

## *No Man's Land*

This day was Juliette's to determine, and she was determined. She wanted to retrace the Wall she remembered from decades past and to walk through and within physical spaces that had been off-limits the first time she had visited Berlin. She wanted to go into the no man's land she had seen only at a distance and touch what before had been beyond her reach.

Tareq ran his finger along the route she had penciled onto the map spread out before them. Today they sat at a table for four, using more than half of the area to plot out their way. Juliette stood behind him, leaning around his shoulder to look at the map. "Make sense?" she asked him. He nodded.

"Now," she said, turning so that she could look him in the eye, "I'll let you figure out how to get us to the Wollankstrasse station to start. After that, we know where to walk." One of the wonders of Berlin, in Juliette's opinion, was its dense and interconnected system of trains, streetcars and buses. It seemed you could get within 100 feet of any destination in the city with the right combination of these three methods of transportation. Tareq was quicker at identifying the transport connections, and she was glad for that. He found the optimal route on his smartphone and held it up for approval.

"You're getting really good at that thing," she told him, lifting her coffee cup to her mouth. She sat down at the table, and smiled up at him.

"It's like carrying a little computer in my pocket," he replied with delight. "Very useful."

Tareq folded the map carefully as Juliette packed her purse. They set out on their journey, reference material at the ready, and made their way to their first destination. The Wollankstrasse station, which loomed large in Juliette's memory, turned out to be much like any other station. The first time she had visited Berlin, the station's northeast exit was a border patrol crossing, but now people walked in and out as though it were normal because it was, in fact, normal. "I keep forgetting," she told Tareq, "just because the Wall has just come down for me, it's been down for everyone in Berlin for a long time."

They walked unceremoniously through the exit and followed their route under the train's tracks to a pedestrian path that was wedged into an unkempt strip of land and overgrown with weeds. "Is this part of the no man's land?" Juliette asked.

Tareq wasn't sure either. The path seemed like a forgotten wilderness in an otherwise urban landscape.

Soon they reached the square that commemorated the fall of the Wall. "Look," Juliette pointed across the tracks. "That's the station where people first came into West Berlin in '89." Juliette snapped a photo. After she took the photo, she wasn't sure it had any value; better to look at the photos that showed people emerging into freedom for the first time. She ran the palm of her hand across Tareq's shoulders. "Let me take your picture," she said to Tareq.

"Mine? Why?"

"Freedom," she replied. "Smile."

They looked together at his expression on the camera's screen, the momentous train station behind him. "This may be my favorite picture of you yet," she told him, kissing him on the cheek.

Everywhere they went, they were greeted with the normalcy of the toppled Wall. Most traces of the Wall had been entirely obliterated, and where it remained, it had often been transformed into something beautiful. The infamous Death Strip, once strewn with barbed wire and land mines, was now home to a park where children played and dogs ran. The threat of gunfire had long since been replaced with weekend karaoke. A preserved section of the Wall still provided a canvas for graffiti artists, but it had lost any sense of its original context. "All things new," Juliette mused aloud.

They watched some jugglers and then continued on to the Berlin Wall Memorial. From an observation tower, they took in the view of the reunited city, the scar from the Wall now barely visible. Back on the ground, they walked along a section of the Wall preserved as it was and which now served as a memorial to the more than 250 people who died trying to get from East to West. Near this section of Wall was a diminutive chapel, its twig-like structure rooted in the place where the large stone Church of Reconciliation had once stood. A photo showed the church stranded in the no man's land, defiantly crying for its own name, until the East German government blew it up in 1985.

They walked on to the New Synagogue, which miraculously escaped destruction on Kristallnacht in 1938 only to be bombed heavily during the war. Juliette craned her neck to get a good look at the reconstructed Moorish facade with its imposing dome. "I wonder how big this dome is in comparison to the one at Reichstag," she thought out loud as they stood across the street from the entrance. Inside they visited the synagogue's standing exhibition and honored it as a place of meditation.

When they left the synagogue, it was well past lunchtime, and both Tareq and Juliette were ready to rest. They were now in a part of Berlin that was more familiar; the Pergamon and Egyptian museums of the day before were not far away, and the Fernsehturm in Alexanderplatz and the skyscrapers of Potsdamerplatz provided a fair reckoning of east and west.

They stumbled onto a café in a courtyard that even the locals seemed to have forgotten. The small cobblestone square, dotted with tables for two, had nearly succumbed to the afternoon's shadows, but one patch still clung to sunlight. Tareq and Juliette gravitated there, and Tareq motioned with a heavy arm to the waiter. After they placed their order, they sat in silence; the weight of the morning had sapped their energy for conversation. So many people had died trying to escape over, under, through, across and around the Berlin Wall. So many more had been separated from those they loved.

Quiet came easily to Juliette and Tareq, both separately and together, and they felt comfort in each other's presence, with or without words. "Coffee?" Tareq asked. This was the first word for either of them in more than 10 minutes.

"That would be nice," Juliette replied and returned them to their silence.

When the waiter brought the bill, Tareq took it from the waiter's hand before he could put it on the table. "Let me get that," Juliette insisted, trying to grab the piece of paper from Tareq, but he shook his head. "Okay," she conceded, "but when you get to New York, it's my treat."

He shrugged his shoulders in reply. "Where to?" he asked. There were more destinations on her route, but he was hoping she had had enough.

"Back to the hotel," she read his mind.

On the way back, they ended up passing one more place on her list: the Palace of Tears, the station where East Germans had said goodbye to loved ones returning to the West. This particular checkpoint was only ever one-way: it was solely for those leaving East Berlin. No one from the West entered here – there were no hellos at the Palace of Tears, only farewells. And those who parted knew that they might never see one another again.

Juliette and Tareq were now on familiar territory. Not much farther and they would be back at Checkpoint Charlie, and just a few minutes beyond that was Juliette's hotel. As they walked, Juliette thought about walls and ways to overcome them. You could climb over them, she thought, walk around them, tunnel under them or even fly over them. But in the end, the only permanent solution was to tear them down.

Tareq thought more about the people separated by the walls. In his work with refugees, he had seen many families torn apart. A wall was a weapon, he thought. The only solution was disarmament. As they walked, he looked at the disarmed Berlin around him, its reunited present more impressive than its divided past. People walked without borders and went freely about their daily lives. Berlin looked and felt like any other city.

And certainly the days of a communist economic system were over, and advertisements abounded. As they passed a kiosk, Tareq put out his arm all of a sudden and stopped Juliette in her tracks. "Look," he said. "Would you like to see this?" He pointed to a poster for a showing of a film version of *Romeo and Juliet*. "It is tomorrow night. In English."

"Would you like to go?" Juliette loathed this story, but if Tareq wanted to see it, she would go along.

"I do not know much Shakespeare," he replied. "Perhaps I ought to." He smiled at her, and it occurred to Juliette that this might be his first smile since breakfast. "For my general education." They both laughed. It was a relief to laugh once again.

"Then let's go," she replied. "You know," Juliette thought out loud as they resumed their walk, "I wonder whatever happened to Jamila and Magdy," To her, they were a Juliet and a Romeo.

"Who?" Tareq asked.

"Jamila, the young woman I met on the bus to Gaza. And Magdy, at the carpet factory. Their child would be a toddler now."

Tareq remembered.

"You know, you opened her letter."

"The letter," he enunciated clearly.

"Yes, the letter you opened that wasn't addressed to you." She eyed him askance. It still took her aback that he was capable of opening a piece of private correspondence. But she accepted that in Tareq's world to open a private letter could be a matter of life and death. He was trained to suspect ill intent first and to trust only when ill intent could be ruled out. He did not default to such niceties as the inviolability of personal correspondence. He took control of evidence, assessed information, weighed the validity of different types of proof, and then drew conclusions.

"I remember your mocking me," she recalled, "saying that Mark and I were out to save the whole Middle East."

"Perhaps that was not fair," Tareq acknowledged.

"No, it was fair. I knew what you meant." She knew that Americans could be annoyingly naïve. "I valued your candor. You told me exactly what you were thinking." He nodded his appreciation. Juliette paused, and then gave in to her curiosity. "Tareq, tell me, what did you think of me when we first met?"

They were standing at a street corner now, and the light was flashing to indicate it was time to cross. Tareq stopped and looked around for somewhere suitable to disclose his answer. He took her elbow to cross the street to a grassy square lined with benches facing inward to a waterless fountain. When they were seated, he replied to her question. "What did I think of you?" He wasn't sure he wanted her to know his first impressions, but she had asked. "Do not be angry with me. I will tell you the truth. When I first met you, I did not like you. I am sorry to say this, but I did not like you."

"You didn't?" Juliette was surprised.

"I did not dislike you, either," he added. "But I thought you were another tourist. To you Egypt was hot and the women were cruelly clothed for the weather. All this I had heard before."

"And I thought you were awfully dismissive. *They are accustomed to it*, you said, as if that made it okay."

It had not occurred to Tareq that perhaps she had not immediately liked him, either.

"But if you didn't like me, then why did you offer to take me to the pyramids? Why did you take the time to show me around?"

"Juliette, I am Muslim. I believe in the honor of hospitality. You were my guest. And you were in need of assistance."

"I suppose I was," Juliette agreed.

"And," he paused to prepare himself adequately for his admission, "eventually I understood that I was in need of your assistance." His eyes landed on hers and thanked her for the hospitality she had unwittingly given him. "I needed to hear what you said to me."

"What did I say to you?" Juliette asked.

"Many things. You knew about Yasmeen. Mark had told you about her letters. This made me angry."

"Married people tend to tell each other things," Juliette offered. This wasn't always true, she knew, but it was the sort of transparency to which she aspired.

Tareq didn't respond. "And I liked the way you said my name."

"Tareq."

"Yes?"

"Nothing. Just saying your name."

## *About Juliette*

Tareq appeared in the lobby just as Juliette was sitting down to breakfast. He walked to the table, but did not take a seat. “My cousin has pressing need of me today. Business I must attend to in his absence. I am sorry. I will not be able to visit the Olympic Stadium with you.”

“Oh,” she said, trying to disguise her disappointment. “Do you have time for a coffee?”

“No, unfortunately not. I must leave now to catch a train to Halle. A delivery my cousin prefers to be made in person. A rare book,” he pointed to the carefully wrapped package in his hand. “But if I leave now, I will return in plenty of time for the film this evening. I will send you a text message.”

“But you don’t like texts,” she teased.

His eyes twinkled. “I will send you a text message. I promise.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek tenderly. “I am sorry to leave you.”

“I’ll be fine. Your cousin’s book seems important.”

He caressed her shoulder, smiled, and was gone.

