly: once for a vacuum cleaner and a mop and a broom; then food; another time for nails and a hammer. Pat couldn't believe the amount of stuff, little by little, it was necessary to get. She'd forgotten all those small things you have to keep gathering: so many things. And there seemed to be no end to this demand for yet something else. Once at home, with bags full of a load in disarray, it was a pain to sort out the miscellaneous articles. Tired after the shopping, to have to find a place to put all those things was too much for her. Eventually, soon enough, she gave up that job. She dropped everything in the attic onto the floor. When she needed some particular item she'd go up there, search for it amidst the amassed stuff jumbled together and fetch it. Also, she'd realised it was best to get some things in bulk to avoid going to town so often, even if, by now, she knew the few shops in town and people were already greeting her as a regular.

It happened now and again that Pat had a day when she just couldn't get up. There were down moments, every so often, but she'd got used to them. There had been so many bad days that by now, she didn't give them a thought anymore. Here we go again,

she'd think, with a sigh. At present, she wouldn't affect anyone else which made her moods more bearable.

The day was grey and dark and cold. She could see the muddy paths, the wet streets of the town in England where she had been born ages ago, even if she couldn't recall the geography or actually make out the particular roads anymore. Somehow, all that surfaced was a dismaying darkness and pervading drabness, not of any specific street, building or landmark. It was rare for apparitions of that old factory district to appear in her mind. No doubt many features of that place in England had gone, been demolished, utterly changed. Nevertheless, she wished she could permanently erase once and for all these images springing up from nowhere in her brain, no matter how seldom. She turned her body around in bed and changed position. She felt more comfortable now with her back straight onto the mattress and focused on what she'd do that day instead. She decided to have breakfast and got up.

A formless sky, an immeasurable grey mass blinding not only the eyes, but every vital sense in you, as if you were nothing, had brought with it, this time. Swooshing and rumbling sounds were coming from outside and continued on and on. It seemed that they were even growing louder and rawer in their rushing about. Pat finally went to the back door in the kitchen and slightly lifted the curtain. There was a storm running its course. High winds blew everything: rain, sleet, snow, blurring the whole place. Sky and earth had become indistinguishable. She glued her face onto the glass, mesmerised. Swiftly, a blizzard was taking over. Everything was turning white and opaque. Soon there would be nothing to see but that blind seamless vision of white. She stood there looking for a while. Had she seen something like that before, she asked herself. She didn't remember. At the back of her mind, there seemed to be some reminiscences similar, but probably just from films or books. She'd seen snow in New York and a couple of other places, but she thought she'd never been in the middle of

such a sight. It was a complete void of space, without landmarks. Even the vegetation had been blanketed. It felt like the first time she was seeing that wildness together with that devastating blanking. Now, her face was going stiff from the cold and she took herself away from the door. She slapped her face hard and rubbed her hands vigorously, while running towards the thermostat to raise the temperature and then went round the house like a trapped mouse. Frantically, she exerted herself trying to warm her body, till she fell to the floor panting. She'd tripped over a pile of books. As she listened to the thump of her heartbeat, she realised she was panicking. 'Stop! Stop! Stop!' she shouted aloud and then forced herself to both silence and immobility. Pat reasoned with herself: 'What are you doing? You're going mad. You've got to calm down. Calm down, calm down. It will go away, like everything does. It's just a lot of noise, that's all.' Even so, she could feel currents of air rushing through the gaps and crannies of the house against her hot flesh. 'Don't think about anything, anything at all' she continued, talking to herself. 'It's just wind.' She closed her eyes and stayed for a while trying to steady herself.

Sometimes there was nothing you could do, she said to herself, as if trying to remember a lesson she'd seemed to have failed learning. You wait and then maybe you'll see, she whispered, afraid someone could hear her, and returned to bed. Still she was unable to calm down completely and control her anxiety. She reached for the box by the bed and picked the strong sleeping tablets, used for emergencies, out of the box. Whilst she waited for the tablet to knock her out, convoluted thoughts darted across her mind. And if she was not going to get out of bed anymore, engulfed by depression again. There would be no one to help her now. And if the roof of the house caved in, leaving her trapped underneath a beam, leaving her alive but paralysed, no one would come to pull her out either. Eventually, the screams she imagined ceased as she fell asleep.

The storm passed. She woke up lulled.

Over those first weeks at the house, Pat slowly devised a plan. Painstakingly, she worked out a timetable to nail her down. It was not a rigid schedule, but something more like a puzzle, made out of numerous pieces going into the utmost detail of the tasks setting her up in an endless toil. It consisted of several blocks of activities taking into account everything which she could think of, such as cleaning the house; emptying the bin; going to town to have lunch once a week; travelling to New York to buy some food and medicines once a month; reading; watching TV; going to the library and so on. No task was either too big or small to register, as she'd started to forget more and more at quite a fast pace. Every single thing was written down, over and over. Some blocks could not be moved, but almost all of them were interchangeable and could be moved from place to place. On one of the living room walls, there was a huge calendar that she'd drawn herself where she pinned squares of an ever-increasing stack of coloured cards. She also kept a diary, recording every activity of the day, from the moment she woke up (Monday 12 December – woke up 9.33 am), till she went to bed. She carried a small notebook with her all the time, she scribbled new activities she discovered, memos for others she'd thought she should follow up the next day and where reminder notes were stuck.

Despite the constant strain this exerted on her, harder at the beginning, there was one weekly chore in particular with which Pat struggled to stick to the most: the trip to town that included lunch at the diner. Nevertheless, she persevered with it. The only rule of the plan was not to give up a single thing, although she eventually gave one

up.

At the restaurant, she sat at the same table with Bill, Jack and Lenny. Apart from this weekly outing and the monthly one to New York, she never left the house.

Lenny had been the one to invite Pat over to the threesome's usual table.

'Pat, why don't you come and sit down here today? I'm fed up with these old coots.'

She'd looked at them perplexed, as the other men laughed.

'Yes, come and have a seat with us. Don't pay attention to Lenny. He's just sick of listening to his own voice and so are we too', said Bill, the oldest of the group.

Taken by surprise, she hadn't been capable of thinking up an excuse, so she just sat at the empty chair at their table.

That day, she'd felt so awkward, she didn't say much, but they obviously expected her to join them from then on.

'See you next week, same place, same time,' Jack had said, while the others agreed simultaneously.

Throughout the following week, Pat suffered from agony practically all the time, just to think about the upcoming visit to town. However, the more she debated what to do, the more desperate she became. She couldn't even concentrate, never mind think of anything.

When the day and the time came, she took her seat and smiled uneasily to her new lunch partners. She steadied her mind not to think about anything, decided to take the plunge her eyes shut.

‘Damn this place and the stupid job. Now my keyboard broke and I’m stuck till God knows when to get a new one, as I have to work overtime all week for this clearing the files up order. Fuck! I can’t go anywhere!’ started Jack.

‘Calm down, pal. I’m sure we can get a keyboard somewhere in no time,’ replied Bill with his usual unperturbed state of mind, adding to Pat:

‘Jack here is dating by e-mail. Don’t ask me how you can date by computer.’

‘I’m going to New York on Thursday. If you want, I can get you a keyboard,’ Pat suggested shyly.

‘Really? That would be great!’ said Jack excited.

‘No problem,’ Pat replied.

‘See, I told you,’ said Bill.

Jack sneered back at him.

‘Love is in the air....’ Lenny started singing.

They all laughed.

Little by little, Pat relaxed in their company. Little by little, she told them about herself one thing or the other. Little by little, she talked back to them, without resorting to made up stories or lying, apart from the reason why she had secluded herself in her house. She told them that it was her retreat to write a book about the 9/11 and that it was a matter she wouldn’t talk about. It brought her bad luck, she’d said. Except for that, she talked about whatever, like them, little by little. Little by little, it was not so bad. Little by little was easy.

When they learned Pat had been born and had grown up in England, it took some more explanation than Pat was expecting. At first, they didn't believe her. And even after knowing more of the story, they weren't fully convinced, she could tell. However, they didn't seem to mind if it was true or not in the end.

'How come you don't speak English then?' had been the first question.

'They all speak as if they have a hot potato stuck in their mouths. I can't understand a damn thing.' Lenny had said.

'I was just born there. My passport says I'm American, not English,' Pat had replied.

'So you never went back?' asked Bill.

'Now and again, I go to see my sister, but she lives in a very different place from where we were born.'

'And you understand what they say?' Lenny had continued, bewildered.

'Yes. We have the same language, Lenny,' Pat had answered him, sniggering and adding:

'Actually, they kind of pull a face when I speak trying to understand me, so...'

'There you go! Because it's not the same language. They speak English, here we speak American, American,' he'd repeated emphasizing the last word.

The weekly lunch conversations were always varied and rich with their zigzag course. Somehow, they reached a counterbalance between conflicting personalities. Lenny's young impatient outbursts met against Bill's old blasé dictums, Jack's middle-aged nervous moodiness ran into Pat's loosened up dramas. Even when they ended up angrily fighting and parted irritable, one or two or three furiously not speaking with each other or others, the following week, the discussion would continue, as if nothing had happened or as if it had resolved itself.

Only at the beginning, the excitement brought by a new member had provoked a slight imbalance, but soon the commotion had settled down. Lenny stopped chasing Pat as a candidate to satisfy his carnal needs, Jack's anxiety went back to its normal state and Bill got tired of his suspicious curiosity. They gave up on their initial insistent invitations for Pat to come more often to the diner and to go to their homes too. Instead, now and again, after she'd gone to New York they would have a dinner at Jack's, the only one who had a decent bachelor's house and could concoct a proper meal with the provisions Pat brought from New York. In time, she was able to begin to slacken off her guard. She'd become a regular customer in the little town: the shopkeepers, assistants and the inhabitants greeted her as a friend and engaged her in conversation.

There was only one piece of the puzzle stating 'keep in touch with Marcia' that Pat had deleted. Pat felt sad, but she'd realised she couldn't bear the relationship. Every time they met there were arguments. Marcia couldn't keep her mouth shut about anything: the past and the future, particularly, were in each word she uttered like beads on a necklace, round and round. A broken necklace that Pat had to fix: Marcia kept going on and on. So, finally, without a word Pat stopped from going to see her and even answering the phone. She told Kate, her sister, to ring once, put the phone down and ring again 5 minutes later. This finished calls from Erik too. Anyway, Erik had ended much before for her. It had never been part of the big plan. He continued to write letters that she didn't read; she kept them without knowing why.

‘It was Pat on the phone!’ Marcia said.

‘So, she’s at home! But I just phoned five minutes ago and there was no answer.’ exclaimed Erik.

‘Now, she is,’ replied Marcia.

‘Did you ask her if she was staying at home?’ Fred asked.

‘No, of course not. If I’d asked or even said anything, she would put the phone down. I’ve told you: she never answers the phone. I put the phone down immediately.’

They didn’t say anything more. They all knew what would happen if Pat was aware that the three of them were planning to pay her a visit.

‘Well, let’s go then. Quick.’ Erik said.

‘It’s a long way and the roads are dangerous.’ Marcia warned.

‘Come on guys. Let’s move. We’ll be all right.’ Erik spurred them on, getting up from the kitchen stool.

Marcia eyed Fred for a second, then shrugged her shoulders and went for her coat.

Just a couple of days before, one of these raging snow storms, which threatened to last for days and days, had come to a stop. Up there though you never knew if it had ceased altogether or just for a brief spell, only to pick up once more. Moreover, as Marcia had told them, it was very likely that the roads near where Pat lived were closed or so completely covered by snow that it would be impossible to see where they were, never

mind drive.

Not long after they set out, what Marcia had pictured to them became clearly visible. Except for the stark dark tree trunks spreading endlessly through the slopes, there was nothing but thoroughly blank scenery. As the same white landscape kept slowly passing by, each of them had fallen silent. Erik looked uneasy at that never-ending mute colourless mantle spreading out. It gave him an eerie feeling he found hard to pinpoint. It was distressing every way he looked at it. It was strikingly painful. And as they went it was becoming more and more harsh. The longer his eyes fixed the further they were riveted by the ice, so that all that he seemed to see was a pervading icy bruise everywhere. There was no way he could understand why Pat had chosen to bury herself like that. In such a vast country where you could pick whatever you wanted: the weather, the land's relief, the architecture, the people you felt like, it didn't make sense to decide upon living out in the sticks - in the middle of nowhere - as Marcia had put it, when he'd asked her where exactly was Pat staying. For some reason, he could have pictured her living in some godforsaken sunlight drenched place, but not there. He himself knew how hard it was to get used to living in frozen places like that. He remembered the pain he had gone through in Norway. He'd never liked cold places. Maybe that explained how he had learnt so swiftly to dwell in sun bleached places. On top of that, there was the unbearable drabness of the few villages and towns they passed through. Everything he saw were harbingers of despair, desolation, bleakness and decay. It was a space totally strange to him, another planet altogether, weird, utterly unintelligent, without the intriguing character of the plentiful dust-blown sad places in the West Coast.

'Is it still very far?' he asked Marcia.

'To be honest, I don't know. I'm not well acquainted with this part of the woods. We need to pass through a small town called Tatville or something like that.'

she replied.

‘So, you never come up here?’ Fred asked.

‘Never, unless I can’t help it,’ she said smiling.

And she was telling the truth. She really didn’t like that region. The only reason she would drive there was Pat. Whenever she travelled, she headed south and east or west, not north. There was nothing but hillbillies, a bunch of backward, ignorant, rude and inbred hicks. At that moment though what worried her was the bad state of the roads, the imminence of a storm, the sudden fall of a fog bank, the drop of the night, the ice on the tarmac, a deer on the road, that she’d lose the way, that Pat had gone out, or that they’d reach a dead end, among other things. Anytime darkness could entrap them and she was starting to panic. She’d told Erik that there was no way she’d drive back in the middle of the night. And they were still on their way there, never mind the return. Erik had promised he would bring them back, but that was no relief to her at all.

‘Oh, my God!’ she blurted.

‘It’s starting to rain! Soon it will be pelting down!’ she continued.

‘There! Tatville! Tatville!’ exclaimed Erik, who was beside her.

‘At least we’re close now.’ she said slowly swerving to the left onto a narrow path.

‘How close?’ Erik asked impatiently.

‘Very close, I think.’ she replied hesitantly.

Fred marvelled at the place. It was so quiet and calm. He too was slightly afraid, but he couldn’t help feeling excited as well. Everything was so still and silent all the way, before the drops of rain that he thought only of a kind of magic suspended in the air, waiting for a moment to reveal itself in something small, probably unnoticeable, but containing all the beauty. The secret beauty withheld from their naked eyes, about to release a sign of its enchantment. No doubt, there were a lot of these twinkling about

and even if he didn't see any miracle manifesting itself, he saw plenty of spellbinding glints spread out. The shape of a twig on a tree, tiny prints of steps on the soft snow, the transparent brilliance of a snowflake on the tip of a shoot, the pattern of the snow on the roofs of houses. He approved Pat's choice, knowing she'd come for the peace and quiet you can find in secluded places, seasonally purged, completely stripped of all rubbish by that pure iciness.

'We're here,' declared Marcia switching off the engine.

'That house,' she said pointing to a small one-storey house.

'We have to walk from here,' she continued.

By the time Marcia knocked on the door, the rain had turned even more **violent** and she was almost losing her nerve. There was a dim glow coming from the house, but not light signalling without a doubt there was someone in. So, when Pat opened a slit of the curtain of a window, Marcia sighed:

'Oh, thank God you're in, Pat. Open quick, we're getting drenched!'

For a couple of seconds nothing happened.

Desperate, Marcia started shouting:

'Please, Pat, open up! I can't go back in the middle of a storm. Pat!'

Finally, Pat opened the door and was going to say something, but as she saw Erik and Fred behind Marcia, she remained for a moment open-mouthed and static.

'Pat, let us in, we're absolutely soaked!' Marcia said, nearly screaming.

Without saying a word, Pat moved away from the entrance to make way for them to get in.

Erik and Fred examined Pat, while Marcia went ahead for the living room. They saw that her hair had grown considerably. She had it tied loosely at the back, but there was still a lot of it, in different directions, dangling free. Covering her from top to bottom, she had a thick and coarse black djellaba overlaid by a large silky blue cloth

wrapped around her neck and falling slack over the black cloak.

Pat led them to the living room, where Marcia was already busy throwing wood to the fire. Fred sat down on the black sofa, while Erik stood looking around. Pat still clearly disconcerted said haltingly:

‘I have to go... to the kitchen. I... was... cooking.’

She disappeared and stared at the steaks and at the potatoes she was cutting.

‘I think I saw this house,’ said Erik, who had followed her.

‘How long ago has she moved in?’ Fred asked Marcia.

‘A while. I’m not quite sure how long. The house needed some work done, so meanwhile Pat went to Mexico. That’s where she bought some stuff.’

Pat joined them. She tried to smile, but the way her eyes ran about, diverting from one direction to another constantly, betrayed her awkwardness. In a stilted way she asked if they wanted something to eat or drink.

‘I’m in such a state; I could eat a whole chocolate cake filled with cream,’ Marcia exclaimed.

They all laughed, except Pat, who remained embarrassed.

‘I think we can all have a glass of wine,’ suggested Erik trying to help Pat.

Pat headed to the kitchen again with Erik behind her.

‘I saw this house, didn’t I,’ he repeated.

‘Yes, yes.’

‘It was in ruins.’

‘No. It was pretty messy, but mostly it was dirt.’

‘It looks nice, the kitchen,’ Erik said, approving the warm glow coming from the yellow shades on the walls and cupboards.

Holding their glasses, everyone was seated now, except Erik who remained standing.

‘You can show us around,’ he proposed.

‘Oh ...there’s really not much too see... You can have a look if you want,’ Pat replied hesitantly, but with no intention of getting up.

‘So, you’re sure you don’t mind if we take a tour?’ asked Erik.

‘No, no,’ she replied slowly.

Fred, however, out of politeness and also because he was feeling extremely guilty for invading her space without being invited, didn’t move. He smiled at Pat, wanting to say he was sorry, but without managing to speak. Pat smiled back at him, but then averted her eyes, which fell onto the timetable. She immediately stood up, picked the throw from the back of the sofa and climbing onto the small cabinet covered the timetable, using strong sticky tape. Then, she turned hastily to Fred:

‘Fred, please don’t tell them anything about this.’

‘What is it?’

At this moment, Marcia and Erik entered the living room.

‘I have to eat something,’ declared Marcia as she came in.

Pat, who was still standing in the middle of the room as if lost, darted to the kitchen saying:

‘I’m going to see what there is.’

Marcia went after her:

‘I’m sorry, but this trip left me so unnerved. I’m starving,’ she said apologising.

‘You should’ve told me you were coming,’ Pat moaned.

‘I’m sorry, Pat, to burst in like this. I really am, but you know very well that you would never have us in any other way. What do you want me to do? They came over and obviously they wanted to see you, especially Erik.’

Pat sighed.

‘Here. We can have some cheese. You’ve got some nice cheeses here. Do you

have bread?’ Marcia said, once she’d opened the fridge.

‘In the freezer. I’ll have to put it in the oven. I’ll do it. You go and keep them company.’

‘You’re terrible, Pat; you know that, don’t you?’

Pat didn’t answer. She only kept thinking: now what the hell am I going to do?

Erik popped up in the kitchen again.

‘It looks nice, the house. I like the mix of all the different cloths and rugs,’ he said.

Pat made an effort to nod with pleasure.

‘So, how have you been keeping?’ he asked, trying to start a conversation.

‘All right,’ she said dismissively.

‘It must be quite hard to live here, now in the winter.’

‘You just get used to it.’

‘I would’ve never thought you could live in a place like this.’

Pat shrugged her shoulders.

As he realised she wasn’t going to speak, he fell silent for a moment and then, softly, started:

‘You know...I...’

‘It’s ready’ she interrupted him quickly, taking the bread out of the oven.

Erik’s words got stuck in his throat. His courage abandoned him and he ended by not saying what we intended.

In the living room, Fred and Marcia were lively engaged in a discussion.