His unpredicted absence created a hole in her that she could feel. The past few days in Berlin with him had been *fun*, fun in a way that she had almost forgotten was possible. Even the day before, with its burden of history, had been fun because he was there. Juliette didn’t generally aspire to fun. Her world was thoughtful, well-researched and expertly edited. But Berlin with Tareq was fun, and she wanted more.

She took her time at breakfast and reviewed the guidebook’s information about the Olympic Stadium. The Stadium, she noticed, was near the Charlottenburg Palace and its hall of mirrors. She retraced memories of that day in her mind: Tareq’s reflection in the mirror, falling asleep on his shoulder, the museum, the concert. And dinner. It was hard to believe how much had transpired since then in so little time.

She finished her breakfast, checked her purse for essentials, and then left the hotel behind her. With Tareq by her side, she hadn’t taken much responsibility for remembering routes, but she knew which way to turn for the U-Bahn Station. As

she boarded the train, she received a text. “I am on the train to Halle. Tareq.” Emily would tease him, Juliette thought, just as she teased Juliette. *Old people*, Emily explained to her mother once, wrote texts as though they were formal communications and signed their names as though texts were letters even though their names appeared at the top of the screen.

Juliette had long wanted to visit Berlin’s historic Olympic Stadium. It had been on her list for her first trip to Berlin, but driving rain on her last day in the city had dissuaded her from the outdoor venue. But now she walked among its monumental columns and down to the field itself. She thought of Jesse Owens, who had angered Adolf Hitler by showing that a man with dark skin could out-compete those of Aryan heritage. This was a venue that had witnessed a wall coming down, even if it hadn’t ended a conflict. She wanted to tell Tareq this, so she sent him a text. He replied quickly that he was almost in Halle and would text her again when he boarded the return train.

After a final panoramic view of the stadium, Juliette turned back to the heart of Charlottenburg. It would take roughly an hour to walk back to the Palace, but she had no reason not to spend her time that way. When she got to the Palace, she waved to its dome and felt Tareq’s absence like an empty hanger waiting for its coat. She found a place for lunch; it was odd to eat alone again, she thought, and yet in real life, such as it was, she ate alone most of the time. But now sitting alone felt strange, empty and even unnatural. It was quiet, but not in the way that lunch had been quiet the day before. Together and quiet was vastly different than alone and quiet.

Without paying much attention, she flipped through the guidebook and looked at the map again. She glanced down at her phone, hoping she’d missed a text from him, but no. Pushing away her half-eaten sandwich, she thought about ordering coffee. But without him there to share it with, she decided against it. She looked at the phone again; so much time yet that afternoon before he would return. She opened the guidebook again to see what it might suggest, and this time an entry for a vintage record store caught her eye. She double-checked that she had all her belongings, wrapped herself in the blue pashmina, and headed off in the store’s direction.

When she entered the store, she immediately knew where she was. The store had a familiar scent, and the array of albums evoked the vintage record stores she knew from home. The customers, too, seemed familiar; they could blend seamlessly, Juliette thought, into any vintage record store in New York. These shoppers were not, to say the least, climbing the corporate ladder. Juliette stood out in her more traditional attire and unadulterated hair. She missed Emily.

An employee from the store approached her and offered assistance in English. Was there anything in particular she was looking for? Juliette thought for a moment, bit her lip, and thought some more. The record expert waited patiently. Then the name “Oum Kalthoum” sprang from her mouth. Juliette was surprised to realize that this was in fact why she had come to the store in the first place. “Do you have anything by Oum Kalthoum?”

“I believe we do,” he replied. He walked her over to the counter and asked her to wait. From where she stood, Juliette could see him flipping through a carton of albums, and after a few minutes, he returned with a record. The cover featured the Mother of Egypt, smiling and wearing a pair of glasses that clearly dated the recording. And across the top was her signature.

“I’ll take it,” Juliette stated without hesitation. “Thank you.”

Just then her phone pinged. The message from Tareq read that he would return to Berlin by 4 o’clock and asked her to meet him at the main train station then. She replied simply, “yes.”

Their reunion in the train station was not dramatic as it had been at the airport. But they had missed each other during the day. Tareq would have liked her company in the train to Halle and back, would have liked to walk around the university with her, and would have liked to have had her near him when he dropped off the book. Now with her before him again, he wondered why he had not asked her to come along on the errand.

But at least now the *goodbye* had turned into *hello*, and they set out in the direction of the movie theater. They had plenty of time to grab some pizza and catch up on the day. He wanted to hear about the stadium, she wanted to hear about Halle.

“But what else did you do today?” he asked. Her tour of the stadium had obviously not occupied her for the whole time they had been apart.

“Just wandered,” she replied. She had the record safely in her bag, but wanted to save it for the right moment, which did not feel like then.

After pizza, they found coffee, and after coffee, they walked to the theater. They settled into their seats. The theater was nearly empty and remained that way. Juliette made a decision to like the film as much as she possibly could and consoled herself that among the many versions of *Romeo and Juliette*, this was one that she found less objectionable than the others.

When the film ended, she was glad to be out in the night air. As they walked down the theater’s steps, Tareq offered both his arm and his unequivocal opinion. “I do not like this film,” he judged as they crossed the street into a large park. “They did not need to die.”

“My point exactly,” Juliette concurred. She would happily acknowledge Shakespeare as one of the greatest authors of the English language, but if she could speak with the master himself, she would tell him that she and Tareq agreed: they did not need to die at the end.

“Why did your parents call you Juliette?” Tareq was befuddled. “Juliette, oh Juliette, wherefore art thou Juliette?”

“She’s the one who says that actually. It’s *Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo.*”

“Of course,” he said, his indignation rising. “But why did your parents call you Juliette? Did they not know the story?”

Tareq’s question made Juliette practically guffaw. Could it be that anyone might not know Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*? “I tried using my middle name for a while. But that one isn’t any better.”

“What is your middle name?”

“Amelia.”

“That is beautiful. What is the matter with that name?”

“In the United States, when I was growing up, the most famous Amelia was Earhart. A pioneering aviator, but she died tragically, too.” There was nothing funny about Amelia Earhart’s disappearance and death, but they both laughed in spite of themselves.

“So I stuck with Juliette. That Juliet,” she pointed back in the direction of the theater, “she’s dead anyway. It’s my name now.”

“Yes, you are right. And it is a beautiful name. I like it. But I would not choose it. It is a difficult name, I think.” And it had been a difficult name. For as long as she could remember, when she introduced herself, people would say, “Like Romeo and Juliet?” And if they didn’t say it out loud, she was sure they were thinking it, placing her squarely in a 400 year-old melodrama about two star-crossed teenagers so destabilized by love that they had killed themselves in their machinations to be together. People would say, “Oh, what a romantic name.” But to Juliette, it wasn’t a romantic name at all. It was the name of a fictional girl who made rash decisions to disastrous effect.

“I did not know this when we selected your cartouche,” he continued.

“It’s okay. After the cartouche, I think I started liking my name better. What about Tareq? Tareq, Tareq, wherefore art thou Tareq?”

“Ah, this is a story.” His eyes gleamed. “You will see I have been a troublesome creature since my birth. Tareq means ‘he who knocks at the door in the middle of the night.’ Or maybe you would say, he who *pounds* on the door in the middle of the night.”

“How did your parents choose that?”

“My mother always said that I woke her up to give birth to me. I was born in the middle of the night, and too early in my mother’s pregnancy. She said it was as though I was pounding on the door and begging to enter life. And when I was born, I was cross. She said I looked at her as if to say, *Why did you keep me in there so long!*”

“I’d like to meet your mother,” Juliette thought out loud. But as soon as she said this, she realized that in all likelihood, she would never meet his mother. In some

parallel universe, though, Juliette thought, she would tell his mother how Tareq had pounded at her door in the middle of the night, too.

“One thing I did not understand. What does it mean, *Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized?*”

“That’s a Christian concept,” Juliette explained. “Your given name is sometimes called your baptismal name. It’s the name given to a child officially during the baptism ritual in the church. It’s the name that sort of makes you who you are.”

Tareq listened closely. “So a new name for Romeo would erase the thing that kept Romeo and Juliet apart?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“But would it have worked?”

They left that question unanswered as they walked through the park. “Here it is!” Tareq exclaimed. He pointed to an oversized, outdoor chessboard nestled between low hills. “Care for a rematch?”

“That depends,” Juliette replied. “How do you feel about losing?”

The truth was, Tareq didn’t care at all. When he looked at Juliette, he knew he was winning in the only ways that mattered. Chess was just a game, but his world with Juliette was life itself.

They moved a few pieces around, but it was too dark and too cold to play for long. “Wait,” he told her, “I want a photo of you with the queen.” He snapped the photo and confirmed that it had exposed sufficiently in the dim light.

“Come here,” she called to him, moving the king piece next to the queen. “Sit here.” They sat on the ground together in front of the pieces, and Juliette took the camera from his hand. Tareq put his arm around her shoulders and pressed his head to hers. Juliette nestled close to him and held the camera out at arm’s length. “Smile,” she said. “On three.”

“One, two, three,” they chanted together and were blinded by the flash. The resulting portrait captured them with their eyes closed, their faces not quite centered, and their mouths joyfully open.

“Perfect,” Juliette pronounced.

They continued through the park, making their way past the beloved Fairy Tale Fountain, now illuminated for the Festival. The fountain area was full of couples who, like Tareq and Juliette, did not want to say goodnight. Juliette and Tareq were out of place only because they were not holding hands. But they let their bodies sway into one another as they walked.

They continued through the park, heading roughly in the direction of the station that would take them back toward her hotel. Juliette spied a bench situated off the path and motioned them there. "Sit down. I have a surprise for you."

"A surprise? What kind of surprise?" he queried as he took a seat.

"Close your eyes and put out your hands." He complied immediately. She sat down next to him and placed the album flat on his upturned palms, the photo and the autograph just visible in the moonlight. "Okay," she instructed. "You can look now."

Tareq looked down, looked at Juliette, and then looked down again. "Where did you find this?" he asked, his tone almost reverent.

"At a vintage record shop in Charlottenburg," she replied, deeply gratified by his reaction.

"Juliette," he uttered. That was the only word he could find. And then he took her in his arms and kissed her on her mouth.

Juliette stood up suddenly. Why she did this, she was not sure, but by the time she knew what she had done, she was standing before him, her fingers covering her mouth.

"Juliette, I am sorry," Tareq apologized instantly. "I have offended you. Forgive me. I was just so happy. The album. Your gift."

"It's okay, Tareq," she replied, catching her breath and rubbing her hand on her forehead. "Really, it's okay. I'm happy, too. I don't know why...I just need..."

"What do you need?" he asked, rising from the park bench. "Anything."

"I need to think." They stood opposite one another, a distance now between them that was not there before.

"Please hold me," she whispered.

Tareq pulled her under his chin. She burrowed her face in his chest and began to cry. She cried for how much she had missed him that day, exploring Berlin on her own, and for the peace she had felt when she saw him again at the train station. Did she dare to cry for joy? Not with the pain of parting so present in her mind. She cried for their goodbyes. She saw the elevator in Cairo close, the door severing them in two. She cried for what they had shared in Cairo, and for what they had left undone, unspoken. She wept for the pyramids. She wept for Mark.

There would be no elevator at the airport in a few days, but there would be a goodbye. *I am terrified of being in love*, she acknowledged to herself. Love was so different now, so paralyzingly self-aware. She and Mark had met on their first day of college. They were still teenagers. The excitement of falling in love then had eclipsed any sense of fear. But now love was as much about loss as anything else.

“I’m making your shirt wet,” she sniffled.

“Your tears honor me.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” she found the ability to chuckle. “I thought I was just making a mess.” She rested her forehead on his chest for a moment longer and then raised her face to his. Even in the darkness, she could read the devotion in his eyes. “I just need some time to think.”

They sat down on the bench again, side by side. Tareq wrapped one arm around her shoulder and took her hand with the other.

“I’m frightened,” she said, looking out at the dark garden.

“I am as well.”

“You are?” She was genuinely unsure if he meant that statement, or if he were only trying to comfort her. He seemed he could be frightened of nothing.

“Yes.” He squeezed her hand to comfort them both. “We are old enough to understand consequences.”

“I’m going back to New York in a few days.”

“I know this.”

“What happens after that?” She remembered herself in an aqua blue dress on a balcony in Alexandria, telling him that she would miss him. She didn’t want to miss him again.

He turned toward her and ran his fingers over the pashmina that swirled around her neck and then took the cloth firmly with both hands. They would part again, that much was certain.

They sat on the bench until midnight, when the last lights of the festival flickered off. “Time to go,” he ordered them both. “It is late.”

## *Walls Come Down*

When Juliette awoke that morning, she could not at first tell the time of day, the day of the year or the place where that day would unfold. She had slept the sort of sleep that reorients the subconscious in its dreams. Only when she rolled over and noticed the curtains at the window did she remember that she was in Berlin. *And what happened last night?* A few seconds passed before she could regain focus. *He kissed me. I jumped.* She viewed the scene in her memory from a distance. *He apologized. There was no need for that.* That she remembered clearly. *I cried. I said I was scared. He said he was scared.* That was unexpected. *We walked back here. We said goodbye.* Had she kissed him goodbye? *I fell asleep.* She could recount the sequence of events, but that would not help her master them.

She looked at the clock. *He will be here in 15 minutes. Nothing like a deadline to focus the mind.* She laughed to herself. *At least I still have a sense of humor.*

She got up, showered quickly and threw on some clothes. Her purse was still ready to go from the night before. From the room it would be just out the door, into the elevator and out to the lobby. He would be waiting, and she wanted him to be there. But she was nervous now – more nervous than when the plane had landed a week earlier. Their relationship had shifted, and any plausible deniability of what had passed between them in Cairo or in Berlin was now gone. Everything going forward would be a conscious, active decision. They both felt fear. *Probably healthy*, she thought.

One option was to run. To say to herself, and maybe to him, that this had all been a mistake: she should never have let herself get so near to him in Cairo or in Berlin. Cut the losses and the gains and retreat into a vacuum that could not support fear or any other emotion. But that would not do. Neither of them were runners. They were both climbers by nature.

She pushed the elevator button and heard the generic chime that seemed to be the sound of every elevator in the world. The door opened, and there he was.

“I was worried,” he said. He stood in the elevator doorway, not in, not out.

“Am I late?”

“A little. You are well?”

“I’m fine. I overslept.”

“Good morning,” he said, his manners returning to him.

“Good morning,” she replied, adjusting her handbag on her shoulder.

“Coffee?”

“Yes, coffee,” she sighed. The mention of this one beverage had the ability to put the universe itself in order. Over coffee, she knew what to do and what to say. She could slip into this comforting ritual of morning and figure everything else out from there.

He motioned her into the elevator and stood a few inches away, his arms neatly at his side. He held a book in the hand nearest her, the hand that, Juliette thought, rightly belonged at her back. But he was not far away. Quite on the contrary: the adjustment in their physical distance was the result of their emotional proximity. The nearness of their hearts pushed their bodies apart.

As the elevator door opened, they could see that the dining room was empty; they were the morning stragglers this time. The wait staff was already beginning to pack up the bread, cheese, meats and pickles on offer, so Tareq and Juliette grabbed what they could from the buffet before the trays disappeared into the kitchen. Tareq arrived at their table first, in time to pull out Juliette’s chair. Once she was seated, he sat down across from her.

“Breakfast here always seems like lunch to me,” she made light conversation. “But at least I got this.” She held up yogurt in a clay pot. “This I will miss. At home, yogurt pretty much comes in plastic tubs.”

“I remember,” he replied.

“Remember?”

“Yes. I was once in Virginia. I remember the yogurt.” The look on his face made clear it was not a pleasant memory.

“What were you doing in Virginia?”

“I attended a conference there when I was studying for my master’s degree.”

“You have a master’s degree?”

“You are surprised?”

“No, not surprised,” she hurried to tell him. “There’s just so much I don’t know about you.”

“What would you like to know?”

“What did you study?”

“Conflict Resolution,” he waited for the look on her face. “The conference was at the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University.”

“That sounds intense.”

“Not really. Not in comparison to work.” He could not have put it more plainly or more poignantly. In a flash, Juliette understood that this was one of the most significant wedges in her relationship with Mark. She would never know – could never know – the intensity of his daily routines.

“They took us to Monticello one day,” he said grandly. “It was beautiful.”

“I once wrote an article about Thomas Jefferson.”

“Now I learn something about you.”

“You know he was the first Secretary of State as well as a President.”

“So I may hold him accountable for my difficulty in obtaining a visa?”

Juliette laughed heartily. “He was from Virginia. You know the unofficial motto of Virginia? *Virginia is for lovers.*”

“Funny motto for a state called Virginia.” He raised his eyebrows playfully.

“It’s sort of a joke in honor of Thomas Jefferson. He had a reputation for being quite charming,” Juliette explained.

“And did you write your article about his charm?” Tareq teased.

“Sort of,” Juliette answered, amused. “When Jefferson was in Paris, he fell in love with a woman named Maria Cosway. She was an artist and extremely intelligent. They corresponded until his death.”

“Did she love him, too?”

“It certainly seems that way from her letters.”

“Then what happened?”

“She was married.”

Tareq nodded slowly. It had never occurred to him that he might have something in common with Thomas Jefferson.

“His most famous letter to her is called the *Head and Heart Letter*,” Juliette explained further. “Pages and pages of his head arguing with his heart, trying to decide if he should love her.”

“What did he decide?”

“In the end, he sided with his head. She was married. That seemed to settle the question.”

“As it did for us,” Tareq said. “Then.”

Juliette allowed her eyes to tell him that she knew he was right. *Then* was the operative word; it was the only word that mattered *now*. Her mind darted first to the kiss from the night before, and then to the kiss in Cairo. The Cairo kiss had been his kiss, not hers, but she’d been glad he’d given it. If she had it to do all over again, she’d still take that kiss in Cairo. She’d take everything in Cairo again and hold onto it then, now and forever. And this was the problem.

At that moment a waiter came to their table to take their dishes and to indicate that it was time for them to leave. “Where to?” she asked.

“I have an idea,” he said, his tone brightening. “The Palace of Sanssouci. An hour away. We may walk in the gardens.”

Juliette liked the idea of gardens after the weight of Berlin. It was an inspiring city, but it was also an exhausting catalogue of violence, war and division. To be in nature, among trees that inflicted no harm, never looted or lit fires, built no monuments and aspired to no false arrogance, would be a welcome change.

He pulled her chair out and edged a bit closer than he had in the elevator. “I’ll just run up to the room,” she said. “Be right back.”

Tareq watched her as she walked to the elevator, fixing his eyes as the door opened, she entered, and the door closed again. He ran his hand through his hair and looked around the lobby. *She makes me happy*, he thought to himself. Such a simple idea: to be happy. But to be without her was not the opposite of happy. To be without her again would be empty, void not only of happiness, but of a part of himself.

She returned quickly enough, and they set out for the train station under fair skies. Once in the train, they dug into the book Tareq had brought along – a guidebook just for Sanssouci that he had found in his cousin’s bookshelf. He read aloud to her, skipping parts here and there, and re-reading paragraphs she found interesting. By the time they arrived, they both felt prepared to appreciate their surroundings.

The Palace of Sanssouci, they had learned, was meant to be a home. A grand home, to be sure, suitable for a ruler like Frederick the Great, but a home. It was to Sanssouci, intentionally named *without care*, that Frederick brought his dogs and his friends. Here he entertained musicians and writers and philosophers. Here he had terraces landscaped for the cultivation of wine, and here he was buried.

But while meant as a retreat from the more formal court, the interior still reflected a regal existence. To Tareq and Juliette, the rooms were as lavish as those at Charlottenburg, and they certainly supported a king’s life of leisure. But some spaces were as intimate as they were interior. Tareq pressed open the door to the library, accessible only from a narrow passage off a bedroom, and held it open for Juliette. Once inside, he closed the door quietly behind them. They stood in the

middle of the circular room and turned around together, eyeing the decorated spines of the library's 2,000 volumes. The books surrounded them in a pleasantly claustrophobic way. "It's like swimming in a sea of knowledge," Juliette whispered.

Very little of the palace appealed to Tareq or Juliette in an *I'd like this at home* sort of way, but they both felt at ease in the Flower Room, where Voltaire stayed when he visited. Its warm yellow walls with their paintings of bright flowers and exotic birds and animals gave a pleasant sense of play to an otherwise formal environment.

But the gardens were the reason to visit Sanssouci, even as the days shortened and the sun sat lower in the sky. As they stepped onto the terrace, Juliette tucked her pashmina around her neck and buttoned up her coat, and Tareq followed suit. She brushed her shoulder into his. "At least I'm used to this," she told him. "This must feel arctic to you."

"Best to keep walking," he replied, and he led her down the broad steps that cascaded to the river below. At the bottom of the terrace, they turned in the direction of the Dragon House that now served as a restaurant on the palace grounds.