‘Listen, Pat, and tell me what you would do. Fred is writing the final draft of his Carole Lynn biography and he has found this nut man. He has been living in a sanatorium for ages. He knew Carole quite well, it seems, but the man is completely fucked up, so that it’s hard to discern in the stories he tells the ones which really

happened from the ones he makes up. What can you do? How would you treat this information? I think the best is to leave it for the end, because that's where Fred is in his work anyway, and mention this man as it is, like, well, there is this man who knew Carole Lynn, and he says this and that, lots of things and we can't help but wondering how the facts puzzle out. The book would end presenting an uncertainty. It would be a brilliant ending. Like this, on one hand you're being truthful and, on the other, you throw the reader into an unsettled territory, which concurs with Lynn's character. It's perfect. But Erik here has another opinion.'

Erik laughed.

'Well, Erik, explain your theory. Pat has an extraordinarily perceptive eye,' Marcia suggested.

Erik gave an account of his point of view. Now and again, Fred and Marcia cut in with questions and opinions. Only Pat didn't interfere, listening and then, for moments, switching off. She felt overwhelmed by so much unusual conversation around her that it was difficult to follow everything all at once.

'Oh, my God! It's so late!' Marcia exclaimed suddenly, looking at her watch.

'Pat, do you mind if we stay over? Just to think we have to go all the way back with this weather makes me sick,' she added pleading.

For a second, Pat froze.

'But I don't know where you are going to sleep. There's just one bed,' she replied at last.

'I can sleep with you and the boys can stay here on the sofa. There's plenty of space. The sofa is huge,' Marcia insisted.

'I don't mind. I said I would drive, but to be honest it's too rough out there,' Erik said relieved.

'Excellent,' Marcia concluded.

Fred glanced at Pat who looked back at him.

‘Is it ok, Pat?’ he whispered feeling sorry for her.

‘It’s ok, Fred,’ she answered in a gentle voice, eyeing him.

They continued the conversation, which by then had taken many twists and turns. So, when, finally, Pat was asked to give her verdict she had almost completely forgotten the point. Besides, as the night had evolved, she’d retreated herself into invisibility and to absent mindedness by drinking. Unaccustomed for too long now to both so much drinking and staying up till that late, she muttered:

‘Err...’

‘About the nut, Pat,’ Marcia said helping her.

‘The nut?’

‘Yes, about what to do with his testimony in the writing,’ Marcia clarified.

‘Leave him alone,’ Pat said.

‘What?’ Marcia burst.

‘But...’ Erik started.

‘No, no. Please let Pat finish,’ Fred interrupted him.

‘What do you mean by leaving him alone Pat?’ Fred asked.

‘I don’t know...’ she started hesitantly.

‘I don’t know. It seems cruel,’ she continued slowly.

Erik and Marcia looked at her inquisitively. Fred encouraged her:

‘I thought about that too. Every time I go to the sanatorium there’s a frail woman, Cal her name is, begging me to stop talking to Dave, the name of this man. She says he suffers a lot when talking about Carole.’

‘It’s his life,’ Pat said, her voice saddened.

‘His life? It’s not his life. Carole’s dead and he’s just one among so many others. He wasn’t her first lover or the last. Besides, it’s not a book about him,’ Marcia

put in.

‘Carole’s dead, but he insists she’s not,’ Fred said.

‘But that’s his problem,’ Marcia exclaimed.

‘I’m sorry. I have to go lie down,’ said Pat, getting up slightly unbalanced.

The next morning, they got ready to leave. Erik, after following Pat everywhere for a chance to speak to her alone, had to stay behind the others, who were already in the car, to have a word with her finally:

‘Listen...’ he started.

‘No, no,’ Pat replied softly.

‘Listen, I want to take you to the sea. You don’t belong here,’ Erik came out so fast that it was almost incomprehensible.

Pat looked at him, bewildered.

‘Please, promise me you’ll come,’ Erik insisted.

‘Next time,’ she said, after a pause.

‘I’ll come soon, ok?’

Pat nodded.

‘I wish I was in Pat’s shoes,’ declared Marcia the following day over a conversation discussing Pat’s state.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Erik replied.

‘Silly? She never had lack of offers. Never. All the men ran after her. You see her like this now, but you can’t possibly imagine what she was like in the old days.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Fred curious.

‘She was absolutely astounding. She was beautiful, she was young, she was rich. Ok, yes, she had a very peculiar temperament, too. Still, no one could resist her. I looked like the poor clumsy servant by her side all the time. When there were parties at her house though it was even worse. I had a major crisis, just to think about what to wear.’

‘She threw parties?’ Erik asked incredulous.

‘Oh, yes. Not many, mind you. She and Peter liked to keep very much to themselves. And Peter was not exactly the social type.’

‘What was he like?’ Fred asked.

‘You’re going to write Pat’s biography next?’ she asked laughing.

‘Oh, come on, Marcia. We don’t know anything about her life before,’ Erik said.

‘Peter was very withdrawn, a kind of a lonesome man. He was amazingly cultured. He was brought up in Long Island, studied in the best places at the time. He was a single child from wealthy parents. But he was quite independent. He was a photographer for the National Geographic magazine, so he spent all the time travelling to take pictures.’

‘And Pat? Did she go with him?’ Erik asked.

‘Most of the time, no. She was working. And she was dedicated to her dance. After, when she stopped dancing on stage and turned to teaching, she’d go more often with him.’

‘Was she happy?’ Erik asked.

‘It’s difficult to say. She was very self-demanding. She worked hard and was always involved in several activities. She studied I don’t know how many languages, attended courses all the time and participated in a charity organisation for orphans. I actually met her at a German class. But I think she was happy, especially if you compare it to the way she is now.’

‘Did she have affairs?’ Erik asked.

‘Affairs? Erik!’ Marcia said scolding him.

‘Well?’ Erik insisted.

‘If she had, I don’t know. She wouldn’t confide that to anyone, not Pat. But if I had to guess, I don’t think she had. She met Peter late, only when she was thirty something. They only lived together 4 or 5 years. They were very much in love with each other.’

‘I don’t know why you’re so surprised. She must have spent a lot of time alone, so...’ Erik said.

‘She was used to living alone by then. She’d lived by herself for ages before and she kept herself very busy.’

‘Did you ever meet her parents?’ Fred asked

‘They were both dead, when I met her.’

‘So, how long have you known each other?’ Erik asked.

‘Maybe a couple of years, before she met Peter.’

‘She is from England originally, isn’t she?’ Fred asked.

‘I think so. She never talked about her past. She’d only go back as far as when she’d started to go to dance classes in New York and that was it.’

‘That’s very strange,’ Fred commented.

‘Yeah. Very strange,’ Marcia agreed.

‘She must have had a bad time,’ Fred said thoughtfully.

‘Umm...’ said Erik.

The moment Erik, Fred and Marcia left, Pat felt immensely relieved. Once inside the house, she fetched one of the timetables to see what she’d scheduled for herself that day: ‘Cleaning the bedroom, lunch in town, after the morning exercises.’ She had another cup of coffee and thought for a while how strange the whole visit appeared in her mind. Marcia was like she’d always been: a curious little girl, getting easily scared in the middle of things. One moment giggling, the next opening her arms surprised or afraid, but her brain ticking and her mouth talking all the time. Fred seemed to be less anxious than she’d remembered, even if there wasn’t much to remember. Maybe it was the absence of sweat that produced a more solid figure, although he still showed a divided mind, mirrored in those attentive and watchful eyes, which he didn’t seem to know where to turn. She was grateful to him, though. He hadn’t said a word about the timetable. Also, she’d sensed his uneasiness. Surely, the other two had pushed him into the intrusion into her life. Erik, though, had turned into a stranger. That dark tanned young man, wearing new jeans, new black shirt with a Chinese collar and new brown loafers, was the image of an opaque figure she did not recognise. From where did that meek stalker come? ‘To take me to the beach? To see the sea?’ She laughed, sadly. Then she focused hard again on her schedule for the day and her mind summoned up the familiar words: never look back.

That day, she skipped the exercises and the lunch in town, postponing it for the following day. She was tired of listening to people talking. She cleaned the house thoroughly all day. Then she settled on the sofa and watched a couple of old films.

It was the second time Pat had taken a stroll around the grounds by the house. The first had been when she'd gone there looking for a house to buy.

Throughout all winter she'd only walked the path from the house to the small clearing where her car was parked.

By mid April the sky had turned suddenly intensively blue and bright. As she walked towards the little brook, the sun hit her face in waves interspersed with blows of raw bursts of wind. She looked at the dense foliage of trees and bushes, displaying their vivid deep green, at the flowers spread all over, dotting the hill with their fierce colours. She lay on the ground by the brook and closed her eyes. Although the earth was still wet she didn't feel the dampness, through her thick winter clothes. All she could sense was the warmth on her face and the different sounds in the woods. Above all, she heard the noisy swoosh, the ripples of water and the gush of melting snow. Progressively, her ears could distinguish the sound of birds, particularly of the woodpeckers hammering away at the tree trunks and, then, of insects darting across the air. Also, she could feel bugs or worms, probably just ants, crawling on her hands. Still she didn't make a move to shake them off or any move at all. For a long time, she just remained there very still, her mind empty till she realised that that was all there was; nothing else. She was just one more of all those tiny things and exactly like them. Her thoughts, emotions and feelings had been completely flattened as if by magic. Eyes shut everything had turned into an overpowering blur. So much that she could say she felt the water flying, the birds swimming in it and the wind piercing the ground underneath, the worms gliding in it. Everything had turned obsolete, distant and indiscernible. There was not a place to

go or anything to do in her mind. It was the end. In a flash of clairvoyance she could see the transparent close and she accepted it, both weary and relieved and, after the initial eerie impression, she felt calm as she saw herself forever still. Maybe even the sadness embedded in her could be smoothed out of her appearance too, once she'd breathed her last.

Introduction to commentary

Le monde est grand, mais en nous
il est profond comme la mer.

R.M. Rilke

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(The world is large, but in us
it is deep as the sea)³

To realise such immensity of the world can provoke, on one hand a sense of insatiable anguish and irremediable loss and, on the other a feeling of enormous freedom opening before us.

Both these perceptions, implicit in the nature of space, constitute the axes explored in the following essay. However, instead of being considered in a binary opposition, they are treated as interrelated through a dynamic relationship.

In part I, I investigate how space, defined as a fluid entity that is always changing is clearly interlinked with the protagonists, Pat and Fred, of my novel *Away*. Here these characters are discussed as they relate differently to space, which at the same time, is revealed to be constructed and deconstructed by them.

Turning the focus on to the main character, Pat, I then concentrate on one of the spaces privileged by her – the desert.

The choice of this particular space echoes a long tradition of narratives recounting travels through the desert. Hence, I demonstrate, resorting to selected works, the dynamic relationship that is portrayed, namely in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by T. E.

³ Rilke quoted in Bachelard, G. (1994) *The Poetics of Space* Trans. Maria Jolas, Boston: Beacon Press, p.183 (no source or date supplied)

Lawrence, *Desert, Marsh & Mountain* by Wilfred Thesiger and *The Sheltering Sky* by Paul Bowles. This investigation helps to elucidate how the uniqueness of the desert's characteristics discloses 'par excellence' the complexity of space, as considered in this project. The immensity, enigma and sinuosity of the desert discussed in this part of the dissertation prefigure themes and elements of space present in Auster's work.

In part II, I explore how some Auster narratives – *City of Glass*, *The Music of Chance* and *In the Country of Last Things* – display similar dynamic relationships between space and their protagonists. In addition, these Auster stories show other aspects of space and characterisation that I have sought to dramatise differently with my creative work.

In part III, I return to the investigation of my novel to discuss other significant elements. Firstly, I reflect on the development of the writing process and the aims I intended to achieve in my writing. Secondly, I focus on aspects mainly related to the characters and their relationships.

At this point, my project deals with the exploration of the characters' identity and development, turning to the ensuing interrelation it establishes not just between the characters, but also in the architecture of the writing, concerning the narrative elements, such as time, narrator and reader.

Finally, in the conclusion, I end up by mentioning my debt to other writers who greatly influence my work: Bruce Chatwin, Edward Forster and Marguerite Duras. Here I refer briefly to the reflection that their narratives bear on my writing.

Part I – *The Characters and Space*

At the start, my intentions, regarding the two main characters, Pat and Fred, was to portray them as contrasting identities and play with the conflicts brought by their relationship. Actually, at that stage, I thought about them in terms of space: Fred was to signal North, whereas Pat the South. Nevertheless, as the narrative developed this dual opposition did not work and was therefore abandoned, even if some traces remain, as well as other aspects to which I'll refer to in Part III of this commentary. Now, I realise that such an idea was impossible to carry on, as it involved conceiving space merely as a sphere defined by binary oppositions and hence a very restrictive notion of space.

Yet, both Pat and Fred present themselves as very different characters, concerning their imagining and living in/of space.

Whereas Pat tends more significantly towards the notion of space as 'representational space', as defined by Lefebvre (1991) [Permission to reproduce from Lefebvre's work has been granted by Emma Willcox, Permissions Assistant, John Wiley & Sons Ltd], that is, a space associated with the imaginary, the utopian, which is constructed and constructs us simultaneously, in an unplanned and aimlessly drifting way, embracing change as it comes, Fred embodies mainly the concepts of 'spatial practice' and 'representations of space' (Lefebvre, 1991), in other words, of spatial dimensions concerning the physical and social production and reproduction of action and the space related to mental concepts associated with knowledge, be it either academic/professional (like the ones manipulated by architects and geographers, for instance) or to the experience and thought by the general public.

At this point, it is not only pertinent to present Lefebvre's concepts of space, but also to stress that this triad he puts forward has a 'dialectical relationship', to use his words, and, therefore, between each of the notions there is an inevitable

interconnectedness. The triad, Lefebvre set forward is the following:

1 *Spatial practice*, which embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society's relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of *competence* and a specific level of *performance*⁴.

2 *Representations of space*, which are tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to 'frontal' relations.

3 *Representational spaces*, embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less as a code of space than as a code of representational spaces). (Lefebvre 1991, p. 33)

This triad is more succinctly named by Lefebvre as 'the triad of the perceived, the conceived and the lived' (Lefebvre 1991, p. 39), respectively.

Similarly, Harvey and Soja draw on this description presented by Lefebvre, even if under different denominations. Following the same order, Harvey (1990, pp. 218, 219) calls them 'material practices', 'representations of space' and 'spaces of representation' [Permission to reproduce from Harvey's work has been granted by Verity Butler, Permissions Assistant, John Wiley & Sons Ltd] and Soja (1996, pp. 74, 78, 81) renames them as '*firstspace epistemologies*', '*secondspace epistemologies*' and '*thirdspace epistemologies*' [Permission to reproduce from Soja's work has been granted by Emma Willcox, Permissions Assistant, John Wiley & Sons Ltd].

On a different level, it is relevant to add Massey's study (2005), since her propositions take a step further, in the sense that she stresses the interrelations, but also, more importantly, multiplicity and an ever ongoing process as features of space, demonstrating a postmodern view of space. At the beginning of her book *For Space*, her propositions illustrate this argument:

First, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny. ...*Second*, that we understand space as the

⁴ Note by the author: "These terms are borrowed from Noam Chomsky, but this should not be taken as implying any subordination of the theory of space to linguistics."

sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity. Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space.... *Third*, that we recognise space as always under construction. Precisely because space in this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out; it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as simultaneity of stories-so-far. (Massey 2005, p. 7) [Permission to reproduce from Massey's work has been granted by Valérie Bernard, Permissions Assistant, SAGE Publications Ltd].

Another crucial aspect linked with the above descriptions of space is the consideration that their concern with space does not entail a dismissal of the time dimension. As Massey pertinently observes:

On this reading neither time nor space is reducible to the other; they are distinct. They are, however, co-implicated. On the side of space, there is the integral temporality of a dynamic simultaneity. On side of time, there is the necessary production of change through practices of interrelation. (Massey 2005, p. 55)

Hence, she often prefers to use the expression time-space, against just space, concluding that:

Space is as much a challenge as is time. Neither space nor time can provide a haven from the world. If time presents us with the opportunities of change and (as some would see it) the terror of death, then space presents us with the social in the widest sense. The challenge of our constitutive interrelatedness and thus our collective implication in the outcomes of that interrelatedness; the radical contemporaneity of an ongoing multiplicity of others, human and non-human; and the ongoing and ever-specific project of the practices through which that sociability is to be configured.(Massey 2005, p. 195)

In this dissertation, I opt for Lefebvre's nomenclature as I find it more expressive.

1. Fred

Contrary to Pat, Fred's travelling is motivated by a project and has a goal, a destination to reach. He travels in order to gather traces, evidences, information and also to experience in/ the places where the woman writer, Carole Lynn, has lived and passed to write her biography, according to a predefined itinerary, revealing 'perceived' and 'conceived' space. Pat, instead, travels to move, not only not knowing exactly why, where and for what, but also unwilling and uninterested in seeking a reason, direction or meaning, showing her personification of 'lived' space.

The problem for Fred is that, despite all his efforts to move following plans and maps and having a destination in mind, he finds himself carried away through diversions, due to the elusive nature of the person who is his research subject, Carole Lynn. Hence, instead of a journey progressing through an itinerary, he finds himself in a labyrinthian journey, where he loses his bearings and unsettles his identity. Moreover, his unbalance is deepened because of the mirror effect that he sees between the two women, Pat and Carole, the dead and the live one. So that Fred slips into the realm of 'lived' space.

The moment Fred looks at Pat and sees the picture of Carole Lynn he feels unsettled. Suddenly, the space of the past superimposes upon the space of the present or vice-versa, the dead emerges through the living and another space is produced - a space where Fred cannot locate himself. Then, he suffers uncertainty and is unsure, at certain moments, which direction to take. Both women haunt him and for a while he feels seduced to follow the living woman, Pat, instead of the dead one. Still, quite soon, after that first impulse, his instincts seem to reveal Pat to him as the image of the water in a mirage and he turns his back to the intensity of that image, as it blurs his vision. From this point onwards, it looks as if each one, Pat and Fred, will go their separate ways.

Once again, the feeling of ending looms in the novel.

Rather than an ending though, what occurs is an opening of new trajectories for Fred and Pat, as a result of their first encounter. Brought together by a ‘collision’ in a position (position, understood here as an element of space), made possible by chance, ‘the element of chaos’, as Massey puts it, defining it in these terms:

The chance of space lies within the constant formation of spatial configurations ... It is in the happenstance juxtaposition, in the unforeseen tearing apart, in the internal irruption, in the impossibility of closure, in the finding yourself next door to alterity, in precisely that possibility of being surprised ...that chance of space is to be found. (Massey 2005, p. 116)

Once Fred and Pat are put together by chance, and even if their first encounter is only an apparently fleeting and ephemeral one, their lives are going to be affected by that first meeting. This meeting will change both their paths in a way that they cannot foresee at that point of the narrative. Moreover, chance will end by playing a determining role for Pat, as I will demonstrate later.

For a while, Fred disappears from view in the novel, but only to return later, apparently by chance. We find him, two chapters later, in the same airport as Pat. And once more he is unsettled. He can hardly believe in this coincidence and he finds himself unable to communicate with Pat. This scene reveals, on one hand, that they are thrown together as a signal either of fate or of some covert order, pointing towards the possibility of creating a relationship; on the other, due to Pat’s refusal or inability to acknowledge Fred, shows that this meeting seems after all unproductive, almost as if they had not really met, in the end. This situation leaves Fred, as probably many readers, utterly confused. No wonder the titles of the chapters where Fred appears in the first half of the novel are ‘Where are we?’ and ‘In the Air’.

In spite of the emptiness and apparent unproductiveness in the outcome of these encounters between the two characters, those contacts both reinforce the difference existing between them and the bond linking them. It is a weak bond due to Pat, and I

will come back to this point when I focus on her character. The interrelation is emphasised when we have Fred looking at a map and reading a guidebook about Jordan, where Pat is.

Unlike Pat, Fred resists travelling. Again, he fights his desire to follow her, counterbalancing it with the fulfilment of the needs that put him on the road – his purpose and goal of his journey. However, there is not a winner or a loser in this opposition between needs and desire, for although he does not go to Jordan he acts as if he is going, in the sense that by reading the guidebook about Jordan and looking at map of Jordan he is like someone who is preparing for a trip, but, more than that, Fred also puts himself in Jordan by imagining beyond the map to the point of seeing Pat. So a spark of his desire is satisfied, emerging through and bridging the gap between him and Pat. Actually, he expresses his pleasure about this achievement and even declares himself a winner (against Pat). This spark only comes through rigid representations of space – a map and a guidebook- nevertheless.

Maps and guidebooks offer an order in the world, as Massey says:

It [the map] tells of an order in things. With the map we can locate ourselves and find our way. And we know where others are as well. So, yes, this map can set me dreaming, let my imagination run. But it also offers me order; lets me get a handle on the world. (Massey 2005, p. 106)

And here we find the reappearance of the irretrievable gap, or distance, between Fred and Pat. Whereas Fred resorts to guidebooks and plans for his travelling, Pat scarcely uses these tools and she is not capable of using them properly. Whilst Fred strives to satisfy mainly his needs, Pat moves just at the mercy of her desire: an unbridled desire, it seems.

However, this gap, distance between the two characters will not remain, or is, irretrievable. At the beginning, it presents itself very much as an overwhelming difference, but in fact it has already started to change in a way that it points out more to

an approximation than to a dispersal movement, or, in other words, to the interrelation between 'perceived', 'conceived' and 'lived' space.

Now, in Jordan, Pat is moving in space not just through her body, as she was in the first two chapters, but she crosses space by car. This change entails several consequences and will originate changes in space (see the car crash in chapter 6 of *A*). At the moment, though, let's just say that the use of a car involves a closure of space, similar to, but not exactly the same, the 'incarceration' that Certeau (1998) refers to when speaking about travelling by train. In a car we are enclosed in a machine, which separates us from the space outside. Hence, just to mention here two of the consequences entailed by the switch to the travelling by car, Pat creates a barrier between space and her body and also makes her motion dependent on a machine. With this, her desire starts to appear not so unbridled, as by using the car she has to stick to the communications network grid of roads, created to serve, distribute and impose a political and economic power. In short, now her paths are closer to the rigidity of space represented on maps. Roads because constructed by man are much more easily and readily reproduced on maps – road maps, making it easier to have 'a handle on the world' (see Massey 2005) and paradoxically too for the world, that is power, to have a handle on you. So, Pat's freedom and travelling is being dwindled and becoming closer to Fred's travelling. That's why he says he is winning: 'He [Fred] knew where she [Pat] was, he could see her. He was winning' (chapter 4, p. 95).

At the same time, Fred is going to travel for the first time 'without having booked any ticket or even clearly thinking what was he going to do or where he was heading' (*A*, p. 102). Furthermore, Fred ends up in India, a destination which proved to be relevant on the road and not at the start in his planning of the journey. It was only in Mozambique that he met someone who pointed that direction to him. This way, we see that space is able to create new spaces. Even if, Fred had already an indication that India

might be a possible point, at the time he was preparing his trip, because he didn't trust the source (a deranged man), this destination was not properly planned.

With this movement on the part of Fred, by accepting what chance brings to him, he therefore comes closer to Pat's way of travelling or of 'lived' space. And India will prove to be a crucial position for Fred. Not only for his work, his research project, but also a place where he is going to be completely diverted from the trajectory he had devised, leading him to a space with nothing to do with his purpose and goal - to Tunisia, in search of Pat. Better yet, he goes after a person who may well not be Pat, as the printout (where Erik discovers an appeal to people to identify who Pat is) just mentions the person as Pat S. through an engraving in Pat's ring. However, Fred does not swerve his direction like this alone. He needs Erik, his friend, to coax him. And Fred needs much persuasion to embark on such an unforeseen and unexpected journey. Fred is unable to do it by himself and for himself. As a result, Erik in a sense replaces Fred and takes over the narrative. So, Fred, once more, leaves the scene, to return only at the end of the novel, in the final chapter.

When he does, curiously enough, it looks as if Fred and Pat swapped places in space. Fred is still on the move, whereas Pat has stopped and fixed herself to one spot. While Fred seems to personify mainly 'lived' space, Pat looks as if she is embodying now 'perceived' and 'conceived' space.

Nevertheless, this is an illusory swap. Although, both Pat and Fred have changed, they remain in different positions in space, without a space to share, to juxtapose or live together. The change these two characters underwent approximates them in the end. Fred feels fascinated by the space where Pat has located herself, as it reminds him of his familiar and original space – the snow, the cold, the forest, the remoteness are signifiers of his homeland (Norway). On the way to Pat's house, we find Fred absorbed in the 'magic' that the space exerts on him. He agrees with Pat's choice

of the place she lives in. So, instead of confrontation between these two characters, what we find is a mutual understanding in terms of space. Moreover, Fred feels guilty for invading Pat's space, her house. He knows that that space is hers and seems to comprehend the reasons for her not wanting to share it with anyone else. Another example of this understanding can be seen when, at Pat's home, the characters are discussing a part of Fred's work. Fred demonstrates interest in listening to Pat and expresses his understanding of her point of view, even if in the end we don't know if he is going to opt for her opinion or the opinion of the other characters. Also, at the very end, Fred's last sentence- 'She [Pat] must have had a bad time' (A, p. 217) reveals that he perceives reasons which motivate Pat's way of life, instead of dismissing her as a nut case, a marginal being that should be excluded, relegated to a space apart from society. Likewise, in the final chapter, Pat does not display anymore her former hostility towards him. Quite the opposite, she shows herself to be grateful to him for having kept her timetable a secret between them. It is as if they signed a pact, a shared space, even if tiny and transient, after all.

Despite that, and also due to the nature of this shared space, the understanding these two characters reach is not enough to bridge their differences and divergences to the point of being able to create a new space where the two together can construct and build upon. All they achieve is the capacity to communicate through a passageway, a "meditational or transitory way" (see Lefebvre 1991, p. 363). A communication that is possible not through an articulated language, but only through body language, which to borrow Lefebvre's words could be put like this:

a 'sense': an organ that perceives a direction that may be conceived, and directly lived movement progressing towards the horizon. (Lefebvre 1991, p. 423)

2. Pat

Pat, the protagonist of *Away*, appears at the beginning of the novel as almost nothing but a body completely wrapped in clothes and imprisoned on a moving bus. So, right from the start this character hides herself behind a shroud of secrecy. We don't know where she comes from, the departure point; where she is going, the direction; or where she aims to go, her destiny.

Only further on we are explicitly told about the determination/desire she has to cross space and understand that she intends to do it through the movements of her body.

Hence, at this point, Pat embodies 'a representational space'. And so to emphasise the primacy of this space and simultaneously of this character, the voice of the narrator, concerning Pat, is extremely reduced. To restrict this narrator's voice to a bare minimum was an intentional device and also a risky one. With this, I intended to heighten the experience of space, of 'lived' space mainly through the acts of the protagonist. The mediation of the narrator inevitably creates a representation of space, an interpretation of space that I wanted to minimize, so that a 'representational space' could predominantly emerge. That is, the goal was to avoid as much as possible to have space merely as scenery against which a story develops and even more than just an element that points out indicia or signification. The aim was to have space as an active realm derived from the body, as Lefebvre considers:

The whole of (social) space proceeds from the body, even though it so metamorphoses the body that it may forget it altogether – even though it may separate itself so radically from the body as to kill it. The genesis of a far-away order can be accounted for only on the basis of the order that is nearest to us – namely, the order of body. Within the body itself, spatially considered, the successive levels constituted by the senses (from the sense of smell to sight, treated as different within a differentiated field) prefigure the layers of social space and their interconnections. The passive body (the senses) and the active body (the labour) converge in space. (Lefebvre 1991, p. 405)

Thus it is the movement of Pat's body, the physical body that constitutes itself as an essential feature of the narrative (as I will explore in more detail in chapter 3 of this commentary).

At first, Pat moves on the ground solely through her body. In this immediacy between space and body, it is as though she starts from scratch, like the nomadic peasants of the old days. This movement marks a desire to return to an original space from where she can create a new identity. Also, because she walks in an open and vast space, she frees herself from the power exerted by a city or an inhabited place, where there is already an order imposed and imposing on the possibility of trajectories.

Furthermore, due to the fact that she was a dancer and continues to value her body, it is necessary that she experiences through her body the change she is determined to undergo. However, she doesn't know what direction to follow or what her goal is. She merely follows her desire, as she says to Fred: 'You know, people often say, Oh I wish I could go away, but they don't move. I heard myself saying that. So, I packed and took off. That's all'. (A, p. 34) In her case, I agree with Lefebvre:

Specific needs have specific objects. Desire, on the other hand, has no particular object, except for a space where it has full play: a beach, a place of festivity, the space of dream. (Lefebvre 1991, p. 353)

And what space could be more appropriate for a 'full play' than the desert?

The desert is a natural extension of the inner silence of the body. If humanity's language, technology, and buildings are an extension of its constructive faculties, the desert alone is an extension of its capacity for absence, the ideal schema of humanity's disappearance. (Baudrillard 1989, p. 68) [Permission to reproduce from Baudrillard's work has been granted by Cristiana Petru-Stefanescu, Contracts Manager, VERSO].

Hence, the desert is the space that first lures Pat. Here the paths are almost indiscernible, if and when they are at all visible, and constantly changing. Also, in the desert it is hard to orientate yourself. Pat loses herself in the first chapter, as will happen later, since she lacks the sense of both direction and orientation.

Travelling through the desert has a long tradition in literature as a space that

magically attracts writers and explorers. Stories narrating journeys have been produced since, it seems, the human-being has been able to write until nowadays. In 1990, Arita Baaijens, a Dutch explorer, decided to quit her job to trek across the desert alone by camel, because after a few expeditions she had done in the desert she couldn't stand to stay at home in Holland 'where human lives are governed by the minute hand of the clock' (Baaijens 2008, p. 19) [Permission to reproduce from Baaijens' work has been granted by The American University in Cairo Press, Mark Linz, Director] and couldn't bear the longing for the desert: 'I missed the horizon, the caress of the wind, fussing around with camels, and the languid rhythm of life.' (Baaijens 2008, p. 19) Once in the desert she finds out that:

the longing for solitude and a life on the edge had not been an illusion. Heat, cold, thirst, discomfort, and exhaustion did not bother me, and giving up my resistance to things I had no power to change had a beneficial effect on my spirit. My life now centred solely on camels and on finding water. The world beyond simply did not exist. It was glorious to walk for hours on end, occasionally looking back to check on the camels. (Baaijens 2008, p. 19)

The desire to wander in the desert and to write about that journey can be traced a long way back. As an example, it is sufficient to mention stories collected in *The One Thousand and One Nights*, as Richard van Leeuwen reminds us in his book *The Thousand and One Nights – Space, travel and transformation* (2007), when referring only to the Arabic context where to travel was endowed with

The metaphorical and social significance of the pilgrimage, as a source of collective awareness, as a spatial reflection of the contact with the Divine, and as a source of status, is evident. The metaphorical meaning of the journey was further developed by mystics, whose theories often took the sacred topographies or discourses of travel. For them, the desert was endowed with a whole set of meanings, not only related to asceticism, initiation, and inner struggles, but also to emptiness and purification. The desert was not only a space without any ordering, but also a space without the semiology of history, and therefore a place where a complete isolation from the world could be achieved. (Leeuwen 2007, p. 20)

Thus, since a narrative such as *The One Thousand and One Nights*, where we find texts

possibly originated as far as the 8th and 9th centuries together with apocryphal stories provided by copyists and others throughout the following centuries, we have accounts of journeys made in the deserts. Such is the case of another book dated from the 14th century written by Ibn Battutah – *The Marvels of Metropolises and the Wonders of Wandering*, best known as *Travels*. Tim Mackintosh-Smith in *Travels with a Tangerine – A Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah* (2001) himself embarks on a journey to track down Ibn Battutah’s world. As Tim Mackintosh-Smith confesses by reading Ibn Battutah’s book:

Towards the end of the book it had become so visible, so vivid, that I could slip in and out of it – a virtual fourteenth century. And it had become addictive. What would I do when I finished? I could start at the beginning again. But I knew that cerebral travel was not enough: from those very first words – ‘My departure from Tangier, my birthplace...’ my feet had been itching for the physical, visitable past. The more I read of the *Travels*, the stronger became the itch. There was only one way to cure it. (Tim Mackintosh-Smith 2001, p. 11) [Permission to reproduce from MacKintosh-Smith’s work has been granted by the publisher John Murray (Publishers) Limited].

And he explains just how overwhelming not only the book, but also Ibn Battutah’s travels had been:

He had seen a huge swathe of the known world, visiting over forty countries on the modern map and travelling some 75,000 miles by horse, mule, camel, ox-wagon, junk, dhow, raft, and on foot – around three times the distance Marco Polo claimed to have covered. He had got as far north as the Volga and as far south as Tanzania. He had surfed the scholarly internet, meeting Moroccans in China and savants from Samarkand in Granada. His itinerary was as irrational as that of a New Zealand backpacker. (Tim Mackintosh-Smith 2001, p. 9)

The urge to travel, particularly through the desert, though not exclusively, and to write an account of the journey seems therefore to have been throughout all times a compulsion felt by countless writers and explorers. Some travelled in order to gain knowledge, such as Fred in *Away*; others to perform a duty, or at least that was their justification (such as T. E. Lawrence) and also those who admit the need to move only because an irresistible desire calls out to them. Like Pat in the creative project, they avow simply an irrepressible desire to travel across the desert that they themselves

cannot explain. And here is pertinent to cite Miguel Sousa Tavares (2007), as this passage illustrates both this magnetism for the desert, as well as Pat's desire:

I went eleven times to the Sahara desert. In the last years, I've been at least once a year, like others go to Fátima or others to Paris. So, the devotion has become like a kind of obsession, to the eyes of friends or strangers: frequently they ask me what do I look for there and what do I find. And to this question, so simple and so vast, I usually give one of my favourite answers: I don't look for anything and you don't find what you're looking for, but what you encounter ... What do you seek in a desert? By definition, nothing. The desert is the absence of everything. After all, that is, the secret of this strange attraction: the absence of everything matches the beginning of everything, like a blank page. (Tavares 2007, pp. 131, 132, my translation [⁵]) [Permission to reproduce from Tavares's work has been granted by Marcelo Teixeira (editor), Oficina do Livro].

Likewise, famous writers and explorers speak about and experience the same feeling. I will limit my references to just a few, as this is an issue vast enough to explore by itself in another research project, if not in more than one.

Therefore, I'll focus mainly on T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Wilfred Thesiger's work *Desert, Marsh & Mountain* (from which I'll draw on the part about the desert) and Paul Bowles' narrative, *The Sheltering Sky*.

At the start of *SP*, in the Introduction, Lawrence clearly states the nature of his account:

In these pages the history is not of the Arab movement, but of me in it. It

⁵ **Fátima**: village and sanctuary, central Portugal. Fátima was named for a 12th-century Moorish princess and since 1917 has been one of the greatest Marian shrines in the world, visited by thousands of pilgrims annually. On May 13, 1917, and in each subsequent month until October of that year, three young peasant children, Lucia dos Santos and her cousins Francisco and Jacinta Marto, reportedly saw a woman who identified herself as the Lady of the Rosary. On October 13, a crowd (generally estimated at about 70,000) gathered at Fátima and witnessed a "miraculous solar phenomenon" immediately after the lady had appeared to the children. After initial opposition, the Bishop of Leiria on October 13, 1930, accepted the children's visions as the appearance of the Virgin Mary; in the same year papal indulgences were granted to pilgrims. The content of the devotion includes frequent recitation of the rosary and devotion to the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary. 'Encyclopædia Britannica Online', 2009. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/202573/Fatima>> (accessed on 23 June 2009).

is a narrative of daily life, mean happenings, little people. Here are no lessons for the world, no disclosures to shock peoples. (Lawrence 1997, p. 6) [Permission to reproduce from Lawrence's work has been granted by Derek Wright, Wordsworth Editions Ltd].

Hence, right from the beginning of *SP*, we are told that his purpose is to tell a story about himself embedded in a larger picture of the Arab movement. And the word movement is a clue which points out the major role that space takes on his narrative. Also, he stresses there are only 'little people'. A few lines below, he is even more precise, concerning the role of space:

We were fond together, because of the sweep of the open places, the taste of the winds, the sunlight, and the hopes in which we worked. (Lawrence 1997, p. 6)

In what regards people on the move, despite the diversity of tribes and the assertion of certain individuals (which is an important element in the Arab Revolt), there is a collective sense that prevails. Lawrence complains about the lack of privacy as will Thesiger:

A weariness of the desert was living always in company, each of the party hearing all that was said and seeing all that was done by the others day and night. Among the Arabs there were no distinctions, traditional or natural, except for the unconscious power given a famous sheikh by virtue of his accomplishment; and they taught me that no man could be their leader except he ate the ranks' food, wore their clothes, lived level with them, and yet appeared better in himself. (Lawrence 1997, p. 144)

I was accustomed to some degree of privacy; here I had none. (Thesiger 1995, p. 35) [Permission to reproduce from Thesiger's work has been granted by Curtis Brown Group Ltd, London on behalf of the Estate of Wilfred Thesiger].

It is in this sense that Lawrence declares that there will be 'little people', although in fact several characters are finely and accurately described. Moreover, by his own inclusion as equal amidst the Arabs he belittles his role. On one hand, he does it by adopting to wear Arab clothes, to eat like them, to walk bare-footed as they do and 'to imitate their mental foundation' (Lawrence 1997, p. 14) up to the point of abandoning his 'English self' (Lawrence 1997, p. 14), even if he acknowledges, similarly as

Thesiger, that he doesn't delude himself thinking that he has an Arab self: 'At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin: it was an affectation only.' (Lawrence 1997, p. 14). However, he admits that:

If I could not assume their character, I could conceal my own, and pass among them without evident friction, neither a discord nor a critic but an unnoticed influence. (Lawrence 1997, p. 13)

Then, he echoes

The Beduin of the desert, born and grown up in it, had embraced with all his soul this nakedness too harsh for volunteers, for the reason, felt but inarticulate, that there he found himself indubitably free. He lost material ties, comforts, all superfluities and other complications to achieve a personal liberty which haunted starvation and death. He saw no virtue in poverty herself: he enjoyed the little vices and luxuries – coffee, fresh water, women – which he could still preserve. In his life he had air and winds, sun and light, open spaces and a great emptiness. There was no human effort, no fecundity in Nature: just the heaven above and the unspotted earth beneath. (Lawrence 1997, p. 23)

So he too disposes himself and not only his 'own self' but also of the commodities of goods. All he has is, thus, space. Similarly, Pat discards herself from all her objects, property and relationships. She travels light carrying only the bare minimum she needs and then, when the things are of no use anymore, she throws them away.

On the other hand, the desert not only imposes itself as a space where material possessions have to be kept minimal, it also demands emptiness of mind. Hence, throughout the advance of the Arab movement, Lawrence just keeps going across the landscape barely expressing any thoughts. His only thoughts during their travelling are the ones related to strategies and tactics of the Arab Revolt. It's only when he stops that 'thoughts built themselves up' (Lawrence 1997, p. 318).

But the desert is not an empty page or a barren space as Miguel Sousa Tavares states. No space is. Lawrence knows it:

Men have looked upon the desert as barren land, the free holding of whoever chose; but in fact each hill and valley in it had a man who was its acknowledged owner and would quickly assert the right of his family or clan to it, against aggression. Even the wells and the trees had their masters, who allowed men to make firewood of the one and drink of the

other freely, as much as was required for their need, but who would instantly check anyone trying to turn property to account and to exploit it or its products among others for private benefit. (Lawrence 1997, p. 69)

Therefore both the emptiness and freedom that the desert seems to offer are only an illusion, as the mirages that emerge from the desert. Thus, we can conclude that the desert not only cancels thinking, it is a space that forces the body to create a heightened physical relationship with it, due to the hardships it demands of the body. As a result, the body prevails over mind. Often, Lawrence speaks of the physical exertion that the terrain demands from the body:

After dark we crawled for three hours, reaching the top of a sand-ridge. There we slept thankfully, after a bad day of burning wind, dust blizzards, and drifting sand which stung our inflamed faces, and at times in the greater gusts, wrapped the sight of our road from us and drove our complaining camels up and down. (Lawrence 1997, p. 242)

Furthermore *SP* is filled with almost innumerable descriptions of the desert, the features of which are determinant for the movements of the Arab Revolt, as for the survival of the human-beings.

Movement does not only come from the action performed by the bodies, but also out of non-human organisms as Massey reminds us. Continents, plants, animals, the earth are on the move too, since space can be defined as a realm constituting itself through a 'sense of engagement within a multiplicity' (Massey 2005, p. 61), and always in a 'continuous production and reconfiguration of heterogeneity in all its forms – diversity, subordination, conflicting interests' (Massey 2005, p. 61). Multiple factors, other than human intervention, also alter space, such as, for example the ones provoked by weather conditions.