After lunch, they delved back into the garden and happened upon a single-storey, cylindrical structure with a verdigris dome and columns. They walked the few steps that led up to the gallery and circled once around. Pausing at a statue of a woman, Tareq opened the book. "This is the Temple of Friendship," he confirmed as he walked down the temple's stairs and looked back at the structure. "Sit?" he pointed to the steps. He started to take off his coat to put it on the stone steps for her.

"It's dry," she stopped him. "And it's also cold. You need your coat." They sat down and looked out at the garden. No flowers bloomed, but the garden still insisted on its glory even with its fading leaves.

"Tareq, about last night," she began.

"What about last night, Juliette?" His voice was as gentle as a morning dove.

"I just don't want to make a mess of things."

"Good," he declared. "I have changed my shirt."

She gave his shoulder a shove and then buried her head in her hands. Eyelids closed, she pictured the night before, the evergreens clearly visible against the night sky, a nearly full moon above. When she opened her eyes again, the sun peeked at her through her fingers.

"Juliette," Tareq took her hands from her face and held them in his, "there is no mess."

"But there could have been."

“How?”

“In Cairo, I mean.”

“In Cairo, yes,” he concurred. “But we are now in Berlin.”

Her engine of resistance stalled. He was right. Berlin and Cairo were two different places, two different times, two different realities. But one thing bridged the two in her mind.

“Tareq,” she dropped his hands, “if I had the capacity to betray Mark in Cairo, what’s to say I don’t have the capacity to betray you, too?”

Tareq fell silent. He had never thought of it that way. “Did you betray Mark in Cairo?”

She had reviewed the history many times in her mind, but his question still caught her off guard. “In some sense, yes. My heart went to you. My body didn’t. But I couldn’t stop my heart.”

“And mine went to you. Perhaps mine went first.”

“For a while, after I got back to New York,” Juliette continued as much for herself as for him, “I replayed everything in my mind, trying to understand what had happened.” She paused and closed her eyes. “And then I decided it was better to forget, better not to understand.” Tareq knew those thoughts and feelings as well. “But now,” she opened her eyes fully, “I need to remember. I need to understand. I have to make sense of it. If I don’t, I don’t know if I can trust myself again.”

He picked up a twig lying by his feet and began drawing figure-eights in the dirt. His feelings for her then, like now, risked no vow and broke no promise. But for Juliette, he saw clearly, the facts of her own heart had shaken her to the core.

“What happened in Cairo?” she asked both herself and Tareq.

“What happened in Cairo, Juliette, is that I fell in love with a married woman.”

“And I fell in love with a man who wasn’t my husband,” Juliette paralleled. The facts of the matter were now before them.

“Juliette, I believe I could not stop myself. My heart, it ran ahead on its own. If I could have stopped it, I would have. I knew you were married.”

“Wise men say,” Juliette began with an air of resignation. “You know the song?”

“Only fools rush in,” he continued, half-singing, half-sighing. “But it is true. I do not believe I could help it. And I feel no remorse,” he shook his head at himself. “Perhaps I should, but I do not, not even toward Mark. In fact, I hold him responsible!” His tone was mocking, but he was also serious. “If he had come to Cairo as he promised, he would have met you at the airport, not me.”

“I’m glad you met me there, though.”

“As am I. Now.” He threw the twig in his hand off to the side. “But when he called to ask that I meet you, I was irritated. I said, *Of course*. But I thought, *You do not know the burden you hand me. You think you only ask me to meet her. But really you ask me to disappoint her.*” His annoyance with Mark was severe. “You would not be looking for me,” he spoke now to Juliette. “How would we find each other? So I wrote your name on a sheet of paper. Only Juliette. I did not know your second name. I knew that your second name was not Mark’s name, but I did not know it.”

“You were very formal,” Juliette recalled. “You were even wearing a suit.”

“Of course,” Tareq replied, completely unaware of how odd that sounded to her. Juliette knew no other man who would wear a suit in sweltering heat to meet a stranger at the airport. “And then he did not come for you.”

Juliette remembered Mark’s absence all too well. “And then I went to Gaza to find him,” she recalled.

Tareq threw back his head and covered his eyes with his hands. He pulled his hands slowly down over his face, shaking his head at her all over again.

“Tareq, I’m sorry about that. Did I even tell you at the time how sorry I was?” Some regrets, Juliette thought to herself, can last a lifetime. Memories flooded her mind of her futile attempt to see Mark and her embarrassment when she called Tareq to pick her up. “You gotta’ call someone to pick you up,” the soldier had told her, handing her his cell phone. Tareq was the only person she could call, and the only person she had wanted to call. “I’m so sorry, Tareq. You must have been shocked when I called.”

“I do not like receiving calls from the Gaza border, this is true,” was all Tareq said.

“And the drive. What was it round trip for you? 12 hours? More?”

He did not answer, and the silence reminded her of the long drive back to Cairo, the tension thick between them, like a wall. “I wasn’t angry with you,” he began. “No,” he corrected himself, “I *was* angry with you. You had put yourself in danger. But,” he looked at her with respect, “you did so out of devotion. I envied Mark that.” He caressed her hand. “I was furious with Mark.”

“It was stupid of me, I know that now. And if you hadn’t come, I don’t know what I would have done.”

“But I did come,” he ran the back of his hand along her cheek. “I came.” His eyes were as soft as his voice. But then, in an instant, Tareq’s voice turned stormy. “And the whole time I thought: Mark, you fool!” His hands cursed into the air. “But I also remember that I knew I had no choice. I could not leave you there. I

picked you up at the airport out of obligation to Mark. But I drove to the border because it was you.”

That was news to Juliette, and the revelation triggered a realization of her own. “Maybe that’s the reason I went to Gaza,” she considered for the first time. “Maybe after spending time with you, I needed to remind myself of Mark.”

“I believe I knew by then what you were to me,” he concluded. “And I was glad when you appeared again at my café.”

“I knew you were angry when you dropped me back at the hotel. I couldn’t leave it at that. I had to see you again.”

“And then you beat me at chess,” he flashed his eyes at her. “A fine way to say thank you!” He waved his finger at her good-naturedly.

“I did beat you at chess,” she recalled. “You took the time to play chess with me.” She recalled holding the queen in her hand. “I had a husband who worked thousands of miles away from home, I’d come all the way to Cairo to be with him, and he wasn’t even there. But you gave me your time.” She knew there was no benefit in making such comparisons; Mark and Tareq were completely different people in different circumstances. But she needed Tareq to know how much his time had meant to her.

Her thoughts now wandered from memory to memory of Tareq and Cairo. The jumble was freeing. Sense wasn’t always a matter of order. “Do you remember that stupid quiz?”

“The one I failed?”

“The one that concluded you were definitely *not* marriage material.”

“I remember.”

“You made fun of the magazine.”

“Perhaps I was not fair,” he offered.

“No, you were right. And when I went back home, I took stock of my work, my writing. I realized I didn’t want to devote so much time to the magazine.”

“Really?” he asked. He had never intended such an impact. But the quiz had changed him, too. It was a ridiculous set of questions, he knew, but it also niggled at him. What was he doing with his life, not sharing it with someone? Why wasn’t he married? Was he just waiting for her?

“You asked me before what happened in Cairo,” he interrupted himself. “In Cairo I forgot that the only reason that I was with you was that Mark was not.”

They both paused for a moment. “I forgot, too, Tareq. And I think I was content to forget.”

“And then I did not think at all. I just kissed you. And I felt happy in my heart.”

“I felt happy in my heart, too, Tareq.”

“And I began to deceive myself,” Tareq recounted. “In the train to Alexandria, I told myself you could stay in Cairo. With me. At the wedding, I was happy to be with you in a way I had no right to be.”

“I remember,” she whispered. She could feel his hand on her back.

“I went to the balcony to think. When you found me, I wanted to tell you how I felt, to ask you to stay. I gave no thought to what this would mean, for you or for me.” He folded his arms on his knees and bowed his head.

Juliette pulled herself closer to him. “My heart ached when you danced with Yasmeen,” she said into his ear. “I liked Yasmeen. I could even see you with her. But I couldn’t bear the thought of your being with anyone but me. I had no right to feel that way; I knew that. In that moment, I knew I’d lost the battle to keep my heart safe.”

He looked up at her, his arms still clenching his knees. “Neither of our hearts were safe,” he observed. “But love is not safe.”

“When we got back to the hotel...” she began.

“I thought I understood your meaning.”

“You did understand.”

“Then what?”

“I wanted to see the pyramids with you.”

“I let myself believe you were mine alone there.”

“I was.” Her eyes graced his face with the truth. She had promised Mark she’d wait for him so they could visit the pyramids together. While she waited for him in Cairo, she had seen pyramids from a distance; it had seemed the pyramids were visible at every turn. But she had refused invitations to go to them. But that morning, she broke her promise to Mark.

Tareq had kept his distance all day, from the elevator door to the gardens of Sanssouci, but now he opened his arms to enfold her. “Please,” she accepted his embrace. In the privacy of his neck, she found the courage to remember. “If Mark hadn’t been in the hotel lobby when we got back...”

“Yes.”

“I just know that when the elevator closed, I didn’t know who I was betraying more, you or Mark.”

“I knew I would never see you again.” Traces of that agony were still audible in Tareq’s voice.

“But here we are.”

“Yes, here we are.” He loosened his hold on her, held out his hand and pulled her up from the steps. “Here we are. Walk?”

They continued through the garden, turning back toward the main palace. Tareq’s hand was now again at her back. There was no path in this part of the garden, but the dense trees in the distance indicated the location of the river. As they neared the riverbank, they found a quiet spot with a clear view of the terraces on the other side. “Did you go with Mark to the pyramids?” Tareq had been wondering this for nearly two years.

“Yes.” She replied honestly. He looked resigned. It would have been unrealistic to expect a different answer. “But you were everywhere. Oum Kalthoum was on the radio, and when I asked the driver to turn up the volume, he switched to a different channel. And the song that was playing should have meant nothing to me. But instead it undid me.”

“What song?”

*“Never Knew What I Missed Until I Kissed You.”*

“The Everly Brothers.”

“You know it?”

“Of course. *You don’t realize what you do to me.*” It wasn’t clear to Juliette if he were quoting the song or saying the words to her for himself.

“The words made my heart cry. It sounds so trite, but it was like they were singing at me, talking to me about you. But I was there with Mark, and those words, that silly song, it should have been for him. But it wasn’t.”

Juliette had buried this particular memory in one of her strongest vaults. But now the locks blew open and all of the memories of that day exploded into the air above her. “And Mark asked me about my cartouche. He asked me if his name were on it. I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing. And my need to hide you from him made me realize how much you meant.”