Even colour and texture, as Deleuze considers referring to *SP*, is movement. This is visible, for instance, in a passage where Lawrence describes the entrance in the Valley of Rumm:

We looked up on the left to a long wall of rock, sheering in the like a

thousand-foot wave towards the middle of the valley; whose other arc, to the right, was an opposing line of steep, red broken hills. We rode up the slope, crashing our way through the brittle undergrowth.

As we went, the brushwood grouped itself into thickets whose massed leaves took on a stronger tint of green, the purer for their contrasting setting in plots of open sand of a cheerful delicate pink. (Lawrence 1997, p. 341)

Here in Rumm particularly, as Deleuze says:

And color is movement, no less than the line; it is deviation, displacement, sliding, obliquity. Color and line are born together and meld into each other. Sandstone or basalt landscapes are made up of colors and lines, but they are always in movement, the broad strokes being colored in coats, and the colors being drawn in broad strokes. Forms of thorns and blisters follow upon each other, while at the same time colors are given names, from pure transparency to hopeless gray. (Deleuze 1998, p. 116) [Permission to reproduce from Deleuze's work has been granted by Cristiana Petru-Stefanescu, Foreign Rights, VERSO].

In this landscape the human-being feels almost as if he is nothing:

Again we felt how Rumm inhibited excitement by its serene beauty. Such overwhelming greatness dwarfed us, stripped off the cloak of laughter in which we had ridden over the jocund flats.

Night came down, and the valley became a mind-landscape. The invisible cliffs boded as presences; imagination tried to piece out the plan of their battlements by tracing the dark pattern they cut in the canopy of stars. (Lawrence 1997, pp. 365, 366)

Moreover the magnetism of space is so strongly felt that there's nothing but the desire of the body of melting with space:

The world became very good. A faint shower last evening had brought earth and sky together in the mellow day. The colours of the cliffs and trees and soil were so pure, so vivid, that we ached for real contact with them, and our tethered inability to carry anything of them away. (Lawrence 1997, pp. 385)

However, as Deleuze pertinently observes *SP* is not just an account of space and movement. In fact, he concludes that

There are thus two books in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, two books that are intertwined with each other: the first concerns the images projected into the real, leading a life of their own; the second concerns the mind that contemplates them, given over to its own abstractions. (Deleuze 1998, p. 119)

And clarifying, he adds:

Abstract ideas are not dead things, they are entities that inspire powerful

spatial dynamisms; in the desert they are intimately linked up with the projected images – things, bodies, or beings. (Deleuze 1998, p. 119)

So Lawrence, driven by the passion to contribute towards the building of a new nation, because of space ends up by realising that his dream entails a high price – the double betrayal of the Arabs and the English. He confesses to being particularly ashamed of betraying the Arabs, due to their mutual relationship. Therefore, in a sense, he sees himself as the Arabs, whom he describes as ‘a people of starts’ (Lawrence 1997, p. 26), by admitting that

There was a special attraction in beginnings, which drove me into everlasting endeavour to free my personality from accretions and project it on a fresh medium, that my curiosity to see its naked shadow might be fed. The invisible self appeared to be reflected clearest in the still water of another man’s yet incurious mind. (Lawrence 1997, p. 563)

But since he knows that he has not acquired an Arab self and that he has given up his English self, at the end he refuses ‘every honour offered’ (Lawrence 1997, p. 560) and confesses: ‘Indeed, the truth was I did not like the ‘myself’ I could see and hear.’ (Lawrence 1997, p. 563) He is only engaged in the process and not interested in the achievements gained: ‘When a thing was in my reach, I no longer wanted it; my delight lay in the desire.’ (Lawrence 1997, p. 562) Because, as Deleuze concludes:

Lawrence’s undertaking is a cold and concerted destruction of the ego, carried to its limit. (Deleuze 1998, p. 117)

Likewise Pat’s character displays this compulsion for beginnings and obstinacy in freeing herself from the ‘chains of being’, to paraphrase Deleuze. Hence, her constant veering of direction. Nonetheless, contrary to Lawrence, Pat cannot endure to follow what she starts for very long, as she seems to lack the sense of abstraction, or in other words, to have detached herself from the power conferred by thinking. For her the body is the primal element, whereas for Lawrence the body is an entity of which he is ashamed and despises. Even if it is the space of the desert that imposes itself on the body, through experiencing hunger, fatigue and illness, it, at the same time, enhances the power and value of the body by thrusting it forward.

Turning now to Wilfred Thesiger and his desert writing we can find many similarities with Lawrence and thus I will refer to *Desert, Marsh & Mountain* briefly.

Thesiger, as Lawrence, accompanies the Arabs as an equal, but not thinking of himself as one of them:

I wore their clothes – they would never have gone with me otherwise – and went bare-footed as they did. (Thesiger 1995, p. 36)

But though the easy equality of our relationship satisfied me, I did not delude myself that I could be one of them. (Thesiger 1995, p. 51)

Also Thesiger's descriptions of the desert space reveal the constant change and movement inherent to this space through colours and textures:

At first the dunes were separate mountains of brick-red sand, rising above ash-white gypsum flats ringed with the vivid green of salt-bushes. Later they were even higher – five hundred feet or more – and honey-coloured. (Thesiger 1995, p. 51)

However, opposite to Lawrence, who embraced a mission, Thesiger is an explorer who engages to live and cross the desert mainly by desire, as he states:

I have sometimes wondered what strange compulsion has driven me from my own land to wander in the deserts of the east, living year after year among alien peoples, often in great hardship, with no thought of material reward. (Thesiger 1995, p. 1)

Thus, in this sense, Pat's wandering is much more close to Thesiger's travels, as she is herself not moved by duty or indeed any aim.

Another point relevant in Thesiger's account lies in his sorrow for a different change in the nature of space introduced by the use of cars:

There are no riding camels in Arabia today, only cars, lorries, aeroplanes and helicopters. (Thesiger 1995, p. 78)

I was in the desert but insulated from it by the jeep in which I travelled. Had we stumbled on the legendary oasis of Zarzura, whose discovery had been the dream of every Libyan explorer; I would have felt but little interest. (Thesiger 1995, p. 27)

The same happens in *Away* with Pat. The moment she crosses the desert by jeep, firstly, she detaches herself from space and then her accident provokes the total separation between her body and open space, precluding her complete isolation at the end of the

novel. Furthermore, the car accident entails the severing of her body, without which she is unable to engage with space.

The Sheltering Sky by Paul Bowles, particularly in ‘Book Three – The Sky’, narrating the story of Kit after she left her dead husband to travel through the desert is relevant here. I have used the same situation in my creative project. First, Kit as Pat, embark themselves on a journey in the desert after their husbands die. Then, progressively Kit realises that now it is her body, not her mind, which takes charge of her movements and ultimately of her destiny.

The crucial scene in *SS* signalling the emergence of the major role the body will play comes actually just before ‘Book Three – The Sky’, when Kit finds herself before a pool. There, in the oasis, the narrator says:

She stood staring at the calm dark surface of water; straightway she found it impossible to know whether she had thought of bathing just before or just after seeing the pool. Whichever it was, there was the pool. She reached through the aperture in the crumbling wall and set down her bag before climbing across the pile of dirt that lay in her way. Once in the garden she found herself pulling off her clothes. She felt a vague surprise that her actions should go on so far ahead of her consciousness of them. Every movement she made seemed the perfect expression of lightness and grace. (Bowles 2006, p. 262, 263) [Permission to reproduce from Bowles’ work has been granted by Davara Bennett, The Wylie Agency (UK), Ltd.].

It is at this point that Kit realises that the joy and freedom she feels by acting solely according her body’s desires derives from space:

She felt a strange intensity being born within her. As she looked about the quiet garden she had the impression that for the first time since her childhood she was seeing objects clearly. Life was suddenly there, she was in it, not looking through the window at it. The dignity that came from feeling a part of its power and grandeur, that was a familiar sensation, but it was years ago that she had last known it. (Bowles 2006, p. 262, 263)

Then, in ‘Book Three – The Sky’, when Kit starts walking in the desert, she has ceased to be only the ‘watcher [who] suspects it is the same day returned once again’ (Bowles 2006, p. 286) to be a participant in the space dynamism because for her there were ‘no doubts whatever about its being a new and wholly separate day.’ (Bowles

2006, p. 286) This is why, immediately after, taking upon the chance provided by the appearance of a passing caravan, Kit suddenly knows that she is going to be part of this caravan:

Even as she saw these two men she knew that she would accompany them, (...) (Bowles 2006, p. 286).

And later she actively becomes involved in a sexual relationship with those two men without questioning it or thinking about it:

At this point, apart from a gnawing desire to be close to Belqassim all the time, it would have been hard for her to know what she did feel. It was so long since she had canalized her thoughts by speaking aloud, and she had grown accustomed to acting without the consciousness of being in the act. She did only the things she found herself already doing. (Bowles 2006, p. 296)

Further ahead in the novel, when Kit manages to escape from the prison Belqassim had put her in, Amar, another man with whom she makes love says:

Here we say that life is a cliff, and you must never turn around and look back when you're climbing. It makes you sick. (Bowles 2006, p. 332)

With these words, he encapsulates Kit's life, after her husband died, since from that moment she keeps moving to the point of disappearing completely at the end of the novel, as if engulfed by space. So, even when physically restrained, as she is in the final pages of the story by a man sent by the American consul and then, entrapped in car with Miss Ferry, working for the consulate in charge of sending Kit back to the States, Kit is able, once again, to flee away as if evaporating. At the end of the narrative we only know that the two men in the cab where she was must have realised that Kit escaped as

They looked inside, glanced up and down the sidewalk; then they spoke questioningly to the driver, who shrugged his shoulders. (Bowles 2006, p. 342)

After that the reader is only told that 'at that moment a crowded street-car was passing by' (Bowles 2006, p. 342) and left with a description of the trajectory of the street-car without any reference to what happened to Kit.

Hence we can conclude that the novel presents the reader an open ending stressed by the endless constitution of space. In this sense, albeit the difference between

Kit and Pat, concerning their opposite engagement with people, both characters are portrayed as embedded in space, moving without apparent reason but following their bodies' desires.

And if the desire, Pat's desire, has no 'particular object', if the desert is a space associated with a deep and undefined mystery where both nothing and everything is possible, it is fitting that the first spaces that Pat walks on are deserted spaces. The bareness, aridness, apparent emptiness and vastness of the desert reflect not only Pat's desire, but also her state of emotional numbness. As well, it evidences the move of stripping herself practically down to the body, to an original state, as if she could turn herself into a weightless being, as Baudrillard observes: 'Everything disappears before that vision. Even the body, by an ensuing effect of undernourishment, takes on a transparent form, lightness near to a complete disappearance' (Baudrillard 1989, p. 28). The desert is the perfect space, as Baudrillard (1989) mentions, to disappear, to escape the overwhelming power of western civilisation and culture. Stretching further this point, I borrow again Baudrillard's words when he says that: 'The desert is a sublime form that banishes all sociality, all sentimentality, all sexuality.' (Baudrillard 1989, p. 71). Additionally, Baudrillard views the desert as capable of silencing time:

But the desert is more than merely a space from which all substance has been removed. Just as silence is not what remains when all noise has been suppressed. There is no need to close your eyes to hear it. For it is also the silence of time. (Baudrillard 1989, p. 69)

However, I cannot agree with Baudrillard when he considers that 'No desire: the desert' (Baudrillard 1989, pp. 123, 124), arguing that desire is 'deeply natural' and only exists in Europe, that is a 'moribund critical culture', whilst America has been able to create itself within the desert, where he claims there is no History, no depth, but only simulation and superficiality. Instead of desire, Baudrillard believes there is just fascination – 'the fascination of the very disappearance of all aesthetic and critical

forms of life' (Baudrillard 1989, p. 124). If so, how could you explain then the drive of so many explorers, writers, archaeologists and common people towards the desert? And what about the rest of the world? Africa is much more deserted than America...

In fact, Pat experiences undernourishment in the desert (see chapter 1, *A*) and also the cruelty of such a space (see chapter 3, *A*).

If on one hand we observe a nihilistic desire, as if Pat is engaged in running towards death, on the other hand, what is evident is her instinct for survival, as happens with Lawrence. For example, when in the first chapter she is starving, she seeks food. More significantly, she carries on pacing the earth with a tenacity that is, at least, remarkable, given all the hardships she goes through, but also, befuddling. Therefore, Pat embodies a paradox, which ultimately only space will be able to handle, by leading her to her death, in the end.

The protagonist's choice to travel in deserted spaces, most predominantly in the novel, implied by the characterisation of those places, entails and contaminates the characterisation of all space in the narrative. There is a consistent absence of much detail and description of the places included in the novel, creating a sense of space almost as a flat surface. *Away* is not intended to be an exemplar of travel writing, even if this genre is very flexible and variable, a problematic which I am not going to dwell on here. It would not surprise me to find *Away* shelved under this category.

The lack of the local colour of places issues from Pat's perception and experience of space, in the sense that her body is inextricably embedded in space and motion. Movement is crucial to Pat and the narrative. And she wishes this movement to be unstoppable. In this sense, she is neither a tourist nor a traveller. Both the tourist and the traveller are engaged in 'a process of seductive encounter' (Crouch 2005, p. 24) [Permission to reproduce from Crouch's work has been granted by Lizzy Yates, Permissions Administrator, T&F Royalty Department], involving important features

such as anticipation, or the preparation of the trip, surprise and curiosity, as Botton (2002, see pp. 5-27) refers to in *The Art of Travel* [Permission to reproduce from Botton's work has been granted by Hayley Davidson, Permissions Assistant, Penguin Books Ltd.]. In Pat, these characteristics are almost non-existent. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator voice says about her: 'To walk was the thing. The only thing.' (A, p. 9). And we see, several times in the narrative, her effort to keep going no matter what.

Besides, the speed in movement increases when she switches to travel by car, not to mention the velocity heightened by the plane travel. This frenzied motion is a way of escaping the past and an accelerating towards the future. Pat is very much similar to the description of space that Jameson (1991) puts forward:

The new space that...emerges involves the suppression of distance...and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places, to the point where the postmodern body – whether wandering through a postmodern hotel, locked into rock by means of headphones, or undergoing the multiple shocks and bombardments of the Vietnam War as Michael Herr conveys it to us – is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed...I take such spatial peculiarities of postmodernism as symptoms and expressions of a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individuals subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself. (Jameson 1991, pp. 412, 413) [Permission to reproduce from Jameson's work has been granted by Diane Grosse, Rights & Permissions Manager, Duke University Press].

Jameson relates this new space to the 'switching channels on a cable television set' (Jameson 1991, p. 373) by which the public has access to an enormous array of disparate images capable of flattening and mixing time and space, similar to the suppression of distance and time achieved by the way we can travel nowadays.

I argue, like Massey (2005), that by shortening the distances 'new kinds of spatial configurations' are produced. An example of this is the car accident which almost kills Pat, entailing new spatial configurations, as I have already referred to and will develop later.

Pat's car accident is a major turning point in the narrative. The protagonist stays immobilised and as a consequence of her debilitated physical condition, she suffers from trauma and a recurrent bout of depression (a disease from which, she never completely recovers), which leaves her, for a while, in a vegetative state. It is a scientific fact that 'physical illness can set off depression' (McKenzie 2006, p. 30) [Permission to reproduce from McKenzie's work has been granted by Mark Thornton, Director, Family Doctor Books]. Slowly, Pat recovers. However, being enclosed and unable to move for a time has its consequences, regarding space. As soon as she thinks she can travel again, she wants to go home. Hence, it seems that Pat desires to put an end to her wandering and re-settle down, finally. Exactly as Baudrillard observes:

Speed is simply the rite that initiates us into emptiness: a nostalgic desire for forms to revert to immobility, concealed beneath the very intensification of their mobility. (Baudrillard 1989, p. 7)

Instead, and despite the nostalgia, there is no way of going back, as space changes:

For the truth is that you never simply 'go back', to home or to anywhere else. When you get 'there' the place will have moved on just as you yourself will have changed. (Massey 2005, p. 124)

Once in New York, Pat goes to look at her former house and sees that 'There are no vestiges of the fire.' (A, p. 183) that killed her husband. On her way back to Marcia's flat although she tries 'to hold on the image of that street [where she used to live], to fix it in her mind ...nothing seemed to...come out of that effort...she could see nothing but a blank.' (A, p. 183) Furthermore, Marcia agreeing with Pat says: 'This city has changed.' (A, p. 187).

Then, changing direction and movement radically, Pat decides to live in a secluded place, where she drastically limits her movement in space. Meanwhile, she has changed too. We can see that she has difficulties in being sedentary. She complains of all the 'stuff' necessary to buy and accumulate for a home. Moreover, attempting to fix herself firmly on the ground, Pat compulsively and obsessively writes plans, concerning

every little task she resolves to accomplish. Even the relationship she establishes with the local people follows that strict order she imposes on herself. With this extreme swerve of direction, Pat literally both closes and horizontalises space and time. By obliterating the dynamic flow of energy that constitutes time and space, Pat ultimately kills herself.

We are always, inevitably, making spaces and places. The temporary cohesions of articulations of relations, the provisional and partial enclosures, the repeated practices which chisel their way into being established flows; these spatial forms mirror the necessary fixing of communication and identity. (Massey 2005, p. 175)

Without having the ability of participating in and producing communication on an ongoing multiplicity and creativity, she cannot make space or have an identity. Therefore, in the end, Pat disconnects herself completely. She melts into space.

Writers, explorers and wanderers of the desert communicate through space and time, attracted by the desert's singular ability, as if responding to a call of a siren song. Actually, several names and descriptions of the desert's features resort to sea comparisons or metaphors – the whale dunes or 'parallel straight dune [which] is long and slim with slipfaces on both sides and waves on top, just like the sea' (Vivian 2008, p. 11) [Permission to reproduce from Vivian's work has been granted by Laila Ghali, Senior Publishing Consultant] and the movement of the sand, to name just a few examples. These men and women drawn to the desert find themselves embedded in its apparent inexistent web, which they soon find out to be in reality a complex and inextricable one, from where, if they survive, they come out changed, marked forever. That magic magnetism to which they all seem to fall at the beginning is, in the end, never completely satisfied or fulfilled (unless, only perhaps with the consciousness of their shattered selves), as the thirst they suffer whilst crossing it, as the extraordinary clear sight of the horizon they sometimes can see and that at other times is totally obscured by the intensity of light that blinds them thoroughly.

That is why the only chapter of *Away* in which Pat stays by the sea, presents no significant differences from the ones where she finds herself in the desert. Here, as in the desert, she feels lonely, lost and faces danger. Although, the island presents itself as a more threatening landscape, not only due to the isolation she suffers from being in a small island, but also due to the imbricating vegetation. Hence, the fact that Pat does not venture outside the secluded place she encloses herself in during the last chapter of the novel. Finally, when she does go out to open space it's only to discover that after all nothing can present a danger or a challenge, anymore.

Part II – Paul Auster: *Barren space and characters*

My fascination for Paul Auster's work comes from a long way back. I cannot remember anymore when it started. All I can say is that from the moment I began reading it I couldn't stop myself from reading Auster's fiction. Maybe, it was a fascination which unfolded merely through chance. Because chance is an essential feature of Auster's poetics, let us say that it really happened by chance. As for the reasons from which this fascination emerged and developed, I'll simply put it down to my addiction to stories, again borrowing Auster's point of view and subscribing to it:

I suppose, I tend to think myself more as a storyteller than a novelist. I believe that stories are the fundamental food for the soul. We can't live without stories. In one form or another, everybody lives on them from the age of two until their death. People don't necessarily have to read novels to satisfy their need for stories. (Auster 1998, p. 336) [Permission to reproduce from Auster's works has been granted by Eliza Dreier, Faber and Faber, US and Emma Cheshire, Permissions Department, Faber and Faber, Ltd. UK].

Hence, in short, Auster's work, particularly his novels, accounted largely for the drive to write my novel.

The fictional world of Auster offers an overwhelmingly complex and vast territory, impossible to be examined here in its entirety. Even if such a project could be conceived, needless to say that it would always be partial and inconclusive.

In this section, I will focus on the role space plays in Auster's work. For this investigation, I will concentrate on three of Auster's narratives – *City of Glass*, included in *The New York Trilogy*; *The Music of Chance* and *In the Country of Last Things* – since I consider that space not only is more explicitly explored, but also provides a matrix for the conception of space, and the one I am particularly interested in, in Auster's work.

Referring to *NYT*, Auster said in an interview that 'New York is the main character of *The New York Trilogy*' (Brown 2007, p. 1) [Permission to reproduce from

Brown's work has been granted by Marilyn Cresswell, Rights and Permissions, Manchester University Press]. So, right from the beginning of Auster's career as novelist, space emerges as a main feature in his prose and will remain a major element to explore throughout his fictional work.

At first, Auster's novels focus on New York – *NYT*, *CLT*, *Moon Palace* – until *MC*, work from which onwards space will be opened to other places in his subsequent writing.

However, New York is already a metaphor for the world. Auster himself considers New York as 'a separate little city state that belongs to the world' (Brown 2007, p. 1). A statement that practically needs no comment – it is enough to remember that New York is a space, I venture to say, known by the whole world through films and news, just to mention some basic examples (even if New York is viewed in many different ways, obviously), and that New York is a space constituted by an amalgam of a huge diversity of people from all over the world.

Moreover, and as a consequence too, New York is not portrayed in Auster's novels as a mere setting for the plot, characterised by neat landmarks and places offering the reader a constructed space where she/he can see – for instance, such café, house, street, city – in more or less detail, or to put it in others words as a representation of space, but instead not just as a space devoid of such features, as well as an almost empty territory where the characters lose themselves and wander in a meaningless manner, that is, a lived or representational space, that is, a space showing its 'qualitative, fluid and dynamic' (Lefebvre 1991, p. 42) nature, as I shall demonstrate later. Speaking about this 'lived space', Lefebvre (1991) says that 'Localizations can absolutely not be taken for granted where the lived experience of the body is concerned' (p. 40).

As an ironic illustration of this, the narrator in *GH* says:

The address is unimportant. But let's say Brooklyn Heights, for the sake of argument. Some quiet, rarely travelled street not far from the bridge – Orange Street perhaps. Walt Whitman handset the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* on this street in 1855, and it was here that Henry Ward Beecher railed against slavery from the pulpit of his red-brick church. So much for local color. (Auster 1990, p. 163; my underlining)

Here, despite the narrator's announcement and conclusion that space and colour are not important, what we find in between is exactly the opposite; he provides us names, atmosphere, colour and history. And so space in Auster's work is a strange and complex entity emerging from the relationship created between characters and space, or to put it in the words of Shiloh (2002): 'The world of the text materializes and the extra-textual space becomes immaterial' (p. 73) [Permission to reproduce from Shiloh's work has been granted by Maria Abellana, Editorial Assistant, Peter Lang Publishing]. Although, even space, in the textual world in Auster's novels examined in this essay, tends to be emptied out. This is a question pertinent to address here. Before answering though, it is important to recall, at this point, that space as considered in this essay is never empty and that to empty it out does not eliminate space. Space is constructed continuously through dynamic and multiple processes. What happens is that several of Auster's characters empty out the contents of space in order to be able to create another self for themselves. By constructing space, these characters attempt to re-create themselves in parallel. Or to be more precise, they attempt to erase themselves – empty themselves out.

This conception of space can be observed in most of Auster's novels, albeit through different processes and, as I've just mentioned, resulting, as a consequence, in distinct endings.

As an example based on two of Auster's novels, which can illustrate this issue and also form one paradigm for Auster's fiction, the protagonists of *MP* and *MC*, respectively, Fogg and Nashe, evidence this difference. Fogg empties the contents of his flat, and curiously the contents are boxes filled with books, that also serve him as

furniture of his flat, and disconnects himself from other human beings, in order to strip himself to a bare condition, from which he can create a new self. As well, Nashe 'dispossesses himself of his entire property' (Shiloh 2002, p. 161) and of his relation with society, not seeking the creation of a new identity, but engaging in a process of self-annihilation. Therefore, Fogg empties the contents of space to embark on a journey through space, which will result in his liberation, in the sense that he has, as Shiloh pertinently concludes, 'found himself' (Shiloh 2002, p. 133). Nashe, on the contrary, by setting out to travel across space, ends by being deleted from the text, absorbed into space.

In other words, Fogg allows space to construct his self by simultaneously constructing a new space configuration. Nashe, instead, by refusing this dynamic construction of space, erases himself, apparently achieving to empty himself out.

Here, in this dissertation, I intend to investigate specifically the conception of space as presented in *MC* that is space as an overwhelmingly vast, indeterminate, confusing territory that undermines the characters' selves. I argue that this territory is particularly relevant in *CG*, *CLT* and *MC* and hence my choice to focus mainly on these works.

Starting by looking at *CG* and particularly at Quinn, the protagonist, Auster is very clear about Quinn's 'problem of identity' to use Joseph Malia's words (Auster 1998, p. 279) in a question he asked Auster to which, he replied:

The question of who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are. The whole process that Quinn undergoes in that book – and the characters in the other two, as well – is one of stripping away to some barer condition in which we have to face up to who we are. Or who we aren't. It finally comes to the same thing. (Auster 1998, p. 279)

This first action of 'stripping away to some barer condition' occurs as a gradual process, concerning Quinn. Quinn is at the beginning presented more like a ghost, in the sense that he hides behind his writer's pseudonym – William Wilson, the writer of mystery novels - then even further behind the main character of William Wilson's

novels, Max Work, whom Quinn sees as ‘his interior brother, his comrade in solitude’ (Auster 1990, p. 7), and finally as an impersonator of Paul Auster, supposedly a detective, showing a diversity of selves, typical of postmodernist texts, which goes even further to the point of slipping into invisibility. As Shiloh puts it: ‘Quinn is characterised by an ever growing invisibility’ (Shiloh 2002, p. 47). Paradoxically, though, at the start, Quinn has already ‘reached point zero’ (Shiloh 2002, p. 45), since he is already suffering from the loss of his wife, son and creative career. After such tragic events and the subsequent mourning/breakdown, the narrator says of Quinn:

He no longer wished to be dead. At the same time, it cannot be said that he was glad to be alive. But at least he did not resent it. He was alive, and the stubbornness of this fact had little by little begun to fascinate him – as if he had managed to outlive himself, as if he were somehow living a posthumous life. (Auster 1990, p. 6)

This ‘posthumous life’ and the fact that Quinn is a writer, still enables him to articulate his thoughts into words, providing him with the ability to remember and feel ‘an imprint of the past that had been left in his body’ (Auster 1990, p. 6), an ‘imprint’ of a human touch (holding his ‘three- year-old boy in his arms’ - Auster 1990, p. 6), so that the past has not yet been completely obliterated.

As regards space, Quinn soon starts launching himself, not only in a process of leaving the past, or the time dimension, behind, but also in a process of disengagement from both himself and others, as can be observed in the following passage, at the beginning of *CG*:

New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighbourhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind, and by giving himself up to the movement of the streets, by reducing himself to a seeing eye, he was able to escape the obligation to think, and this, more than anything else, brought him a measure of peace, a salutary emptiness within. The world was outside of him, around him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible for him to dwell on any one thing for very long. Motion was of the essence, the act of putting one foot in front of the other and allowing himself to follow the drift of his own body. By wandering aimlessly, all places

became equal, and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (Auster 1990, p. 4)

Quinn's New York is this 'inexhaustible' and labyrinthian space where, as Brendan says, 'individuals seem inattentive to both their interaction with others, as well as the physical locale in which they find themselves' (Brendan 2008, p. 105) [Permission to reproduce from Brendan's work has been granted by Copyright Clearance Center]. It mirrors the character's sense of disorientation and loss, not just in geographical space, but also within himself. Another feature related to space is movement, as can be seen in the above excerpt of *CG*, being here portrayed as the best means to achieve complete emptiness of the inner-self. Motion seems to turn all space indistinct, bare and in the end as if it were a non-space: 'nowhere'.

Ultimately Quinn's desire has as its source despair and as destination total disintegration. To quote Shiloh (2002, p. 46): 'Quinn's motivation for his quest for self-annihilation is despair'. So that – 'In a way, he turns himself inside out, transforming his body into a metaphor of his inner being' (Shiloh 2002, p. 53). The result is that 'Quinn becomes even more invisible than he has been, and the desolation of the city eventually swallows him up' (Shiloh 2002, p. 53). As the narrator of *CG* says too: 'Remarkable as it seems, no one ever noticed Quinn. It was though he had melted into the walls of the city' (Auster 1990, p. 139).

When the narrator says this, Quinn has moved to live in the streets, by Stillman's house, in order to protect him from his father (Quinn's assignment), in a movement which is already hinted at by Quinn's sense of feeling most released from himself, the past and others, as observed in the passage of *CG*, above presented.

Yet, if on one hand, this space (the streets) can be considered as an open space, which is 'inexhaustible'; on the other hand it is important to point out that, paradoxically, this space is also characterised by being restrictive, closed, in the sense

that the buildings and the grid of New York streets surrounding and engulfing Quinn is an imposing space too, constructed to serve the economic, political and social order of capitalism. Furthermore, Quinn chooses to remain in an alley where he is 'hidden from view' (Auster 1990, p. 135), but also enclosed.

Nevertheless, he is able to construct and allows himself to be constructed by this space, as we can see in the example of how Quinn resolves the problem of sleep. He finds a solution to this problem by adapting to the bell of a church close by, evidencing his interrelation with space. He managed to sleep in short intervals of fifteen minutes, regulated by the church's clock, so that he managed to live 'by the rhythm of that clock, and eventually he had trouble distinguishing it from his own pulse' (Auster 1990, p. 138).

However, Quinn's stay in the alley leads to two paradoxical consequences. By having to lodge for so long in the alley, when he returns home, he discovers, firstly, that he has changed – he seems to have lost his ability to walk as he used to, so that he has to stop for some moments, before resuming to walk and, secondly, that 'he felt as though his head was made of air' (Auster 1990, p. 142), to the point of even not being able to recognise himself. On his way home, when he looks at himself in a shop mirror he realises that 'he did not recognize the person he saw there as himself' (Auster 1990, p. 142). Once he arrives at his flat, he finds out that he has entered into 'another place altogether' (Auster 1990, p. 147), as his apartment has been rented to someone else and all his possessions have disappeared. The narrator's voice clearly points out that in this situation Quinn 'had come to the end of himself' (Auster 1990, p. 149).

So, simultaneously, space and Quinn changed. Now, the apartment is not his anymore, as he is unable to identify his 'self'.

Nevertheless, as observed earlier in this essay, both the conception of space and Quinn's self are taken further to a more complex level, next.

As a result of the eviction from his flat and the emptiness of his inner-self and almost the emptiness of his outer-self too, Quinn moves away to another space and self. As a consequence we find him moving into Stillman's (who, meanwhile has mysteriously disappeared) apartment, a place which has been 'stripped bare' (Auster 1990, p. 151), where food magically appears and Quinn does little else but writing in his red notebook that becomes his obsession now. Hence his present space is almost equivalent to the space of his notebook, as Quinn ceases to write about the Stillman's case to write mainly about space:

He [Quinn] wrote about the stars, the earth, his hopes for mankind. He felt that his words had been severed from him, that now they were a part of the world at large, as real and as specific as a stone, or a lake, or a flower. They had no longer anything to do with him. (Auster 1990, p. 156)

More than writing about space, or features of space, when the pages of the notebook are finishing, he wonders if at this stage, completely stripped down to his body

if he had it in him to write without a pen, if he could learn to speak instead, filling the darkness with his voice, speaking the words into the air, into the walls, into the city, even if the light never came back again. (Auster 1990, pp. 156, 157)

As Shiloh (2002, p. 55) observes: 'Nothing has been left; there is only the indifferent beauty of the universe, a voice in darkness and despair', since without being able to engage in space through movement, physically or mentally, he is left with nothing.

After this Quinn disappears, like Stillman, whom it looks as if he has been impersonating at the end, as the narrator-character mentions at the end: 'As for Quinn it is impossible for me to say where he is now...And wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck' (Auster 1990, p. 158).

Therefore, Quinn vanishes into space, as if 'by mere evanescence' (Barone, (ed.) 1996, p. 38), or by a trick of magic, transporting him from a closed space towards the endless immensity of space, producing an altogether different space neither open nor closed, or both closed and open.

In Auster's prose, counterbalancing open space, to which I have been mainly referring, there is closed space that is as relevant, if not more, than open space. The locked room, to borrow Auster's title of his last book in *NYT*, plays an essential role, not just in *CG*, but in all Auster's work. When interviewed by Mark Irwin about 'the wonderful obsession with space', Auster replies:

I've never made a conscious decision to write about space ...but looking back over my work now, I can see that it does shuttle between these two extremes: confinement and vagabondage – open space and hermetic space. At the same time, there's a curious paradox embedded in all this: when the characters in my books are most confined, they seem to be most free. And when they are free to wander, they are most lost and confused. (Auster 1998, p. 327)

However, I argue that the conception of space in Auster's work does not lie in this opposition between closed and open space, but in the ambivalence of space, in other words, in the blurring of boundaries between open and closed space, as in the blurring between nomadic and sedentary characters, features that are typical of postmodernism.

Actually, Auster himself in 'White Spaces', I claim, points to this conception of space, as it has been portrayed in this dissertation, as the following passage from the poem 'White Spaces' reveals:

I remain in the room in which I am writing this. I put one foot in front of the other. I put one word in front of the other, and for each step I take I add another word, as if for each word to be spoken there were another space to be crossed, a distance to be filled by my body as it moves through this space. It is a journey through space, even if I get nowhere, even if I end up in the same place I started. It is a journey through space, as if into many cities and out of them, as if across deserts, as if to the edge of some imaginary ocean, where each thought drowns in the relentless waves of the real. (Auster 1991, p. 85)

Here, Auster not only superimposes open space upon closed space, but also superimposes on top the writing dimension, as an act of motion, which mirrors the body's movement, whereby a construction of space is both produced (original writing) and results from an a priori production (namely, for instance, the writing of the writers who influence Auster's writing).

And this idea leads this dissertation to the investigation of *MC*, where the

construction of a wall, built by adding stones on top of each other, bears striking resemblances to what has just been observed.

Jim Nashe, the protagonist of *MC*, is very similar to Quinn of *CG*, in the sense that both characters embark on journeys caused by despair, aiming at self-annihilation. If Quinn walks, Nashe drives. So, now in *MC* we find ourselves all over America, which entails a feature of space heightened by the velocity of movement provided by the use of a car: that is distance and speed are in *MC* extended and suppressed at the same time, provoking a sensation of vertigo and, hence, a dispersal of the self perceived more instantaneously than in *CG*.

In *MC* we find two distinct parts. In the first, Nashe, the protagonist, drives compulsively and aimlessly, triggered by a series of ‘chance events’, to use Woods’s words (Barone (ed.) 1996, p. 146), from which I only examine the one deriving from space – the missing of the correct ramp on the freeway for Boston. This contingency is what offers the main character

A dizzying prospect – to imagine all that freedom, to understand how little it mattered what choice he made. He could go anywhere he wanted, he could do anything he felt like doing, and not a single person in the world would care. As long as he did not turn back, he could just as well have been invisible. (Auster 1992b, p. 6)

However, all this freedom comes as a result, as in most of Auster’s novels, of a loss – Nashe’s wife left him and he leaves his two-year daughter with his sister - , but also of gaining a huge inheritance. Money exhilarates him and plays an important role in the novel ultimately. Nevertheless, money is a theme which is not going to be explored here in this essay though, since it involves several issues sufficient for another dissertation.

The most evident parallel between the first part of *MC* and *CG* lies in the presentation of space as a synonym of freedom, speed and total disconnection with the Other, which is clearly manifest in the examples below:

He covered the entire western part of the country, zigzagging back and forth..., charging down the enormous, vacant highways..., but it wasn't as though he looked at anything or cared where he was, and except for the odd sentence that he was compelled to speak when buying gas or ordering food, he did not utter a single word. (Auster 1992b, p. 7)

Speed was of the essence, the joy of sitting in the car and hurtling himself forward through space. (Auster 1992b, p. 11)

Nashe presents a self-determination that Quinn did not have, regarding the erasure of his former self. While Quinn ambled towards his dispossession and displacement almost unaware, Nashe, instead shows enthusiasm and excitement to discard everything and his former self, as Varvogli pertinently observes:

Nashe prepares for his journey by ridding himself of his possessions, and even the trivial tasks of moving out of a house are invested with an importance that illustrates Nashe's symbolic erasure of his former identity in the hope of replenishment and rebirth. (Varvogli 2001, p. 102) [Permission to reproduce from Varvogli's work has been granted by Dr Helen Tookey, Production Manager, Liverpool University Press].

Another crucial element here, implied by Nashe's exhilaration and determination to dispose of everything he possessed, is the fact that Nashe, unlike Quinn, symbolises the typical American hero launching himself into an adventure through space, paralleling the heroes of the road narratives and films. As Shiloh (2002), Woods (1996) and Varvogli (2001) argue respectively:

The typical American protagonist, like the typical *picaro*, is an orphan and an outsider who has rejected the obligations of family and the authority of society. (Shiloh 2002, p. 161)

The metaphor of the heroic pioneer seeking a pure space for freedom and independence. (Barone (ed) 1996, p. 144)

Nashe starts out as the main character in a road narrative and, as Auster continues to explore, and explode, the cherished myths attached to the American dream, his protagonist experiences what he perceives as total liberty and self-sufficiency; his travels become not so much journeys of self-discovery as assertions of his individuality, his freedom from spatial and temporal boundaries. (Varvogli 2001, p. 105)

Here, as both Shiloh and Varvogli acknowledge we can hear Baudrillard:

Speed creates pure objects. It is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself, since it moves more quickly than its own cause and obliterates that cause by outstripping it. Speed is the triumph of effect over cause, the triumph of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of the surface and pure objectality over the profundity of desire. Speed creates a space of initiation, which may be lethal; its only rule is to leave no trace behind. (Baudrillard 1986, p. 6)

However this vertigo, produced by the speed of traversing across space, cutting through it to the point of eliminating space, is in fact a chimera. It is not possible to be forever and always an outsider, as it is not possible to cancel out space entirely, as Brown pertinently observes:

The effect on Nashe of his speed and his solitude is to strip him of the geographical and social points of reference which might have given his life meaning and provided the basis for selfhood. Instead, the freedom he has to follow his instincts, and to give himself up entirely to chance, has the effect of emptying out his identity, leaving a void to be filled and creating a desire for fixity and certainty. (Brown 2007, p. 104)

Still, Nashe pursues that dream of absolute freedom without having any responsibility aiming towards total obliteration. If Quinn is motivated by despair, Nashe as Shiloh points out is 'equally motivated by despair and recklessness' (Shiloh 2002, p. 162). And this recklessness displayed by Nashe relates to what Woods (1996, p. 146) considers the main issue in *MC*, that is, 'the implications of chance'. Chance, another feature of space is an essential element throughout Auster's work. In *MC* chance is particularly explored, as Woods demonstrates, from the 'opening pages of the novel [where we are presented with] a collage of chance events' (Woods 1996, p. 146), as well as, as mentioned above, triggering Nashe's trajectories and, at the same time, offering this character the possibility of being reckless. However, once again, as happens with Nashe's illusion of total freedom from time and space, chance 'is an inherently ambiguous concept' (Shiloh 2002, p. 159). If on the one hand, chance can provide an opportunity to create a new space and, simultaneously, lead to new knowledge for the self, who therefore, can engage in a process which will both enhance and contribute towards a positive creation of the subject; on the other hand, chance, paradoxically, entails a 'downward movement' (Shiloh 2002, p. 159), that is, a trap leading to a fall. In other words, chance

signifies both ‘randomness and determinism as the forces governing human life’ (Shiloh 2002, p. 159).