She stared straight ahead now, her body stiffening. “And then I was angry. Angry he wasn’t at the airport. Angry that there was no message from him when I arrived at the hotel. Angry that it took him so long to call. Angry that he wasn’t coming and didn’t even know when he’d get there. That he sent you to me with another message that he was delayed. That the soldier in Gaza contacted Mark’s *people* but I couldn’t speak with him. And after Gaza, *he* was angry with *me* on the phone. Angry with me! I understood on some level, but I practically hung up on him. And then I cried.”

She retreated slowly from her anger and then turned to Tareq. “I thought to myself, *This is the person I was waiting for to go see the pyramids?* And I was glad I had gone with you.”

“I am glad you went with me, too.” He took her hand. “I am glad we went together.”

## *Crossing the Border*

When Juliette entered the lobby the next morning, Tareq was already seated at what was now their table. “The waiter recognized me and brought me coffee,” he told her, pleased that their breakfasts were now an established routine. “What would you like to do today?” he probed, hoping she would have no opinion.

“It’s our last day,” she replied as if that were specific enough.

“Could I persuade you onto a boat?”

Juliette pursed her lips as she sat down opposite him, stopping short of an eye roll. She did not swim and did not like being on the water. But she’d floated on the Nile with him and no harm done, and the Spree was not nearly the size of the Nile.

“Okay,” she conceded. “What do you have in mind?”

“We can take a boat to Charlottenburg and back. After that, lunch.”

“And then tonight?”

“I have a plan already.”

“You do?” She paused, waiting for more information, but none came. “Any hints?”

“No.” One word. That was it.

They finished breakfast and headed out on foot toward the river. When they got to the dock, Tareq reconfirmed that she was willing to board. He pointed out that the boat was barge-like, broad and stable, with life vests stored visibly. “Yes,” she said aloud, but in her head, she wasn’t as sure.

They climbed onto the boat and nestled into a bench seat along the side. “When I come to New York, I will teach you to swim.”

“Will you now?” She liked the idea of his coming to New York, but she was not at all sure about swim lessons.

“Yes. It is important that you are able to swim. This is a matter of safety.”

“I don’t know, Tareq. People don’t really learn to swim at my age.”

“They do not quit smoking at my age, either.” This time he had won the chess game.

“Okay. If you get your visa and come to New York, you can teach me to swim.”

His smile was triumphant as he spread his arms along the back of the seat. She sat close to him and surveyed the water below. The view made her uneasy, and she steadied her nerves with his knee. It would be better to keep looking ahead.

Tareq and Juliette were nearly alone on the boat. The weather was on the cusp of being inhospitable for sailing. A season was coming to an end. “I’m flying back tomorrow,” she reminded them both.

“Saying goodbye will be different this time,” Tareq countered.

“Yes, it will,” she agreed.

“I will miss you.”

“I will miss you, too.” That part would be the same.

“But no goodbyes this time.” Tareq was emphatic.

They spent the rest of the cruise mainly in silence, occasionally pointing to something on land that they remembered from the preceding days. But just being in each other’s company was enough.

The boat returned safely to the dock. “We made it,” he said to her with a smile. He didn’t want to rub it in, but he did want to make a point. “Now lunch. I have made a reservation at the Café Freischwimmer.”

“Fry-what?” Juliette asked.

“Freischwimmer. Frei means *free*, and Schwimmer means *swimmer*. What they mean together, I do not know.” They both pondered that for a moment. “Juliette, why do you not swim?”

“Honestly, I don’t think I know anymore. Maybe I never knew.”

“Did you ever try?”

“As a kid. A few times. But I just never trusted myself in the water.”

“What is to trust in the water?”

“The water was always deep and dark and cold. Where I grew up, everyone swam in lakes. There weren’t many swimming pools. Maybe I could have handled a pool. But the lake. You can’t see to the bottom.”

By this time they had walked past several stations that would have taken them to the café. So they kept walking and arrived hungry at the restaurant. They stepped onto what appeared to be a covered float tethered to the bank of a narrow tributary of the river. Other structures, which looked like houseboats or decks, hugged both banks of the waterway. The distance from bank to bank was friendly and could almost support conversation. A few intrepid kayakers glided past, taking advantage of the last days of the year that the weather would allow such exploration in relative comfort.

It was almost too cool to eat outside, but they buttoned their coats, sat in the sun, and took refuge in warm food. “When you swim,” Tareq continued their earlier conversation, “your head is beneath the water and you keep your eyes closed.”

“And?”

“So you cannot look to the bottom.”

“I’d use goggles.” That much was clear.

“And when you swim, you stay near the surface. The depth is not important unless the water is too shallow. If the water is shallow, it is dangerous to jump.”

“This isn’t helping, Tareq.” She eyed him from over a spoonful of steaming soup.

“But I am right,” he insisted. “Deep water is safer than shallow water.”

“As long as you can swim. And assuming there’s something you can hold on to.”

“I will teach you to swim.”

“And the thing to hold on to...?”

“Yes.”

The waiter came with the check, and Tareq glanced at his phone. “It is time to return you to your hotel. You should rest. Tonight will be late.”

“Tareq, I can’t remember the last time someone told me to take a nap, but I think it was in elementary school.”

“Trust me. You will be happy I suggested it.”

They walked leisurely back to the hotel under Berlin’s ubiquitous trees. Along the way, delicatessens and bakeries generously shared their aromas, and they stopped occasionally to peek in storefronts that offered everything from vintage clothing to high-end kitchen utensils to works of modern art. The walk was not long enough to be tiring, but eventually they sat down at a café with outdoor tables and optimistic umbrellas that beckoned them for a cup of coffee until the shadows shooed them back to Juliette’s hotel.

“Dinner will be a more formal affair,” he said as they parted, but this was the only information he would provide. She could do nothing but agree to be ready at the appointed time.

That evening when Tareq returned to the hotel, the lobby was crowded with people. The only free seat was the uncomfortable chair he remembered from when she had checked into the hotel. He tried it again briefly, shifted uneasily and then gave up. He had arrived early to meet her, and he would stand while he waited.

When she appeared in the elevator door, he met her quickly and took her arm in his. “You look lovely,” he said. He ran a finger along the curve of her cheekbone and then saw his hand before him and drew it back quickly.

“Not so bad yourself,” she replied. Her reply was off-handed, but washed over a deep belief. To her he was fundamentally beautiful. She could not define beauty, either for her own time and place, even less assuredly for the sweep of history. But she knew that something in beauty was transcendent. Something about beauty linked the head of Nefertiti to all the rest of time. A quality of grace, she mused, that found physical manifestation in the young and old, in visages of varying hues, in those with physical forms that might casually be described as perfect as well as those embodying a different type of perfection. Grace asserted itself from within and radiated out as beauty.

“Where to?” she asked.

“The Adlon.”

“The Adlon?” She replied, half-wondering if there might be more than one Adlon. “That’s fancy.”

“It is our last night in Berlin.” Tareq wanted it to be special, and the historic hotel was also near the final surprise for the night.

The route to the hotel took them past Checkpoint Charlie again, but it now felt routine to Juliette to cross the border. When they turned onto Berlin’s famed Unter den Linden, they found both the Adlon and The Brandenburg Gate illuminated for the Festival of Lights. The hotel’s normally sedate exterior was now aqua, and circles of gray radiated out randomly from unpredictable centers, as though someone were throwing stones into a vertical pond.

The hotel’s interior lighting, in contrast, cast a faintly yellow glow that evoked an eternal sunrise. They looked around for the dining room, and ended up following another couple who seemed to know where they were going. Once in the dining room, they were shown to a table near a window with a view of the Brandenburg Gate.

“This sort of feels like we’re on a date,” she said as he took the pashmina from her shoulders and helped her into her seat. He folded the pashmina neatly and placed it over the back of her chair.

“I think,” he conspired into her ear, “that may be because we are.” Juliette could feel his warmth on her now bare neck.

He took his own seat and straightened his shoulders. “Is that alright?”

“Yes,” she reassured him. “It’s alright.” Tareq relaxed his posture. “You know, *Grand Hotel* is based on this place,” she informed him.

“Grand Hotel?”

“The movie. With Greta Garbo. You know, *I want to be alone*”.

Tareq knew the line, but hadn’t known where it came from. He looked at her intently. “I do not want to be alone, Juliette.” He reached across the table and pressed his fingertips into hers. “Is this alright, too?”

Juliette looked at the color of his hand next to her paler skin and knew the combination was beautiful. “I want it to be alright, Tareq.”

For the rest of the dinner, they talked as though this evening were an insignificant middle of an ordinary week rather than the last night of a journey that had changed everything. At different points, each of them touched on a memory from their days in Berlin, but they stopped short of tales from Cairo. And neither mentioned New York.

“What’s next?” she asked when the final plates were cleared from the table and the bill was settled.

“Ah,” he said, rising from his chair. He pulled her chair back from the table and offered his arm. “Something you will like.”

Brisk air greeted them as they walked out of the hotel. Juliette pulled the blue pashmina higher around her neck, and Tareq put his arm firmly around her as he flipped up the collar on his coat. “It is never this cold in Egypt!” he exclaimed.

“It can get a lot colder than this in New York,” Juliette alerted him, as though making an important disclosure.

They crossed toward the Brandenburg Gate, lit up for the festival like a rainbow promising who knew what. “Do you think we can walk under it?” Juliette asked. They made their way through the crowds that had gathered for the lights and at last stood directly below the Gate. They were now straddling east and west, occupying a former no man’s land, and validating a united Berlin.

“Come,” he hurried her. “Our tickets are for 11.” He pointed toward the Reichstag’s towering glass dome.

“We’re going there?” she asked. She’d mentioned visiting the dome a few times, but he had always brushed it aside, as though it were of no interest. “I thought you didn’t want to go,” she said.

“I very much wanted to go,” he replied, pleased he had managed to keep his plan a secret. “But I wanted to go when the moon was full.” He glanced up to the moon. Its radiance easily outshone the illumination Festival of Lights. “I ordered these tickets the day you sent me your itinerary. And the sky has cooperated. No clouds.”

She tossed back her head, her hair falling loosely around her shoulders. “You think of everything, don’t you?”

“Sometimes,” he replied with an appropriately self-satisfied smile. “Sometimes.”

They entered the building and made their way to the elevator for the Reichstag’s roof. Stepping out of the elevator, Juliette’s eyes widened both at the night air and at the elegance of the structure before them. The dome was even more impressive at this level than from the street below.

They crossed to the dome’s entrance along with the current of people from the elevator. The dome was busy, even at this hour, and the size of the crowd surprised Juliette. When they entered, Juliette first looked up at the spiraling walkway above their heads. They peeked down at the empty Parliament chamber, visible in the dome’s central light shaft, and then began their ascent of the spiral, taking in the cityscape with each curve. Eventually they arrived at the viewing platform with its large open-air eye above. The moon shone bright and full.