This dual nature of chance is distinctly relevant in the beginning of the second part of *MC*, in the crucial turning point constituted by the poker game. The poker game, not only by its definition is a game associated both with bad and good luck (chance), mirroring ‘Nashe’s decision to pick up the stranger [Jack Pozzi, alias, Jackpot which] is metaphorically described as a blind jump’, (Shiloh 2002, p. 160), but also by the development and result of the match. Pozzi, the stranger to whom Nashe decides to give a lift, manages to convince Nashe to enter the game, against Flower and Stone. Nashe and Pozzi lose the match and as a consequence find themselves *thrown* into an apparently confined space – the Mansion and grounds of Flower and Stone. Pozzi, later, blames Nashe for their loss, arguing that with Nashe’s absence from the game for a while and with Nashe’s stealing of two figures from the model city (City of the World) that Stone is constructing, Nashe ‘broke the rhythm’ (Auster 1992b, p. 137) of their winning position and ‘tampered with the universe’ (Auster 1992b, p. 138), that is, by interfering with the pre-determined order of the universe, provoked their loss. To Pozzi’s remark, Nashe replies that there is no such thing as ‘some hidden purpose’ (Auster 1992b, p. 139) and that to believe in it is only ‘a way of avoiding the facts, of refusing to look at how things really work’ (Auster 1992b, p. 139).

However, Nashe, paradoxically, agrees to pay off their debt, made in the poker game, by building a wall in the grounds of Flower and Stone’s Mansion, seeing it as a relief:

It was almost a relief to have the decision taken out of his hands, to know that he had finally stopped running. The wall would not be a punishment so much as a cure, a one-way back to earth. (Auster 1992b, p. 110)

So, in this sense, Nashe shows that he also sees chance as fate, as a pre-determined order of the universe, revealing the ambivalence of chance.

Another aspect where this ambivalence is noticeable concerns the relationship between Pozzi and Nashe. At first, Nashe sees in Pozzi a 'chance to do something for himself before it is too late' (Auster 1992b, p. 1). Therefore, if on one hand, Nashe considers Pozzi as a way of redeeming himself as the father he failed to be, even if he doesn't trust him entirely:

After that conversation, Nashe noticed a shift in his feelings toward Pozzi. A certain softening set in, a gradual if reluctant admission that there was something inherently likable about the kid. That did not mean that Nashe was prepared to trust him, but for all his wariness, he sensed a new and growing impulse to watch out for him, to take on the role of Pozzi's guide and protector. (Auster 1992b, p. 49)

On the other hand, he sees Pozzi also as a means to provide him with money, which by then was dwindling, that could buy Nashe freedom:

At that point, Pozzi was simply a means to an end, the hole in the wall that would get him from one side to the other. He was an opportunity in the shape of a human being, a card-playing spectre whose one purpose in the world was to help Nashe win back his freedom. Once that job was finished, they would go their separate ways. Nashe was going to use him, but that did not mean he found Pozzi entirely objectionable. (Auster 1992b, pp. 36, 37)

However, from the moment Nashe and Pozzi find themselves as prisoners in the Mansion and grounds of Flower and Stone, due to their debt made in the poker game, their relationship becomes similar to a father and son relationship. The enclosed space of the Mansion's grounds, symbol of the overwhelming and totalitarian power of capitalism, reflected in the City of the World, the model city constructed by Stone, which as Shiloh observes 'conflates capitalist and Puritan rhetoric' (Shiloh 2002, p. 188), enables Pozzi and Nashe to create a relationship, even if, once again, Nashe ends up by contributing towards the possible (possible, because neither Nashe nor the reader get to know if Pozzi dies or survives) death of Pozzi, while trying to help him to escape from the prison space.

When Nashe exits the enclosed space, we notice the marks left within him of that space. Nashe ends up enclosed in his car, showing that at least he learnt something. Nashe has gained an ‘intuitive and subliminal [knowledge]. Such half-knowledge is the share of Nashe in the final section of the novel’, as Shiloh argues, referring to Krook⁶ (Shiloh 2002, p. 180).

Nashe, once freed from the prison space, hits the road again and, ultimately, escapes in space:

Nashe had the car up to sixty by then, feeling in absolute control as he whipped along the narrow, twisting country road. The music had pushed Murk and Floyd far into the background, and he could no longer hear anything but the four stringed instruments pouring out their sounds into the dark enclosed space ...At the precise moment the car hit eighty-five, Murks leaned forward and snapped off the radio. The sudden silence came as a jolt to Nashe, and he automatically turned to the old man and told him to mind his own business. When he looked at the road again a moment later, he could already see the headlight looming up at him. It seemed to come out of nowhere, a cyclops star hurtling straight for his eyes, and in the sudden panic that engulfed him, his only thought was that this was the last thought he would ever have. There was no time to stop, no time to prevent what was going to happen, and so instead of slamming his foot on the brakes, he pressed down even harder on the gas...And then the light was upon him, and Nashe shut his eyes, unable to look at it anymore. (Auster 1992b, pp. 216, 217)

Nevertheless, before Nashe disappears from the text, Nashe tries to ground himself. An example of this can be observed when Nashe starts to keep a written record of the number of stones he puts on the wall. As Varvogli (2001, p. 112) points out ‘what begins as a list of numbers soon acquires a new meaning for him, as he senses that ‘it was fulfilling some inner need, some compulsion to keep track of himself and not lose sight of where he was’ (Auster 1992b, p. 203, quoted by Varvogli). By trying to fix himself to a rigid space, or better to a strict practice of space or ‘everyday practices’ to use Certeau’s (1988, p. xi) expression Nashe, evidences his desire to return to immobility. But, instead of presenting merely a binary opposition between closed and open space and between mobility versus immobility, the prison space of *MC* reveals

⁶ Krook, D. (1969) *Elements of Tragedy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

itself as more complex. To use Varvogli's words, the characters 'become trapped in yet another plot' (Varvogli 2001, p. 104) where closed and open space 'merge into one another' (Varvogli 2001, p. 107), since inside the prison space, Nashe works in open air and lives in a trailer, a transient space. Moreover, the wall 'that Nashe and Pozzi erect is, first of all, stripped of its primary function: this is a wall that neither encloses nor shuts out; although it is an emblem of confinement, this wall does not confine' (Varvogli 2001, p. 111).

Yet, it is too late for Nashe, since for space and identity to be constructed it is necessary to engage in a process of an ongoing formation. In other words, it is necessary for the character to both accept and contribute to the creation of developing relationships and to take chance as an inevitable element of space. By refusing to engage in multiple and diverse spaces and relations and, therefore, flattening both space and time, the characters (Nashe and Quinn) precipitate themselves towards death or towards obliteration from the text.

Nashe by pushing 'Murks and Floyd far into the background' (Auster 1992b, p. 216), and then by being cut off from the music, acts out and simultaneously succumbs to the 'divestment of his humanity' (Shiloh 2002, p. 180). He eliminates his possibility to survive. Ultimately, it is as though Nashe really achieved his goal by scattering his self into space, almost as if they had blown themselves into pieces.

In this way, in *MC*, the narrative completes a circle (as Nashe ends on the road, just as he had started on the road).

Finally, the protagonist comes to the moment of:

Recognition of the determined shape of the life he [the hero] has created for himself with an implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life he has forsaken. (Frye⁷ quoted by Shiloh 2002, p. 181)

Or as Woods (Barone (ed.) 1996, p. 158) points out, 'Auster's own description

⁷ Frye, N. (1969) *Anatomy of Criticism*. New York: Atheneum, p. 212.

of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*⁸ fits the destiny of Nashe:

Mind and body have been weakened; the hero has lost control over both his thoughts and actions. And yet he persists in trying to control his destiny. This is the paradox, the game of circular logic that is played out through the pages of the book. It is an impossible situation for the hero. For he has wilfully brought himself to the brink of danger. To give up starving would not mean victory, it would simply mean that the game was over. He wants to survive, but only on his own terms: survival that will bring him face to face with death. (Auster 1998, pp. 12, 13)

In the end, both protagonists of *CG* and *MC* 'shift from the material world into the immaterial world, or the space of incorporeality' (Barone (ed.) 1996, p. 147). Or as Shiloh puts it 'In the fictional space, the boundaries of the self dissolve, and quester becomes one with his environment (Quinn, Nashe)' (Shiloh 2002, p. 201). In this sense, the characters, Quinn and Nashe finally find the 'salutary emptiness' that Quinn was after.

Presently, it is pertinent to comment briefly how space is explored in *CLT*, since this novel presents other aspects of space, which are pertinent to examine in this essay.

In *CLT*, Anna Blumme, the main character, comes to an unnamed city to look for her disappeared brother, William. As, with *CG* and *MC*, the protagonist of *CLT* finds herself immersed in a space where reference-points are scarce. Right from the beginning Anna is in the middle of this nameless city and the entire novel is the account of her experiences in this space. I agree with Woods (1996), when he says that '*In the Country of Last Things* foregrounds Auster's engagement with the additional postmodernist "S" word- spatiality' (Barone (ed.) 1996, p. 108).

For most of the novel, Anna Blumme's story takes place outside – in the streets, echoing the errantry of Quinn. Also, this space of *CLT* is presented as an apocalyptic city, a ravaged and ever changing space, where it is difficult, if not impossible, to locate yourself, because everything keeps disappearing:

⁸ Quoted from Auster, P. (1998) *The Art of Hunger*. London: Faber and Faber (Hamsun, K. *Hunger*, 1890)

Close your eyes for a moment, turn around to look at something else, and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone. Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you. (Auster 1989, p. 2)

The fact of everything vanishing is equivalent to what happens in *MC*, not only due to the element of speed with which Nashe traverses space, entailing the same consequence of erasure of thoughts.

Nevertheless, while Anna Blumme suffers from the transience of the city and its state of utter destruction, Nashe's space is characterised also by the transience due to the speed with which he passes through. Contrary to Nashe, though, Anna Blumme fights for survival by writing down her experiences and by changing herself too, as Woods puts it: 'In order to protect herself, she has to eradicate herself, to feign otherness, to feign masculinity' (Barone (ed.) 1996, p. 114). In other words, she has to allow herself to be 'constructed by that place' (Barone (ed.) 1996, p. 115). Putting on men's clothes, Anna's reaction is:

I looked so ugly that I didn't recognize myself anymore. It was as though I had been turned into someone else. What's happened to me? I thought. Where am I? (Auster 1989, pp. 59, 60)

Thus, for Anna space becomes a product of both herself and the others inhabiting that space, paraphrasing Oakes (2005, p. 39) [Permission to reproduce from Oakes' work has been granted by Lizzy Yates, Permissions Administrator, T&F Royalty Department]. Hence, the others 'are the object of... [Anna's] gaze, and yet are themselves agents in subject formation through their encounter with... [Anna], an encounter in which ... [she] also becomes the other' (Oakes 2005, p. 39).

Contrary to Quinn's and Nashe's changes, Anna's come out of necessity. Anna needs to turn herself invisible, to blend with space, even if, paradoxically, she resists this invisibility by creating relationships with some inhabitants of the city, showing herself to be 'plagued by a schizophrenic sense of self, a subjectivity that depends on maintaining a clear distinction between self and other, between subject and object', as Oakes (2005, p. 41) puts it, referring to Foucault's argument.

Through one of the relationships Anna establishes, the love relationship with Sam, she is capable of restoring Sam's humanity, as Varvogli observes (Varvogli 2001, p. 97). However, before Anna and Sam meet, Sam describes himself as an invisible and indifferent man, in a way that mostly parallels Quinn:

I gave up trying to be anyone, he said. The object of my life was to remove myself from my surroundings, to live in a place where nothing could hurt me anymore. One by one, I tried to abandon my attachments, to let go of all the things I ever cared about. The idea was to achieve indifference, indifference so powerful and sublime that it would protect me from further assault...Little by little, I became as serene as a Buddha, sitting in my corner and paying no attention to the world around me. If it hadn't been for my body – the occasional demands of my stomach, my bowels – I might never have moved again. To want nothing, I kept saying to myself, to have nothing, to be nothing. I could imagine no more perfect solution than that. In the end, I came close to living the life of a stone. (Auster 1989, pp. 162, 163)

In *CLT*, the references to places in space are fewer and much vaguer than in *NYT*. Not only is *CLT* set in a nameless city and the main character finds herself in an unknown territory, accentuated by its constant impermanence but also, due to the obscurity regarding time:

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Space in this novel appears as

Text has been removed due to Copyright restrictions.

Therefore, as in *CG* and of *MC*, it is a space which appears as a non-space too. The few references to landmarks and buildings in *CLT*, such as the Woburn House, the Library and Isabel's house, are all ephemeral refuges, as is, for instance the trailer where Nashe lives in the grounds of Flower and Stone's Mansion.

Contrary to Quinn and Nashe too, though, Anna seeks not only shelter, but also companionship. As one example, amongst others, when staying at the Woburn House, she refers to her relationship with Victoria in these terms:

We continued to sleep together for the next months and finally I began to feel at home there. The nature of the work at Woburn House was too demoralizing without someone to count on, without some permanent place in which to anchor your feelings. (Auster 1989, p. 158)

Quinn and Nashe, instead, not only refuse the past, they deny the Other, for

the gaze of the Other entraps us, engages us with the other and with ourselves...The Other's look posits me as an object, pins me down, deprives me of my autonomy as a subject. (Shiloh 2002, p. 47 and 65)

In terms of space the implications are that while Anna is able to resist by both building and letting herself being built by the environment, there is hope for her, but Quinn and Nashe have no chance of living with their refusal to both accept the past and the creation of relationships; hence denying themselves the possibility of re-creating a self and simultaneously space.

Yet, the absence and scarcity that the lack of name for space in *CLT* points out, does not portray some city in the future, as in the film *Blade Runner*⁹. As Auster considers 'the country Anna goes to might not be immediately recognizable, but I feel that this is where we live. It could be that we've become so accustomed to it that we no longer see it.' (Auster 1997, p. 285). In *CG and MC* although some of the places are named and easily recognised, there is also an absence, since they are described very little, partly due to the indifference of the protagonists, but also to an observation of how space is 'perceived, conceived and lived' (Lefebvre 1991, p. 39) in the present days, brought by the facility of crossing space and covering great distances in a flash of time. Just to give a couple of examples, it is enough to look at the business men and women travelling back and forth and to the world's largest industry - tourism. In *CG* it is not the suppression of time and space that causes this absence, but, as mentioned

⁹ *Blade Runner* (1982) Directed by Ridley Scott [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures

before, the indifference of the people in the New York's streets.

Hence, despite the utter destruction of space in *CLT*, there is hope for Anna. Unlike Quinn and Nashe, at the end of *CLT*, Anna is preparing to leave the city. Curiously, one of the ways Anna together with Sam, Victoria and Boris, who deals with the travel permits, might escape the city is by creating a magic show that will allow them to go on tour. A magic trick, which echoes the disappearances of Nashe and Quinn from the text. Nevertheless, Anna confesses that this magic show is just a dream and at the same time, contradictorily, admits that, once she crosses over to another space, 'anything is possible' (Auster 1989, p. 188).

Part III - *About the Novel*

The 'germ of the idea' (Highsmith 1983, p. 4) to write this novel came into my mind over ten years ago. This idea was the one compelling me to write the first long piece of fiction in English (something I never managed to do in my native language); although this project was interrupted as, meanwhile, I started working on a different creative work for the MA. This last one remains unfinished. However even during the time I was a MA student that first idea was still at the back of my mind.

It was only after I finished the MA that I returned to develop that first 'story germ', which to paraphrase Highsmith's words (1983, p. 5) had popped into my head originally, and consisted of nothing more than a lonely woman travelling. Hence, as Highsmith says this 'germ of an idea' brought 'with it a most important factor for the final product, atmosphere' (Highsmith 1983, p. 11), that is, for my project, the exploration of space.

Then I had already devised a structure to work on. The project would be composed of chapters that could stand as individual pieces and at the same time linked through the main character. In each chapter the protagonist would be in a different place where she would have new encounters. In order to be able to work following this plan I did some research looking into novels where you can find a similar structure. Nonetheless, these novels didn't appeal to me as a reader. Moreover, as I kept trying to advance in my writing I found it hard to make progress. I came to a point when I realised this project was extremely ambitious and mined with difficulties. It was not enough to have the chapters stitched together by the main character. Besides that thread it would be necessary to create the different pieces in such a way that they could respond to each other through correspondences, resonances such as those, mainly, found in poetry. In short, there would have to be an intricate web, both interior and exterior. Saying this I don't intend to claim that there is a complete dissociation between prose

and poetry writing. On the contrary, I agree with Calvino who, when speaking about the way he writes, admits:

I have always aimed at the image and the motion that arises naturally from the image, while still being aware that one cannot speak of a literary result until this stream of imagination has been turned into words. Just as for the poet writing verse, so it is for the prose writer: success consists in felicity of verbal expression, which every so often may result from a quick flash of inspiration but as a rule involves a patient search for the *mot juste*, for the sentence in which every word is unalterable, the most effective marriage of sounds and concepts. I am convinced that writing prose should not be any different from writing poetry. In both cases it is a question of looking for the unique expression, one that is concise, concentrated, and memorable.

It is hard to keep up tension of this kind in very long works. However, by temperament I feel myself more at ease in short pieces: much of my work consists of short stories. (Calvino 1996, pp. 48, 49) [Permission to reproduce from Calvino's work has been granted by Ekin Oklap, The Wylie Agency (UK) Ltd.].

The problem for me was to find this 'felicity of verbal expression' and maintain it throughout my novel.

So after having written the first chapter I came to a halt. I was unable to carry on the project as I had planned. At that point a 'second idea', using Highsmith's words again (1983, p. 5), appeared – the character Fred. From then onwards, as Highsmith confesses 'Everything came suddenly alive.' (1983, p. 5). I don't mean to state that all the story turned immediately clear into my mind, but I could see a way to make progress. There were changes determined by the way my writing develops, to which I'll come back later. On the other hand Highsmith's expression holds up by the fact that with the appearance of Fred the novel created its own development, different from the one I had initially planned. Hence the 'jarring' effect produced by the first chapter of the novel with the following chapters. In the first chapter a character who the protagonist encounters is never to appear again in the novel, while in subsequent chapters Fred, the main character, Pat, and others keep reappearing. Therefore the first chapter was withdrawn, although its omission entailed further rewriting of the new first chapter (which was originally the second).

Now, focusing on the way my writing develops, I couldn't define it better than Paul Auster when he refers to the way he practices his writing, establishing a parallel between the developing of the writing and the embarking on a unplanned travel:

Every day, I set on a journey into the unknown, and yet the whole time I'm just sitting there in my room. The door is locked, I never budge, and yet that confinement offers me absolute freedom – to be whoever I want to be, to go wherever my thoughts take me. (Auster 1998, p. 328)

Auster stresses this point further by saying that:

From day to day, I scarcely know what I'm doing. I begin blindly with a few images, a few buzzes in my head – the sound of a character's voice, a gesture. The story then begins to develop within me, and often it takes years for the thing to form itself to the point where I'm able to begin writing. (Auster 1998, p. 330)

Likewise my writing, after having abandoned the initial plan, developed along this 'intuitive' process, as Auster calls it. It was almost as if, once having the two characters roughly shaped into my head together with the notion of space, the writing developed by itself. In particular Pat, the protagonist, worked as a dictator of the narrative, in both senses of the etymon of the word dictator. That is, she dictated the narrative acting practically as the motor of the story propelling it forward and at the same time, in an apparent paradox, forcing, like a despot, the narrative voice to be reduced to a minimum.

Before going into the investigation of the protagonist, though, it must be said that the second idea I referred to (the appearance of Fred) presented me the opportunity of fulfilling a goal I wanted to achieve – to produce a piece of creative work which could provide 'a good read' too. Here, I couldn't help listening to several voices. Firstly, the voice of Cicero speaking about the qualities of an orator: 'docere, delectare et movere' (to teach, produce pleasure and emotion). Instead of old, I would rather think of it as timeless, in the common sense of the word, that is: always present and here, across time and space, or better, within time and space. Then I recalled the voices of

several authors who admitted that they wrote what they would like to read, such as Highsmith and Auster, for instance.

Also, I wanted to produce an innovative piece of work through which I could explore and contribute towards an experimental process of writing. Therefore in order to create equilibrium between the production of an original and entertaining piece of writing, I resorted to the creation of a difference between the characters in the novel. On one hand, the protagonist embodies the pushing of the limits of the writing, whilst on the other hand, the other characters work as a counterpoint. However, the characters do not appear as two divergent and separate groups or entities. There is an interrelation between them and it is that interrelation that the novel dramatises. Together the characters constitute themselves in a dynamic relationship. Otherwise, it would not be possible for them to emerge as living beings and, at the same time, the narrative would not be able to form a coherent piece of work.

Let's turn now our full attention to the leading character, Pat.

Pat is a dancer and so the body is for her the major element of identity. To emphasize the centrality of her body I resorted to the intentional device of restricting the narrator's voice to a bare minimum in what concerned her character. As Deleuze states: 'the body has autonomous external reactions. The body is the animal. What the body does it does it alone.' (Deleuze 1998, p. 123). According to Deleuze it is first the body that 'act[s] and react[s] before the mind moves it' (Deleuze 1998, p. 123). Further on, developing this idea, Deleuze says:

The mind begins by coldly and curiously regarding what the body does, it is first of all a witness. (Deleuze 1998, p. 124)

Hence I wanted to limit as far as possible the narrator's voice, when it came to this character, so that this voice would be like an eye perceiving first of all what the body does, its actions.

This option presented several challenges through which I wanted to push and

experience the limits of my writing. The aim was to have space as an active realm derived from the body, as Lefebvre considers:

The whole of (social) space proceeds from the body, even though it so metamorphoses the body that it may forget it altogether – even though it may separate itself so radically from the body as to kill it. The genesis of a far-away order can be accounted for only on the basis of the order that is nearest to us – namely, the order of body. Within the body itself, spatially considered, the successive levels constituted by the senses (from the sense of smell to sight, treated as different within a differentiated field) prefigure the layers of social space and their interconnections. The passive body (the senses) and the active body (the labour) converge in space. (Lefebvre 1991, p. 405)

I would go even further than Lefebvre by suggesting that the body is never passive from the moment it is born until the moment it dies. Even when the body doesn't move it still is both inevitably exposed to environmental movements which make the body change and to the internal functional body circulation of fluids that alter it too.

One of the risks issued from limiting the voice of the narrator concerning Pat is confronting the reader with an unsympathetic character with whom the reader might have difficulty relating. By stripping away the emotions, thoughts of the protagonist and through the brusqueness and rudeness revealed by many of her acts and attitudes, accentuating her insensitivity, I am aware of creating a character with whom the reader will not be willing to engage. That is why the other characters work as entities that not only attenuate the heartlessness of the main character, by taking upon themselves the role of balancing the narrative by reflecting and mirroring the reader's reception, but also as mediators by their effort to understand this woman and through the way they display their reactions and thoughts about her.

The primacy of Pat's body and suppression of her soul entails further consequences.

Pat's choice is clearly stated in the novel:

'I just came, because I wished to be somewhere else.' (A, p. 10)

‘You know, people often say, Oh I wish I could go away, but they don’t move. I heard myself saying that. So, I packed and took off. That’s all.’
(A, p. 10)

Her body moves through unconscious need and desire, driven by compulsion to become constantly displaced by motion. Pat pushes her body to the brink of collapse, but, paradoxically, she always fights to survive. With this we find a permanent and continuous possibility of ending which is constantly deferred. As Paul Auster mentions about the hero of *Hunger*:

He wants to survive, but only in his own terms: survival that will bring him face to face with death. (Auster 1998, p. 13)

At the start, Pat’s travels and her movements are simultaneously unconscious and controlled up to the point she realises that, instead of propelling herself forward, she is been retracing her steps by revisiting places where she has been with her husband. Thus, she is prolonging a past impossible to develop. So when Pat embarks on a journey through the desert, despite the new detours she does in a known trajectory, where she has to steer carefully, on the one hand she avoids death and on the other she emulates her husband’s orienteer role. Here Pat is yet struggling to unburden herself from the past, even if she senses freedom, there are still reference points. Only later she will loose control of both thoughts and actions by travelling randomly, following nothing but variables. As a body constantly in transit, then she escapes present, obliterating thus both past and future, as well as she emerges like a fluid self, fragmented and decentred by the dynamic relation with space she crosses. Increasing velocity, by driving instead of walking, Pat precipitates her fall. Not as she wished through evaporation, like she feels when she is on a plane taking off:

Feeling the hard tarmac being devoured faster and faster and then plunging on the runway at the unreal high speed of the commitment point, together with the roar and vibration, to the point of not leaving the ground behind completely, but of even being propelled up, just in a matter of seconds, triggered in her some kind of mechanism, whereby she could sense letting everything go, suddenly and independently of her will

– it was as if a gate had unlatched by itself (A, p. 76)

This passage is already a premonition of disaster- the car crash. It reminds Icarus's fly too close to the sun, regardless of his father's warning. Likewise Pat, careless at last, blind both to the sun and to her body survival, ends up by severing her body and, simultaneously her identity. However, instead of dying from speed, she finds her closure in absolute stillness as if levitating, mirroring Walt in *Mr. Vertigo* by Paul Auster:

Deep down, I don't believe it takes any special talent for a person to lift himself off the ground and hover in the air. We all have it in us – every man, woman, and child – and with enough hard work and concentration, every human being is capable of duplicating the feats I accomplished as Walt the Wonder Boy. You must learn to stop being yourself. That's where it begins, and everything else follows from that. You must let yourself evaporate. Let your muscles go limp, breathe until you feel your soul pouring out of you, and then shut your eyes. That's how it's done. The emptiness inside your body grows lighter than the air around you. Little by little, you begin to weigh less than nothing. You shut your eyes; you spread your arms; you let yourself evaporate. And then, little by little, you lift yourself off the ground.

Like so. (Auster 1994, p. 278)

Before reaching this point though, the novel moves forward through leaps in time and space. Here, too, the process is exploratory. Just as an example, in one chapter we are in the Egypt, in the next in the Seychelles. And places pile up through the novel, not only from one chapter to the following, but sometimes within the same chapter there are jumps in space. All the places are explicitly revealed, whereas time is perceived implicitly only. The scattering in space and the effacement of time is another challenge both to the writing and to the reading.

Pat's movement has another consequence in the narrative, which lies in the delay of crucial information about her. Only in the fourth chapter, do we discover that Pat has embarked on a journey because her husband has died; an event that threw her into depression. She not only left her familiar space behind, she discarded everything she had: the house, all its contents and her former way of life. So, it takes time for the reader to understand the main character.

It is mainly through her actions and the other characters that the reader can have access to her past. Also, because the other characters, with the exception of Kate and Marcia who are able to talk about Pat's past, are only capable of slowly grasping Pat, since she does not disclose anything about her past. Moreover, at the moments she cannot avoid speaking about herself, she makes up a new identity for herself, tricking the other characters. Pat lies because for her there's no distinction between lie and truth, as she doesn't believe in anything. Even Kate and Marcia's knowledge is problematic. Kate opens a door letting us know a bit about her sister's past, but she restrains herself from entering completely into the past, as there is an implicit pact between the sisters, regarding their past. To Kate, Pat is like a mother and so she complies with Pat's refusal of the past. Marcia has no problem with unveiling Pat's past. Nevertheless, on the one hand her knowledge of that past is limited - she only knows up to the moment she met Pat, already a grown woman; on the other hand Marcia makes her appearance only in the final chapters of the novel and is barred from knowing what happened to Pat during her absence.

Both these experimental features, the dispersal in space, with the dimming of time, and holding back the past of the main character, result from my sense of the nature of the protagonist. Although they pose a challenge to the writing and to the reading of the novel, they also bring into play an element of mystery to the writing and reading, inviting the reader both to participate in it and allowing more freedom to his or her imagination. Similarly with a mystery novel, where a crime has been committed right at the beginning, the reader is engaged in sorting out why it happened, who did it and how. The reader is thrown directly into the 'murder scene' on the spot. And these procedures are not entirely new, nowadays. Films and TV series do it all the time. From one scene to the next we can be transported in less than a second to a different place and time.

Also, travelling in our days has the ability of, in a couple of hours, hurtling us

through space. At 1 pm we might be under a cloudy and rainy sky in London and at 3 pm find ourselves under a blazing sunny sky in Lisbon.

So far, I have explored and argued how Pat, the main character influences the narrative voice, dealing with the protagonist (to which I'll come back later in more detail). I investigated how she affects the architecture of the novel in broad terms and some of the consequences entailed by her.

Nevertheless, there are more salient features that are also of major importance to examine, concerning the nature of space and identity of the self of this character.

After the death of Pat's husband, Peter, she falls into depression. We know, at the end of the novel, that before she started travelling she remained as if in a coma for a long time (close to one year).

Depression is a paramount feature of the protagonist. Here I don't intend to expand extensively on depression, as that would lead me to another investigation altogether. However, the depression Pat suffers from is crucial in the implications it brings both to the development of the writing, the character's travel and ultimately to her identity. Therefore it is pertinent to present some characteristics and statements regarding depression.

Pat has what is called in medical terms a 'reactive depression' which developed into a more severe depression. In *Understanding Depression* by McKenzie we can find a definition of this illness:

This term [reactive depression] is used in two ways by doctors. In the first, reactive is used to describe a depression that is caused by a stressful event ...a stressful event can trigger more severe depression and people who are prone to depression can have stressful life events after their illness starts. If this happens it is difficult to pinpoint exactly whether the depression is truly a reaction to stress.

The term 'reactive' is also used to describe a depression in which a person can still react to and enjoy social situations. (McKenzie 2006, p. 37) [Permission to reproduce from McKenzie's work has been granted by Mark Thornton, Director, Family Doctor Books].

Depression, still quoting from the same book, has also a genetic origin, '...but

there are many genes involved and no one knows exactly how they work.’ (McKenzie 2006, p. 23). Also, the death of a spouse appears mentioned as one of the top 10 stressful life events (McKenzie 2006, p. 29). Amongst many of the features of this illness, I refer only to the ones applying to Pat, stated in the book alluded to above:

- Emotional numbness: ...You feel numb. You can't cry and you feel like there are no tears left. You may not feel that you are part of the world because you do not think that you have feelings. You may feel distant and unfeeling about even people very close to you such as your partner, family or children. (McKenzie 2006, p. 8)
- Concentration and memory problems: ...problems with concentration also lead to indecision and inattention; you may feel muddled and confused. (McKenzie 2006, p. 11)
- Mental and physical slowing: ... You feel tired all the time, it is hard to perform everyday chores, everything is an effort and it seems as if everything is slowed down. Your speech may be slow and monotonous and you may even move slowly. (McKenzie 2006, p. 15)
- Sex: Many people go off sex when they are depressed. There are many reasons for this. Some people do not feel able to fulfil a physically loving relationship when they are emotionally numb. (McKenzie 2006, p. 16)
- Lack of daylight... seasonal affective disorder (SAD). (McKenzie 2006, p. 33)

Finally, two more facts from McKenzie (2006):

1. At least one in five adults will suffer from depression in their lifetime.
2. Women are diagnosed as suffering from it twice as often as men. (McKenzie 2006, p. 3)

Turning now to a recount of a personal experience, I add quotations from Lewis's (2002) book, *Sunbathing in the Rain*. What happens is that:

Your old self is gone and in its place is a ghost that is unable to feel any pleasure in food, conversation or in any of your usual forms of entertainment. You become a body bag. Moving a pile of books can take days, as the objects in a room have a stronger will than your own. (Lewis 2002, p. xi) [Permission to reproduce from Lewis' work has been granted by Stuart Paterson, Contracts Assistant, HarperCollins Publishers UK].

Lewis, describing the way she felt while going through a bout of depression from which it took her two years to recover, says:

It was as if my personality files had been wiped. There was no way of knowing who I was any more, or who I might be when I finally got out of bed. (Lewis 2002, p. 29)

Pat's depression can be considered as a departure point, one at least amongst

others, since we could place it as well on the death of her husband, for instance. However, both these only precipitated an already latent condition (Marcia says at the end of the novel). As mentioned above, depression is triggered by a combination of factors not very well known and without having a clear point of origin. Moreover, in the novel, the state of depression is only mentioned in the third chapter and then, told explicitly by Marcia near the end of the narrative and not shown, even if during the novel there are several moments where Pat suffers from recurring bouts of depression, as can be inferred from the characteristics of the disease mentioned earlier. Briefly, we see her often tired; sleeping a lot; emotionally numb; refusing to engage in relationships and sex; having problems with memory and concentration and fleeing to sunny landscapes.

Looking again at the words of Lewis, at the beginning of her writing, she mentions:

Every episode of depression is a murder mystery...You are both the corpse and the detective without alibis – work, a social life- there's nowhere to go. Your job is to find out which part of you had died and why it had to be killed. (Lewis 2002, p. xi)

Further on, she continues:

The corpse I'm talking about here is you, the person you were before you became depressed. The only fortunate side effect of clinical depression's memory loss is that it helps your old, fake life, as you cross an internal Lethe on your way to the underworld. (Lewis 2002, p. 222)

Although Pat rejects the detective role and her Lethe is as much internal as it is external.

By engaging on travelling, Pat moves away from her old self, determined in inventing a new identity. And, I couldn't put in better words than Lefebvre's:

To change life, however, we must change space. Absolute revolution is our self-image and our mirage. (Lefebvre 1991, p. 190)

It is indeed an "absolute revolution" what Pat takes upon her. Nonetheless, this revolution reveals itself after all to be a trajectory towards total annihilation of a 'dissolved ego', to use Deleuze words (1998, p. 119) and ending in absolute stillness.

Counterbalancing this movement, Fred's journey is an example of an intellectual

quest. As Shiloh puts it:

We may conclude that fictional journey narratives can be broadly divided into two different types: the episodic, open-ended road story and the theological and deterministic tale of voyage and quest. The two types are, in profound sense, antithetical. In the traditional road story, historically associated with the picaresque, the disjointed and fragmented narrative is the form that best expresses the vision of the individual's alienation from society and his existence in a chaotic universe, governed by the capriciousness and absurdity of chance. The structured and goal-directed narrative of quest, omnipresent in mythologies, fairy tales, heroic epics or romances, conveys an idealized world-view, in which a heroic individual defies danger and risk, venturing out in defense of eternal human values. (Shiloh 2002, p. 4)

Hence, paraphrasing Shiloh, if Pat is the careless adventurer 'committed only to h[er]self and to the terms of fortune and chance' (p. 4), Fred is committed to a search which will lead him to the enlightenment of the object of his research work and to his own self enrichment, even if as discussed before these two different types of journey here in the novel are intertwined forming not only dynamic spaces and not separated or portrayed as antithetical, but also dynamic relationships between the characters.

The major relationship explored in the novel is the one between Pat and Fred. If, as mentioned before, Pat propels the narrative forward, mainly through the movement of her body, Fred not only contributes to the progress of the action of the story as well through his travelling, but also to the development of the web interlacing the different characters of the novel.

Firstly, Fred is the character who tries to engage with Pat by insisting in talking to her and establishing a relation with her. We see him in the first chapter asking her to share a taxi to go to Cairo and following her through the city streets. Nonetheless, Fred's desire to create a connection with Pat results from a complexity of motives.

Fred is a scholar who travels to seek information about a Norwegian writer, Carole Lynn, in order to write her biography. Hence Fred's journey aims to provide him knowledge. Furthermore, Fred is a character who privileges thinking processes, such as reasoning, rationality and planning, where memory, history and time play a determinant

role, in opposition to Pat. And it is precisely these elements that, partly, trigger his desire to know Pat, even if when Fred approaches Pat for the first time what he experiences is above all a physical attraction. He sees Pat as an extraordinary beautiful woman who he compares to Cleopatra and a goddess, as he considers Carole Lynn too, later on in the novel. However, added to the bodily desire and to curiosity, another dimension is associated – bewilderment and confusion provoked by a sense of ‘déjà vu’. A ‘déjà vu’ which refers not just to the parallel Fred establishes between Pat and Carole, but also to the fact that when Fred speaks with Pat for the first time, he doesn’t notice immediately that it’s not the first time he sees her.

Right at the beginning, Fred shares the bus seat with Pat not realising that she is a woman (as she completely wrapped in clothes), because almost all the other passengers on the bus are men he assumes that Pat is a man too. On one hand this reveals the sexual ambiguity of Pat: she in fact later on disguises herself as a man, her name can represent either a man or a woman and it has similar writing with the word ‘path’, as well as ‘pat’ is an adjective meaning glib and unconvincing. On the other hand, this indicates clearly Fred’s inability to place Pat, to understand her, as we can see more evidently on the latter scene of the same chapter when he finds her having breakfast at the hotel’s balcony. However, at the same time, the moment the bus arrives at its destination, Pat has to wake Fred, so that she can step out of the bus, and she does it by clawing her fingernails on Fred’s shoulder who puts his hands on top of her hands, allowing him to discover that she’s a woman by feeling her ring and ‘the smoothness of a woman’s hand’ (A, p. 5). Here too there are already clues, which define their relationship. Firstly, the physical contact established by Pat displays a forceful personality that will entail Fred’s involvement with her up to the point where, sometimes, he feels unbalanced and perturbed by this woman in an irrational and instinctive way, echoing that clasp of her hand on his body. Secondly, the ring

symbolises the bond linking these two characters, reinforced by the magical effect the ring will produce throughout the novel. It will be the ring (the object) working as a magnet that will bring them together. At the start, in the first chapter, it is through the ring that Fred realises that the woman on the bus is the same woman seated at the hotel's balcony the following morning, when they begin talking, and ultimately it is also the ring that working again as a magic magnet leads Fred to Tunisia, just to see if the woman hospitalised is Pat or not, even if he feels beforehand that it must be Pat. Although as a rational man he fights both with himself and Erik (he doesn't tell Erik about the existence of the ring) against that instinctive feeling, since the ring represents an extension of Pat's body.

Hence the ring plays a similar role to the ring of an ancient legend about the emperor Charlemagne who felt in love with a ring, a story mentioned at the beginning of the chapter about quickness, by Calvino, who states that

it is the movements of the ring that determine those of the characters and [...] it is the ring that establishes the relationships between them. Around the magic object there forms a kind of force field that is in fact the territory of the story itself. (Calvino 1996, p. 32)

Also, my intention with the mentioned scenes between Pat and Fred was to display exactitude in the sense Calvino, in part, defines it:

(2) an evocation of clear, incisive, memorable visual images [...] (Calvino 1996, p. 55)

In this sense, the crucial scene, in the first chapter, when Fred is struck with the image of Pat seated on the balcony of the hotel, due to the almost exact resemblance of this image with a photo he has of Carole Lynn (the writer whose life he is researching), not only he is perturbed by the superimposition of the past and the present, but also by the superimposition of a long dead woman and the one alive right before his eyes, even if, at this moment, Fred is unaware that these two women, Pat and Carole, share also a vagrant way of life too.

Moreover when Fred finds out that Pat has read a book by Carole Lynn, his

interest in Pat is intensified and justified, as now he can provide a rationale to himself for the desire he feels towards Pat as an intellectual desire, since he considers that Pat can contribute with relevant information for his research project.

Nevertheless, at this point in the novel, Fred doesn't realise that in Pat is already not entirely alive, in the sense of a balanced human being. I recall here, Lewis (2002, p. x) testimony (quoted before) about her state when suffering from depression: 'your old self is gone and in its place is a ghost'. Pat can be considered a ghost, a person like many of the people inhabiting the City of the Dead, the famous cemetery in Cairo, where she goes to, in the first chapter:

She knew many of these people living there considered themselves dead already too. She'd talked to some years before, listened to how suddenly, caught in a strike of misfortune, they'd ended up there leading such a wretched life that their only desire was to die. (A, p. 20)

To Fred, Pat can be seen also as a ghost by the way she keeps mysteriously appearing and disappearing before him. In the first chapter, Fred suddenly doesn't see her anymore and only knows, after some days, that she left the hotel through the hotel clerk. Then, by chance, in chapter four, Fred catches sight of Pat, first in Johannesburg airport, practically only to see her fleeing away again from him (as in the first chapter, on the bus). In chapter six, he sees her briefly on TV and finally, in the same chapter, knows about a woman, who might be Pat or not, hospitalised in Tunisia. This woman is in fact Pat.

Therefore these unexpected encounters between Fred and Pat seem as if Pat is in Fred's trajectory an apparition that could even be associated with the catholic visions of saints, stressing the God like figure of Pat from Fred's initial point of view.

Resorting to this device in the narrative of having these two characters appearing and disappearing was intentional. By creating a play of hide and seek concerning the relationship between Fred and Pat, I had the aim of enticing the reader into the novel, so that the reader could feel compelled to keep reading, using a process similar to the one

used in mystery, crime and suspense fiction, through suspense.