“Reminds me of the *Moonlight Sonata*,” Juliette said. “That’s always been one of my favorites.”

Tareq nodded in agreement. “It is very beautiful. The waves of the left hand are constant. And the crying out of the right hand.”

“The crying out?”

“Yes. I always hear Beethoven crying out with his right hand.”

“What’s he crying for?”

“Not what. *Who*. For Juliette,” he replied.

“What?”

“*Who*,” he repeated. “Giulietta Guicciardi. She was his student. Briefly. He fell in love with her, at least for a time.”

“I had no idea,” Juliette said. “But it certainly sounds like the work of a man in love.”

“Very much in love,” he confirmed, turning his body toward hers. “His letters were eloquent on the topic. Perhaps like those of Mr. Jefferson to Mrs. Cosway.” But not like any letters from Tareq to Juliette. “Perhaps I ought to have written,” he whispered.

“I could have written, too.”

He put his hand on her back, and they descended the spiral and exited onto to the roof deck. They found an empty stretch of wall looking out to the Fernsehturm. The tower was illumined with a pattern of white dots that, from this distance, looked like fanciful constellations.

“Juliette, I should never have kissed you in Cairo.” He had broken a rule, and even if Tareq didn’t feel bad for Mark, he felt bad for the rule. She placed her fingers to his lips to stop his apology. He took her hand and moved it aside. “But I kissed you sincerely, Juliette. You must know this.”

“I know, Tareq. I knew that then and I know that now.” Nothing about Tareq was flirtatious. He was disarming and could tease with the best of them, but he was never superficial. “And just because you shouldn’t have kissed me doesn’t mean it was unwelcome.”

“After you left,” Tareq chastised himself, “I told myself over and over, *Juliette is married!*” He turned back toward the wall and looked out into the darkness.

“You’re being hard on yourself.”

“No, I am realistic. You were married and a Christian.”

“I’m not really a practicing Christian.”

“Perhaps not. But you were married.”

“Rules exist for a reason.” As hard as it could be to accept that statement, she believed it was generally true. She turned him toward her and placed her hands on his arms. “Tareq, if we had been more to each other in Cairo, would you even want to be with me now?” She searched his eyes for an answer. “Tareq, what if...”

“You told me you loved me and then left me for another?” His question was matter-of-fact.

She nodded.

“I know that you would return to me. I know this.”

“And what would you do when I returned?” She needed to know how the story would end.

“I would open the door when you knocked.”

“And I would come in.” She could feel a wound closing.

They both looked out onto the city that had mended itself, arms loosely around each other’s waists. The dome closed at midnight, and soon it was time to leave

the rooftop's aerie perch. Back on the ground, Tareq reminded her of the time. "I should take you back to your hotel."

"No, Tareq, let's walk some more."

"Walk? Okay. Let us walk."

"Where to?" Juliette asked.

"I do not know."

They wandered, and soon they were at the Holocaust Memorial. The night was still, and they could hear the footsteps of others making their way through the maze of concrete, rectangular blocks. The terrain rose and fell, alternately obscuring and revealing the sea of sarcophagi-like stelae. Each metaphoric coffin occupied the same footprint on the ground, but varied in height, and the overall effect was claustrophobic and disorienting. They held hands and led each other through the narrow aisles, emerging to the east.

Without thinking, they headed away from her hotel and then turned toward the river. In all their explorations, Juliette now realized, they had missed this part of the city. "I think this will take us to Bebelplatz," she said, recalling the map in her mind's eye. Tareq nodded, and they walked on to the historic square that had hosted the burning of thousands of books. Once at the square, they had to hunt for the memorial itself. The lamps in the plaza assisted as best they could, and eventually Tareq and Juliette saw the light coming from the memorial's small window set into the ground. They kneeled down to look at the empty bookcases below. After a few minutes, Tareq stood up and offered his hand to Juliette. They stood together in silence and mourned the loss of reason, wherever that loss occurred, and hoped for its return.

They crossed a bridge and then accepted the need to turn in the direction of her hotel. Eventually their path veered back to the river, and the dark of night turned bright again as they reached an illuminated stretch of the Wall known for its murals. They lingered on a painting called *It Happened in November* that depicted people coming through the Wall on the night the Wall became obsolete.

"It did happen in November, didn't it?" she asked him, remembering her time in Cairo. She had never known such heat in November. "I know it did."

"Yes," he sighed, drawing her toward him. "It was November."

From there they walked back over the river and allowed the route to proceed through parks and squares as it wished, propelling them in the general direction of her hotel. Juliette was sure she was tired, but the sense of fatigue seemed to be someone else's reality, someone else's problem. *This is an out of body experience*, she told herself. *But I don't mind it.*

As the sun began to peek over the horizon, they noticed an open café. They took a seat inside at a booth near the back. They ordered, and Tareq slid toward her,

eliminating the distance between them. She put her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

“Tired?” he asked.

“Yes. You?”

“Yes.” He was tired of living without her.

“Happy?” she asked.

“Yes. You?”

“Very.” She couldn’t imagine a more peaceful happiness.

A young man with dark, round eyes and a closely cropped beard served their coffees. Tareq thanked him, and the young man replied in thickly accented German. Tareq waited for the server to walk away and then gently lifted Juliette’s cup from her hands and put it next to his. “Juliette,” he began.

“Yes, Tareq?” she replied.

“Juliette,” he tried to continue.

“Yes, Tareq,” she assented.

“We are not perfect, Juliette. We make mistakes. It is what we do with our mistakes that matters.”

“Or what we don’t do.”

“Did Mark ever know?” Tareq could occasionally feel Mark’s cold presence.

“I don’t think so.”

“But if he had?” Tareq imagined Mark’s rage.

“I don’t know.”

“You made many sacrifices for him. You did not leave him.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Juliette, we must forgive ourselves sometimes. We must forgive each other. I never married. What do I know?” His question was not rhetorical. “I know what I believe. I believe that life is complicated. I believe that love must be more than a promise of faithfulness. Love must be more durable than faithfulness. It must be faith itself. I know the choices you made. The choices we made. I have faith.”

They drank their coffees without further conversation. At that moment, there was nothing to say. The rising sun, though, pierced through the window of the café, and would not be gainsaid.

“Your flight will depart soon,” he said.

“I haven’t packed.”

“We go then.” He mustered resolve for them both.

They caught a taxi to her hotel. Their walk was over, at least for now. Juliette wondered if she should tell him to take the taxi straight to his cousin’s flat and then return for her later, after she’d packed. But before she had completed this thought in her mind, he was out of the taxi and opening her door for her. He took her hand, and they walked together, hand in hand, into the hotel lobby.

When they reached the elevator, they stood awkwardly, facing each other, a flood of memories filling the space between them. “Good morning,” he said, placing his hands on her arms.

“Good morning,” she replied. It was a very good morning, she thought, one of the best she had ever known.

They stood together, both remembering Cairo, both remembering the moment he had kissed her good night, surprising them both. That kiss had made magic, but it had also broken the spell. Tareq had acted then, and unilaterally. He had repeated history in the park and had frightened her. This time he would wait.

“Good morning, Tareq,” she whispered. The elevator bell chimed as the doors opened. “Please kiss me good morning.” They entered the elevator together this time. She reached over to press the button and then settled back into the palm of his hand.

Once inside the hotel room, they kissed good morning. They kissed for the past and for the present, and for the past giving away to the possibilities of the future.

“Juliette,” he breathed her name. She looked up. With his dark hair, pale eyes and delicately curved nose, his face was a crossroads of civilizations and centuries. He was a testament to time and to what time honors. Faces like his existed because people fell in love and crossed borders and tore down walls to be together.

“Juliette, you are the one who knocked at my heart in the middle of the night.”

“I’m glad you opened the door,” Juliette said, and then the phone rang, jarring them both from that place where airplanes existed only for people who could bear to part.

“Don’t answer,” he begged into her neck.

“I have to. When you have children, you have to answer the phone. You never know...” He spun her around in the direction of the phone and let go.

No children were on the line, just the hotel's front desk. "No, thank you, that won't be necessary. When is the check out time again? Yes, thank you."

She hung up the phone and looked back at Tareq. "They were asking if I needed help with my luggage. Checkout is 11 am. We need to leave by then anyway. I have to pack. Would you make some coffee?" He looked around the room. "Over there," she said, "there's a coffee maker over there."

He walked over to the machine with its packets of something that purported to be coffee. "You would like me to make you coffee with this?" he asked.

"I know Tareq, but it will have to do," she cajoled.

He shook his head. "I will make tea."

Juliette pulled out her suitcase and packed up her things. She organized essentials on the bed: passport, carry-on, coat. All set. Tareq now sat on the small sofa, two cups of tea ready and waiting, and observed her every movement. How beautiful she was in the unremarkable motions of life.

"Done," she announced.

"Come sit with me," he invited. She sat beside him, pressing her shoulder against his. "Good morning," he said, angling toward her and handing her a cup.

"Good morning," she replied, taking the warm cup in her hands. They fell into the same wondering: how many more times would he hand her a cup and say good morning?

After a few sips, he glanced at the clock next to the bed. "Time to go."

"Tareq, promise me you won't forget to email the guy I know at the State Department." She clung to the lapels of his coat, creating an island for the two of them in the airport hall.

"I will write to him. I will come to New York as soon as I am able." He pulled her closer with one hand, the other still on the handle of her carry-on bag for safekeeping. He pushed the hair away from her face and delicately tucked the strands behind her ears.

The clock on their time in Berlin had run out. "I have to go now," she resolved.

"Yes," he acknowledged the tyranny of the flight schedule. He kissed her forehead and nodded almost imperceptibly. An airport was not, in Tareq's world, the place for more, and Juliette was fully cognizant of all the emotion packed into that one compact gesture. She kissed him on each cheek. "Tareq, take this," she handed him a folded piece of paper and whispered in his ear. "After Cairo, I tried to forget you. But I never tried to not love you."

Tareq watched as she went through security and disappeared into the airport. He wiped tears from his eyes and then looked at the folded paper in his hands. He opened it and read the words, written in her own hand.

My dear Tareq,

Until now, I don't think I ever understood this poem. I think I only saw it from one side. Now I see it in the round. Love, when it's really love, is always held in common. It is a trust. Love and faithfulness have now come full circle.