Still, before referring to the reader in more detail, and just to finish the previous point of the 'ghost' figure it is pertinent to add that Fred is haunted yet by another ghost – Carole Lynn. Throughout the novel we can see Fred debating how he should proceed with his work and struggling to find relevant information about the writer he is researching. One of the obstacles he confronts with is the elusive personality of Carole Lynn together with the dispersed nature of her writing and travels, mirroring Pat's movements and attitudes. Another great obstacle is time, since the places where Carole Lynn lived and wrote have considerably changed due to the huge gap in time between Carole's life (beginning of the twentieth century) and Fred's work. Furthermore, Fred is presented with two more problems he needs to overcome: the reticence of Helena Bowles in talking about Carole and how to deal with information disclosed by the mentally disturbed Dave, both features that echo Pat's refusal to talk about the past and her illness.

Fred works as a powerful connector, not only in terms of the writing, but also of the reading of the novel, mirroring the reader's reception and thus creating simultaneously a clenched and delicate bond between the diversity and complexity presented in the narrative.

One of aspects regarding this issue is the narrator. Whereas the narrative voice is minimised in relation to Pat, due to the elusiveness of this character, presenting her almost as a flat character and hence posing a challenge to the reader, in the sense that ‘it is especially through projected people that the reader becomes involved in the fictional world.’ (McHale 1989, p. 103) [Permission to reproduce from McHale’s work has been granted by Lizzy Yates, Permissions Administrator, T&F Royalty Department], when telling the story of Fred and the other characters the narrator displays a diverse narrative perspective corresponding to an omniscient narrator, who is reliable leading the reader to ‘take [it] as an authoritative account of the fictional truth’ (Rimmon-Kennan 2002, p. 101) [Permission to reproduce from Rimmon-Kennan’s work has been granted by Lizzy Yates, Permissions Administrator, T&F Royalty Department]. The account of Pat’s actions, on the other hand, due to this character’s unreliability and transient nature, is limited and silenced, as considered by Rimmon- Kennan (2002, p. 101), entailing the deferral of the narrative in what concerns the understanding of the character Pat, since the knowledge of her past is constantly held off, which can lead the reader to take up the challenge of puzzling out Pat’s story or cause confusion to the readers who

identify less with the protagonists’ adventures than with the strangeness they feel about themselves – for whom being or becoming someone constitutes the ultimate difficulty. (Bruckner in Barone (ed), 1996, p. 31) [Permission to reproduce from Bruckner’s work has been granted by Copyright Clearance Center].

By resorting to a different narrative perspective I intended not only to provide the reader with a less demanding reading experience of the novel, but also, as similar to Pat’s narrative voice, to reflect Fred, the other characters and the reader points of view. Therefore, despite the divergence of the narrative voice in the story, the narrator is characterised by the same effect – the blurring between the narrator and the character. Hence, when it comes to try understanding Pat’s character, the point of view imitates a detective, a role that is partly performed by Fred and also offered to the reader. As

examples of Fred playing the detective, we can see him searching Pat's bag at Johannesburg airport; following Pat in the streets of Cairo and even almost catching a flight to join her in Jordan. Moreover, he is also a detective by the work he develops in trying to establish Carole Lynn's biography. For this reason, showing that he is already engaged in a searching mission, he prevents himself from launching into another quest, also due to the fact that he restrains himself to follow his body's desires, since his mind intercepts the bodily impulses. Moreover Fred is disturbed by the effects on his body as a result of the physical travelling conditions.

Though Pat and Fred are portrayed in many aspects almost as two opposite characters, they, paradoxically, share also several features, besides the ones mentioned in chapter one in the discussion about space. Both Fred and Pat are committed to a search, albeit the stark contrast between the natures of each search, as pointed out earlier.

Finally, at the end of the novel, we find the same magic element linking Fred and Pat through the way Fred observes the space where Pat has stopped. He is fascinated by the landscape and, not only through space, he feels that he at last understands Pat, indicating a prescient knowledge that this is Pat's last stop, but also by the fact that he complies with her by not telling Marcia and Erik about the timetable displayed on the wall and surmising that Pat must have had a hard life. Likewise, Pat acknowledges that Fred is after all someone she could count on. At last, both he and Pat have reached the end of their journeys, even if antithetical, with gained insight as a result of their trajectories in what concerns their relationship.

As a conclusion, the relationship between these two characters can be defined as a delicate and somewhat undefined bond, in the sense that they cannot actually comprehend the link they formed, remaining as if in suspension, instead of being activated in terms of plot.

On the contrary, the relation between Pat and Erik displays simultaneously open conflict and engagement.

The detective role Fred was unable to pursue is taken up by Erik. Erik emerges as an energetic character, eager to take action and with a keen desire to accept the challenge, provided by chance, firstly of meeting Pat and, then, of unravelling the puzzle that Pat signifies.

In opposition to Fred, Erik doesn't have problems with his body. In fact, we know that he gave up from pursuing a PhD, because he realised he wanted instead to get involved physically with the world. Hence, his final occupation is to be a chef, that is, he ends up by performing a profession which implies working mainly with his hands.

So, in what regards his relation with Pat, Erik participates in the healing of her body by doing physical exercises to facilitate Pat recovering her mobility, as well as taking care of all the manual chores such as cooking, doing the dishes, since Pat is, when they met the beginning of their relation, physically disabled and, also, mentally disturbed.

By his persistence, Erik not only manages to create a bond with Pat but also falls in love with her. However, the moment Pat decides she is capable of getting on her two feet again, their relationship changes. Once Pat, as phoenix rising from the ashes, is ready to carry on travelling and hence equally on renewing the control of her destiny, she dismisses Erik of her life. Again, she is determined 'not to be caught in any dependence on people' (A, p. 19). Nonetheless, Pat has evolved and she is not the same as she was at the start of the novel. Now, near the end of the story, despite her strong-willed character, she has changed, revealed by her response to Erik's kiss and her invitation to Erik to accompany her to the USA.

Erik, who shares many personality traits with Pat, also lets himself go by following her, although knowing that their relationship has no future. Still, being both

characters 'governed by the capriciousness and absurdity of chance' (Shiloh 2002, p. 4), they follow, at this point in the novel, the path of chance all the way to the end.

Only after landing on the blanket of ice and snow in New York and the interference of Marcia in Erik's life, he finally sees clearly that he reached a dead end, concerning his relationship with Pat and leaves her, mirroring a movement characteristic of Pat.

The problem between them is that whereas Pat is professionally retired and has excluded herself from society, Erik, a much younger character, is still searching for new the opportunities and a new life.

Therefore, the last scene when he, Fred and Marcia go to Pat's house, is nothing but a kind of swansong, in the sense that Erik in a final attempt sings to a dying swan, with his appeal for her to come to see the sea with him - the hopelessly last hurrah.

Marcia and Pat's relationship turns out to be irretrievable since both characters cannot reconcile the past with the present. As Pat entirely refuses the past, she cannot endure to develop a relation with someone from her past. Likewise, although differently, Marcia unable to contact Pat is prevented from establishing the bridge uniting the friend she knew years ago with the Pat of the present. The gap of time and space produced between Pat's departure from New York and her return, has created a black void which Marcia cannot fill in and hence provokes an irreparable rupture between them.

The only character able to establish a complex and unfailing bond with Pat is her sister, Kate.

We know that between the two sisters there is a strong alliance derived not only through kinship, which anyway doesn't follow a straight blood tie since they were born from different fathers, but also, more significantly, they share a common past. And it is due to the nature of their difficult past that, from their childhood onwards, they felt the

need to create an everlasting and solid relation. Therefore, we find that they always communicate with each other, despite the distance in space separating them and the irregularity with which Pat contacts her sister during her travels.

In the third chapter, Pat visits her sister and it is finally at this point in the narrative that the reader starts to discover facts about Pat's past. We are informed that Pat's husband (Peter) has died and that his death was the event that triggered Pat's depression and led her to wandering throughout the earth; that they spent their infancy and adolescence living and growing up with a disruptive family life. Furthermore, we find out that Pat and Kate's mother was mentally unreliable and an alcoholic. More than an absent mother, unable to protect, educate and take care of her children, she becomes a kind of a monster. When their mother's unstable condition aggravates family life Kate's father secludes her to a room of the house and prevents both sisters of contacting their mother, as if she were a monster. Later we are aware that Pat's father left the family house, abandoning his daughter. Not surprisingly then Pat absolutely rejects her father. To her, the moment he left her behind with a crazy mother, he was a dead man (A, p. 67). So, not only did Pat grow up both with an absent mother and father, but also had to cope with the death of her husband. Hence, she is not just a deterritorialized person, in terms of space, but equally an orphan (which explains her work for an orphanage) with no other family but her sister. Further on the novel (in chapter five), we understand as well that both sisters had to take care of one another: 'To Kate, Pat was both a mother and a daughter' (A, p. 97). Thus we perceive that their relationship goes beyond a relation between sisters. Taking up the role of both mother and daughter entails a deepened emotional involvement between the sisters. This is what explains the existence of a pact between these two characters. Being the younger sister, Kate, like a daughter, looks up to Pat and so resists talking about the past, respecting Pat's refusal of the past, as well as the way Pat chose to live her life. Switching to the role of mother,

Kate later on runs to take care of Pat when she is hospitalised in Tunisia.

However, now, Pat has withdrawn from the roles of mother and daughter towards her sister as a result of her determination in severing the bond between her and people. Still she maintains an atavistic relationship with Kate in the present. When Pat has to face up with difficult moments, she inevitably feels the necessity to recourse to her sister. That's why Pat goes to her sister's house after being taken care by an Egyptian family, after she had collapsed. The attention, love and the attributes of family ties she experiences while staying with the Egyptian family provokes in her such an overwhelming sense of loss the moment she parts from them that she goes directly to see her sister. The same happens when Pat realises that her trajectory has been completely the opposite of the one she wished to follow, as she has gone back to places where she had been with her husband, leading her towards the past, instead of the future. Then, once again, she asks Kate's help to enter into unexplored and new space – Sicily.

Therefore, we can conclude that Kate works as a lifebuoy to Pat.

At the very end of the novel, Pat resorts to a similar device that I'll call anchor, in order to follow the sea metaphor from above, by letting herself to establish a relationship with the men of the diner, Bill, Lenny and Jack. In fact, now, not only Pat has marooned herself in a secluded place as she rigidly sets herself out to follow a strict life by enforced rules. She constantly and obsessively writes down every single task she has to achieve; each of the chores slot into a tight timetable she devised, in another attempt to steer her life in a completely different direction. At the moment, instead of freedom associated with movement and open space, she closes herself, without realising that by doing this she is denying her own identity, despite paradoxically telling the truth about herself to her new restaurant fellows, whom she sees only once a week according to her self imposed rules. She tells them the truth, but forbids them from intruding into

her life with a lie. By restricting herself to repetition and preventing herself from opening up to the opportunities chance provides and thus to any real development, she is already in the process of killing her self. Or has Bryden (2007, p. 107) [Permission to reproduce from Bryden's work has been granted by Lauren Russell, Rights Co-ordinator, Palgrave Macmillan] puts referring to Deleuze argument about a moment in Michel Tounier's book, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (a version of Robinson Crusoe's story) when the protagonist immerses himself in an intense labour following a strict organisation what he is doing 'is finding in this programme of activity a substitute for Others.' As in the case of *Away*, this replacement of the other by chores ends in disaster. Nonetheless, as Pat is not aware that she is stopping herself altogether from living, paradoxically, it is only when she steps outside into the open air and just through an epiphany that she realises that in fact she is no longer living.

Conclusion

I start by referring to the creative work. In this, the aims were to experiment, pushing narrative boundaries through the protagonist and her interrelation with space, with the intent of producing a new perspective on how a mentally unbalanced character can transform her suffering into travelling, to construct and be constructed by space. However, I don't claim to have presented a completely innovative novel, partly due to the assumption that no novel can be entirely and absolutely new, due to my limitations as a reader, that is, the impossibility of being aware of every ground-breaking text.

Bearing in mind that this experimental part could alienate the reader, I had the purpose of counterbalancing that part with a more conventional narrative, to put it simply, through the story of the other characters in the novel. Nevertheless, these two narratives are not meant to be considered as constituting a binary opposition, but to be interrelated through a dynamic process, such as the dynamic process that space is. Although, ultimately, I had the intent to reveal that space and characters are elusive.

All these questions, regarding the nature of space and characters are explored in Part I and III of this commentary, where I have tried to expose and explain the mechanisms, procedures, strategies and results underpinning the composition of my novel *Away*.

In Part II, I investigated the role of space in some in Auster's narratives, arguing that most characters' selves of Auster's work are equated with space, focusing on the characters who in the end reveal, borrowing Alford's (1995) [Permission to reproduce from Alford's work has been granted by Rebecca Soares, Rights and Permissions Assistant, The University of Wisconsin Press] word, their 'misapprehension' of their interrelatedness with space and, hence, ending up by being obliterated from the text. Although that elimination is not necessarily equivalent to death. Instead, I suggest, that

this death can also be interpreted as an act of levitation which is explored in *MV*. Either way, I contend, the result is similar: the characters' disembodiment and disintegration display that the 'end is only imaginary', as Anna Blumme of *CLT* reminds us.

And imagination as space is constantly constructed and deconstructed, as well as it constructs and deconstructs us at the same time. The idea of stretching this perpetual fluidity and transient nature of both characters and space far beyond our view, grasp and comprehension was the central element I wanted to investigate in my project.

Also, no doubt, my writing reflects the disperse nature of my reading. Here, too, I am in debt to a random peregrination. Besides the authors and works explored in my research, testifying the influence on my writing many others loom underneath.

One of them is Bruce Chatwin due to his confessed restlessness and endless curiosity about different places, people and stories. As he writes in *Anatomy of Restlessness*.

In one of his gloomier moments Pascal said that all man's unhappiness stemmed from a single cause, his inability to remain quietly in a room. 'Notre nature,' he wrote, 'est dans le mouvement...La seule chose qui nous console de nos misères est le divertissement.' Diversion. Distraction. Fantasy. Change of fashion, food, love and landscape. We need them as the air we breathe. Without change our brains and bodies rot. The man who sits quietly in a shuttered room is likely to be mad, tortured by hallucinations and introspection. (Chatwin 1996, p. 100)[Permission to reproduce from Chatwin's work has been granted by Sarah McMahon, Permissions Manager, Random House Group Archive & Library].

Chatwin emphasises this point further:

'He who does not travel does not know the value of men,' said Ib'n Battuta, the indefatigable Arab wanderer who strolled from Tangier to China and back for the sake of it. But travel does not merely broaden the mind. It makes the mind. (Chatwin 1996, p. 101)

Before Chatwin, so did E. M. Forster's writing portray the irresistible appeal towards foreign cultures and landscapes, exploring breaks between boundaries. As Gail Fincham notes about *A Passage to India*:

The novel's narrative structure graphically dramatises Wilson's remarks quoted at the opening of this chapter on space as 'distance to be crossed, an openness between points, one of which is occupied by a perceiving

subject, filled by something, sunlight, moonlight, hot dust, cold mud or emptiness'. Both the title of *A Passage to India* and Adela's project of seeing 'the real India' draw the reader's attentions to distances to be crossed, as well as gaps or spaces between geographical locations. The contrast between free space and regulated space is insistently foregrounded from the first sentence of the first chapter, which moves from the city of Chandrapore to the far-off, tantalising Caves: 'Except for the Marabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary.' Dominating the novel physically and symbolically, the Caves are, from the start, mysteriously distant and disturbing.' (Fincham 2008, pp. 45, 46) [Permission to reproduce from Fincham's work has been granted by Lauren Russell, Rights Co-ordinator, Palgrave Macmillan].

In what regards the compelling fascination of writing in and about different places the list would be endless.

The uncertainty, that disturbance provided by chance that space offers to me relates to another genre that plays a significant role in my writing: the suspense novel, particularly the works of Raymond Chandler and Patricia Highsmith. The labyrinthian spaces and movements displayed by characters of this genre, together with the play between darkness and light, related to motives, personalities, time, besides space, that is, in other words, the play between what is visible and invisible.

However, I admit that probably besides Auster another great influence lurking deep down in my creative work is the writing of Marguerite Duras. Auster avows that 'the influence of Beckett was so strong that I couldn't see my way beyond it.' (Auster 1998, p. 275). I could say exactly the same regarding Duras' work. Hence, instead of examining Auster's work, I could have written an alternative essay on Duras' work.

Therefore, just as a brief tribute to Duras' influence on my writing, at this point, I'll mention, in short, to some aspects pertinent to my work, referring only to *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*.

Particularly Pat's character and her story derive from the lonely female protagonists of Duras' narratives.

The themes and elements present in *RLVS*, which marks a turning point in

Duras' writing, since after as Carole Murphy considers:

Successive works are stripped bare of plot, characters and verbiage in a rhythmic progression towards silence and the void. (Murphy 1982, p. 13)

RLVS already displays this void which contaminates all the elements in the narrative.

Lol V. Stein, the protagonist, of *RLVS*, like many others in Duras work falls into a kind of madness after

a parting from the other, [...] the impossibility of union with the love object and the desire to go beyond these limitations. (Udris 1993, p. 13)
[Permission to reproduce from Udris' work has been granted by Fred van der Zee, Editions Rodopi B.V.]

Once at the ball Lol sees that the man she loves, Michael Richardson, leaves with another woman, Lol gradually wanders through a life that progressively becomes a limitless void. Even, if at first, she suffers, the narrator indicates clearly that her pain is pointless:

La prostration de Lol, dit-on, fut alors marquée par des signes de souffrance. Mais qu'est-ce à dire qu'une souffrance sans subject? (Duras 1997, p. 748) [Permission to reproduce from French authors is allowed by French law].

And so, afterwards, although she marries without will:

Ainsi, Lol fut mariée sans avoir voulu, de la façon qui lui convenait, sans passer par la sauvagerie d'un choix (Duras 1997, p. 752)

Lol becomes absent, both to her life and others. Mechanically she takes care of her children and house chores and then starts walking without aim, splitting her life between two apparently opposed spaces – the closed space of the house and the open space of S. Thala, but which in fact are equivalent, as Didier observes:

Il y a, en effect, l'espace de l'errance, de la promenade sans but qui a priori semblerait un espace ouvert; et puis l'espace d'enfermement, enfermement dans la salle de casino, dans la chambre, dans la folie; mais l'espace est finalement le même, ni ouvert, ni fermé, puisque la folie est à la fois errance et enfermement, promenade sans fin d'une emurée – je prononce le mot «folie», faute de mieux, mais je sais que dans cette absence généralisée, le mot qui pourrait désigner l'état de Lol, lui aussi, est absent, que «folie» n'est qu'une approximation qui fausse considérablement les choses. On vient ici donc à cet espace paradoxal qui est à la fois fermeture et vide illimité. (Didier 1985, p. 73)

As the narrator says: 'l'approche de Lol n'existe pas. On ne peut pas se rapprocher ou s'éloigner d'elle' (Duras 1997, p. 795).

As a consequence, if at the beginning, one narrator starts by expressing continuous doubts and negative sentences about Lol:

Elle a un frère plus âgé qu'elle de neuf ans – je ne l'ai jamais vu – on dit qu'il vit à Paris. Ses parents sont morts. Je n'ai rien entendu dire sur l'enfance de Lol V. Stein qui m'a frappé (Duras 1997, p. 741)

Later another narrator avows: 'J'invente, je vois.' (Duras 1997, p. 766). Hence as Didier concludes:

Ce phénomène d'absence va opérer à tous les axes de la construction romanesque: l'espace, le temps, le personnage et finalement l'instance narrative elle-même. (Didier 1985, p. 72)

Therefore, *RLVS* appears as a story about an amnesiac character, to paraphrase Didier.

The themes and elements of loss of memory; absence; void; the poignancy of an impossible desire; madness; silence; prostration; emptiness of space and of self-identity; fluidity of movement together with the brutal incisiveness of Duras' words create in my writing a spell under which I succumb to an implacable reign, using Mertens' words who adds: 'C'est lancinant.C'est incurable. Ça ne vous lâche plus.' (Mertens 1985, p. 13).

All these aspects work as a magnetic field that I desired and wish to continue exploring in my writing. As a writer, I couldn't agree more with Duras when she said:

A progressive loss of identity is the most desirable experience one can know. (Duras in Bettina Knapp 1975, *Off-stage Voices: Interviews with Modern French Dramatists*, ed. Alba America [Troy, NY: the Whitstin Publishing co, p. 134], quoted by Murphy 1982, p. 20)

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