Yours, as ever,

Juliette

Shakespeare's Sonnet 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove:  
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wandering bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
    If this be error and upon me proved,  
    I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

## *Giving Thanks*

Emily met her mother at the airport. Just to be cheeky, she held up a sign saying “Miss Juliette” to mirror the one her mother had described Tareq as holding when she had arrived in Cairo two years earlier.

“Did you think I wouldn’t recognize you?” Juliette joked as they walked to the car. Or maybe the greater risk was that Emily would not recognize her mother. The 10 days in Berlin had been transformative: Juliette walked lightly, smiled freely, and breathed easily. Glasses now seemed distinctly half-full, if not overflowing, and anticipation flooded to the ground like shafts of light.

The drive up the Hudson seemed to notice the change, too. Riotous reds and yellows waved brightly in the autumn breeze. The river sparkled in the setting sun, and the traffic, usually thick and irritating, hummed along as though it had never even heard of congestion. And her town’s welcome sign seemed to greet her personally, sensing that she might be a newcomer to the area.

And home, once so lonely, now took on a warmer glow. The decaying opalescent leaves that cluttered the front lawn were a welcome transport to memories of pleasant walks in Berlin. Her bright red front door looked especially friendly as she stepped onto the porch, and the doorknob accommodated her by not sticking.

“Drop your bag, mom,” Emily ordered. “I’ll take your laundry down to the basement for you. Okay? Then I’ll make dinner.” Juliette was not surprised at her daughter’s thoughtfulness. She had been this way since she was a child. Emily was always the one to run for the first aid kit, give a hug, or sit quietly by if that was what was called for. Sometimes she even saw the shadow on her mother’s forehead before Juliette knew the emotional storm was gathering. She was a most sophisticated bellwether. And since Mark’s death, she had been an absolute rock.

“I’m going up for a bath,” Juliette called down to Emily, who was busy sorting the laundry in the basement.

Once upstairs, Juliette closed her door and surreptitiously pulled out her phone. She wanted to let Tareq know she was home safely, but she didn’t want Emily to know she was contacting him. Why she felt the need to hide this from Emily, she wasn’t entirely sure, but it felt a little like embarrassment. She messaged him quickly and turned on the hot water. In a matter of seconds, he replied. “Thank you,” he wrote. “Now I may sleep.”

When Juliette returned downstairs, the table was set and dinner was ready. Emily's motives for dinner were mixed. She wanted to make sure her mother got a proper meal, but her real mission was information. Emily had her mother's nose for a story, and she knew there was a good one behind Juliette's uncharacteristic decision to fly solo, and internationally solo at that.

"So how was it?" Emily asked with all the nonchalance she could muster.

"Wonderful." Juliette took a mouthful of pasta. "Fantastic."

"That sounds good. Highlights?" Emily prodded, pouring her mother a glass of wine.

"Hmmm, it's hard to point to any one thing," Juliette mulled. She paused in thought and then continued, "Well, the Wall is gone. Just the absence of the Wall was amazing in and of itself. When I was there in college, the Wall was one of the main reasons you went to Berlin." She took another bite. "And then there's all the stuff that *is* there to see." She described Nefertiti, the blue glass interior of the Memorial Church and the organ music, the Olympic Stadium. And the lights! The Festival of Lights was beyond what Juliette had imagined. The coffee was good, too, and she was sure Emily would like the city.

She didn't mention the Hotel Adlon, the Reichstag, or the moonlit walk back to Kreuzberg. She did not mention Tareq.

"Did you go up in the glass dome?" Emily asked, noticing that her mother had failed to mention the one thing touted in every book and website about Berlin.

"Yes. At night, actually. Did you know it stays open until midnight? Can you imagine if Congress let in tours that late?"

"Maybe it's the German version of a romantic date," Emily giggled. "Come with me to the seat of government, mein Schatz. We will make beautiful music together." Juliette more than appreciated the humor in Emily's joke; the dome of the Reichstag didn't immediately scream romance. But Juliette also knew otherwise.

"And what about Tareq?"

Juliette felt her cheeks turn red. It had been decades since that had happened, she was sure.

"Mom, you're blushing!" Emily knew she'd hit on something. But she could also see her mother's self-conscious discomfort. "If you want to, that is."

Juliette was at a complete loss. She wanted to tell Emily something, but in her mind, the story could not be readily expressed. "I don't know where to start," Juliette said. And this was truer than Emily could have known. Start in Cairo? In New York with his letter? In Berlin? "We had a really nice time," she said honestly. "He's fun. It was fun to roam Berlin with him." That was all Juliette

could narrate under present circumstances. She was tired and overwhelmed from the trip. “Can I tell you more later? Show you some photos?”

“Sure!” Emily responded enthusiastically.

“And besides, you’ll meet him soon, I think.”

“Meet him?”

“Yes. He should be coming to New York now. I think we’ve found a way to sort the visa.”

Emily understood. If he were coming to New York soon, with a “we” involved in getting him a visa, then so much had happened in Berlin that her mother would need more than a dinner to answer questions about Tareq.

“Go to bed, Mom,” Emily said, giving her a hug. “You look beat. Don’t get me wrong: you like great. Nice pashmina you were wearing before, by the way. Love the color. But you look beat. I’ll clean up.”

When Juliette awoke the next morning, she found a note on her bedside stand.

Mom,

Had to go. Walking to the train station – don’t worry, it’s fine.

I kissed you before I left. ☺ I promise.

xox

Emily

Juliette rolled to the middle of the bed, Emily’s note in her hand. When the kids were little, they had always made her promise to kiss them, even if they were asleep, if she had to leave early in the morning or return late at night. She had always done this, so that when they asked later, she could tell them truthfully that she had fulfilled this promise. Now Emily was returning the favor.

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The following weekend, the whole family got together for dinner at Mark and Samantha’s home. Juliette picked Emily up at the train station on the way. “Good to see you, honey.” Juliette hugged her daughter as she wrestled with the seatbelt. She held her with a relaxation she could not remember, not since before Mark died. She hugged her without worrying that to let go would be to let her die.

“Okay,” Emily launched into conversation. “This is supposed to be a surprise, but I’m going to tell you.”

“Not if it’s a surprise!” Juliette protested. “I can wait.”

“Mom, this is big, and you don’t do surprises. So let me tell you, and then just act surprised. Okay? Mark and Sam are having a baby. Due next April.”

“A baby!” Juliette bolted upright in her seat. She was glad Emily had told her this before she left the station parking lot. The news was mesmerizing. She would be a grandmother. The joy felt boundless. New life. And arriving a year after Mark’s death.

“You shouldn’t have told me,” Juliette scolded. But in truth, she was glad to have the forewarning.

“And be prepared,” she went on, “Sam is crazy sick. You’ll probably barely see her tonight.”

When they pulled into the driveway, Mark and Samantha’s dog was jumping at the window, ecstatic to greet any guest. Mark appeared at the door. He was so like his father; it gave Juliette a start to see his silhouette in the darkness, illuminated by the foyer light behind him as he clung to the doorframe and leaned forward, his body half in the house, half out.

“Hey Mom. Good to see you.” He gave her a casual hug at the door and motioned her inside. Once indoors, she hugged him again, this time as she had hugged Emily. The panic of loss was subsiding. She no longer feared that everyone she loved would die.

“Mom,” he said, shutting the door behind her. “We wanted to surprise you with the news over dinner, but it’s not going according to plan. Sam’s just too sick. But guess what? We’re having a baby!”

She did not have to work to heed Emily’s instructions to act surprised. While she had heard Emily give her the news in the car, nothing could have prepared her for the moment when her son – her baby – told her that he and his wife were going to have a child of their own. She shed tears of joy and sadness, of impending gain and incalculable loss, of delight and fear. Another human being would enter the world, full of promise, and inevitably destined for broken promises as well.

“Oh, Mark,” was all she could say, repeatedly, for some time. Finally she entered real time sufficiently to say how happy she was and to ask how Samantha was doing.

“She’s having a tough time, Mom. But we’re happy. It’s what we both want.”

“Juliette,” Samantha called weakly from down the hall. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” Juliette replied. “I’m coming.” She turned to Mark and Emily. “Just start without me. I’ll go say hi to Sam.”

As soon as Juliette was out of earshot, Mark sidled up to Emily. “So what’s up with Berlin?”

“I don’t know yet, but I think Mom and Tareq might be...”

“Might be what?” Mark almost sounded alarmed.

“Stop being like that. So what if she’s got a boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend? She might be dating this guy? We haven’t even met him.”

“I don’t know. I just know she’s being very cagey. I think she just doesn’t know what or how to tell us. But she seems really happy.”

“This guy... what’s his name?”

“Tareq.”

“Tareq. Is he okay? What do we know about him?”

“He was Dad’s security officer. Remember? Dad used to talk about him.” Mark wracked his brain unsuccessfully for mentions of a Tareq. The truth was, he and his father had never talked all that much.

“Well,” Emily poured on, “I remember Dad saying, *I’d trust that man with my life. In fact, I do trust him with my life. Every day.*” Her imitation of her father was comically accurate. “Maybe that’s enough, huh?”

Mark was nodding unconvincingly to Emily when Juliette returned. “What are you two talking about?” Juliette asked. When her two children had their heads that close together, she’d learned to expect trouble. Or, even more often, something extraordinarily beautiful, like a handmade birthday card hidden behind small backs in small hands.

“Nothing, Mom. I was just laying out for Mark the privileges of being an aunt. He needs to understand now that it is my solemn duty to spoil my niece or nephew. The sooner we get that into the agreement, the better.”

They dined without Samantha, and after dinner, Juliette heated up some chicken broth and toasted a piece of bread. “This might help,” she offered.

“It’s worth a try,” Mark replied, grateful that his mother had more skill sets in this arena than he did. “Thanks, Mom,” he added wearily. “Thanks.”

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After Juliette’s return, she and Tareq spoke every day. Emily helped Juliette update her phone and computer for video and voice calls. Tareq’s phone was still a new tool for him, but he was motivated to master the technology quickly. Usually their conversations lasted no more than 10 minutes and were perhaps more rituals than conversations. She rose at 6 am and messaged him good morning. He replied,

usually within moments, and then they set a time for later that day when they would talk. They never established who would call whom, but he was always the one who called.

Their conversations followed a rhythmic formula. Visa update first. Then the weather, what he had done that day, what she was going to do that day. Often they'd recount one memory of Berlin to relive together, and then something unrehearsed, maybe about family or work. They would end the conversation by saying that the each was missed by the other.

But not loved. Juliette could not bring herself to say these words. Maybe this was because she could not see him – really see him, that is – via the screen on the phone or the computer. Or maybe it was because now, back in New York, she wondered if she had imagined it all. Or maybe she knew that she hadn't imagined any of it, but now worried that he'd never get a visa, never come to New York, and that they would end up saying goodbye all over again.

And if she would not say those words, neither would he. Despite all that had transpired in Berlin, he held back. Berlin had righted any Cairo wrongs, if indeed any wrongs had needed righting. Berlin had also confirmed an affection that was mutual and enduring. He read and re-read her letter from the airport and believed that she was right: love and faithfulness had come full circle. But now that she was in New York again, he wasn't sure where that circle existed.

He relived their discussion at Sanssouci as well, the full impact only gradually sinking in. He trusted her, but he understood why she struggled now to trust herself. Did it matter to him? Only in so much as it mattered to her. But clearly it mattered, and while they had resolved her questions for a moment in time, they were both scared. And perhaps rightly so, Tareq considered. In his professional world, the first step to safety was a healthy sense of fear. What if Berlin had been an unsustainable romantic lark? Merely the fulfillment of a Cairo wish? Was Berlin the coda to Cairo? Or the prelude to something else? With no answers to these questions, he would not say how very much he loved her.

But their first topic was always his visa. In the week after she returned to New York, he told her about the emails he was exchanging with her contact at the State Department. Tareq's name was not particularly common, but even uncommon names had mix-ups, and Tareq the former United Nations security officer had apparently ended up on a United States no-fly list, or so claimed an eager federal employee.

Once that was sorted, the visa-related chat revolved around his experiences at the embassy applying for the visa. The lines, the waiting, the faces of the other people in the lines, also waiting. Tareq had it easy: he was educated, he had traveled to the United States before, he had a business at home that showed he was economically self-sufficient. The others around him, asking for the same gift of a visa, were generally poor, uneducated and, for the most part, the sort of profile that most immigration officers would reflexively eye with suspicion.

And then one day, the visa part of their conversation held this news: Tareq would go to the embassy the next day to collect it. Once that was done, he could book a plane ticket.

They both fell silent after Tareq made the announcement. And then he asked, “Juliette, I need to know, would you still like me to visit?” Visa now in hand, his inherent pragmatism kicked into gear. He was entering unknown territory, and now was the time to apply his skills. He knew how to size up situations, weigh options, and consider outcomes. And he knew when to check with those in authority; he respected the chain of command. So he asked Juliette this question, as she was the authority in the matter of her own heart.

His question surprised her. They’d talked so much about his visa that it hadn’t occurred to her that he might not use it once it was issued. But in that moment, he came into full view: he made no decision in life based on *if*, but reserved all judgment until the moment of *when*. Now that the visa was in his passport, realities on the ground had fundamentally changed. A trip was now possible in fact, not in theory.

In this mode of planning for the future, he was the antithesis of her late husband. Juliette had known this all the while, but she had not seen it clearly until this moment. Tareq was a realist, not an idealist. And he was asking for permission, permission that was hers alone to grant or deny. She was the only immigration officer that mattered.

“As soon as you can,” she replied.

He sighed audibly, and she saw the tension release from his shoulders on the computer screen. “How long should I stay?” he replied. He would be staying with her, that much was understood. The length of the stay therefore was, in his mind, up to her.

“As long as you like, Tareq,” she replied. It seemed an easy question to answer.

“I must return to Egypt at the end of January.”

Juliette was startled. It had never occurred to her that Tareq might stay for that long. “Okay,” she heard herself saying, “two months will be plenty of time.” After she spoke, she replayed the words in her mind and wondered if he were thinking the same thing: two months would be long enough to make a decision about how many more months after that. Ten more whirlwind days, in yet another environment, would only confuse the matter.

“Tareq, I miss you.”

“And I miss you.”

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Unaware of something called the *holiday rush*, Tareq had booked his arrival for the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. When he first told Juliette his itinerary, she put her hand to her forehead and half-muttered “okay”, not thinking of the impact this would have on him.

“Is it okay?” he asked anxiously.

“Yes, yes,” she replied quickly, realizing her lack of consideration. “It’s fine, actually. Better than fine. You’ll be here for Thanksgiving.”

“Then why did you put your hand to your forehead in such anguish?”

“The Wednesday before Thanksgiving is the busiest travel day of the year in the U.S. The airport is going to be mayhem.”

“I am sure I have seen worse,” he replied with a laugh.

“Look at this way: it will be an authentic cultural experience. We couldn’t have planned it better. Just try to get some sleep on the plane.”

They said goodbye, and Juliette glanced at the calendar hanging in the kitchen. She used the one in her phone, too, but she loved the paper one hanging in the kitchen. It brought back memories of decades past, when the kids would mark each box with a big X to count the days until Mark came home, or until a birthday or other occasion. She put an X in the box for the day. Six more to go, and then one more at the table for Thanksgiving Dinner.

Juliette was hosting on Friday this year. Sam was finally feeling better, so she and Mark were heading to Sam’s parents on Thursday. Emily and Juliette had been invited as well, but Juliette had begged off, not wanting to be the widow at Sam’s parents’ table. It was still too awkward. And now, all the better, as this would give her and Tareq a day to themselves before the kids arrived on Friday.

Juliette called Emily to tell her the news. “Would you mind sleeping on the futon downstairs when you’re here for Thanksgiving? Mark and Sam can take your room, with the queen-sized bed.”

“Sure, but what about the guest room?”

“I’ll put Tareq in the guest room. I could move him to the futon, but I think he’ll feel more comfortable in the guest room. Okay?”

“Why is Tareq going in the guest room?”

“Because he’s a guest,” Juliette replied.

“Mom,” Emily called her out, “I think he’s a bit more than a guest, isn’t he?”

“Well, I suppose,” Juliette admitted, thinking back to all the conversations she and Emily had had about Emily’s boyfriends. It was strange to reverse these roles. “I’m really not sure. Is that enough for now?” Juliette had no idea what noun to

place on him. *Boyfriend* certainly didn't work; he was not a boy, nor was he just a friend. "Honestly, sweetheart, I don't know what word to use for him."

"Let's call him a *person of interest* then, shall we?" Emily ventured.

"Isn't that what detectives call suspects?"

"Yeah. And I'm the detective. And I suspect Tareq is more than a guest."

"Really, Emily. You are..."

"The best daughter in the world?"

"That too. And I've told Tareq as much, so plan to live up to your reputation."

"Will do, Mom. See you Friday."

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Over the next few days, Juliette shopped in between edits, got the house ready and marked more Xs on the kitchen calendar. And then on Wednesday, she got in the car to brave the traffic to Newark. At the airport, the parking lot was nearly full, but after much circling, she found a spot. She checked his arrival time on her phone. She'd make it, but without much time to spare. Or so she thought.

As she locked the car, Tareq texted to say the plane was at the gate. *He'll be another 45 minutes*, she guesstimated, based on her past experience negotiating immigration and customs. But she had never negotiated immigration and customs on the day before Thanksgiving as an Egyptian man with a visa obtained in Germany.

Two and a half hours later, she caught sight of him. He looked weary in a way she'd never seen before. Had she not seen him in this state, she might have thought it impossible for him ever to look so tired. He had tenacity for more than one, that was for sure, and patience in abundance. But he looked exhausted now.

"What happened?" she asked. Her concern and anxiety overtook any earlier thoughts about how to greet him.

"Juliette," he said very quietly, almost like a prayer. He kissed her cheeks and then held her tight for a moment. He stood back to soothe himself with the balm of her face. "It is good to see you." He tugged at the blue pashmina around her neck and then drew her close for another hug.

"Tareq, I was getting worried."

"As was I!" he confessed, still in disbelief over his ordeal. But he was returning to himself, the crisis over.

“What happened?”

“I experienced the full hospitality of the United States Border Control,” he replied expansively.

“Oh no, Tareq. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. I am grateful to you. I had with me every email from your friend at the State Department. I must write him to say thank you. And to suggest that the State Department help the rest of the government update their lists.”

“Good luck with that,” Juliette remarked cynically.

“Indeed,” Tareq echoed. He knew government systems as well as anyone.

“Let’s go home,” Juliette suggested, taking his arm. “Or are you hungry?”

“No. I ate in detention,” he remarked casually. “As is my custom,” he joked, shaking his head.

“They fed you?”

“The first lady, no. She was not very nice. She put me in a room by myself and took my passport. But the second lady, she was nice. She brought my passport back and read the emails I showed her. She apologized and said it was all a mistake. She left again, and when she returned, she brought me a cup of coffee and a sandwich. And when she handed me the sandwich, she said, *It’s not ham, I checked.*” Tareq was still marveling at the consideration. “She knew I would not eat pork.”

“How did she know that?” Juliette asked.

“I think a number of things may have given me away,” Tareq replied sarcastically.

Juliette thought about all the discussions she’d heard about racial profiling, but this time, the assumptions seemed to have gone in his favor. “At least one good thing happened then,” Juliette observed.

“Two,” he corrected, placing his hand on the small of her back, restoring his sense of order. “Shall we go?”

“You might want to get your coat out of your bag.”

“Ah,” he said.

“No coat?”

He shook his head. “I put on my cousin’s coat as I left his flat and then remembered it was his! So I travelled only with this.” He pointed to the sweater he was wearing.

“That’s okay,” Juliette told him. “We’ll go to the car quickly, and I’ll ask Mark to bring you something on Friday.”

By then it was late on the night before Thanksgiving. Rush hour was now long over, but the traffic was increasing, not subsiding. “Should we go back to detention for another sandwich?” she suggested humorously, staring at the sea of taillights before them.

“How long is the drive?” he asked. He looked like himself again, but was still visibly tired.

“Long,” she replied stoically. “With this traffic, long.”

“The busiest travel day of the year,” he quoted her.

“Why don’t you get some rest? Put the seat back, close your eyes.”

“I will. But first,” he reached into his carry-on bag, “you must have this.”

“What’s that?”

“A surprise.” He opened a thin package and put a CD into the player. The voice of Oum Kalthoum filled the car with the song Juliette had heard everywhere in Cairo.

“I love this song, Tareq. Thank you. Thank you for bringing this.”

“You are welcome.”

“But you know, I don’t know what the words mean.”

“Habibi means *dear one*, and the rest of the song....”

“Habibi,” Juliette formed the word in her mouth.

“Yes?” Tareq replied. He had heard her addressing him, even though in that moment, Juliette had only been practicing saying the word aloud.

“Now I know what word to use for you,” she said to him.

“Habibi,” he returned, and then lowered the seat and began to drift off into the safety of her presence.

“Quick,” she said a few minutes later, grabbing his attention before he was fully asleep. “Look out the window!” Tareq sat up with effort and got his first view of New York City. The buildings were visible mainly as collections of lights. Some lights were scattered dots. Others were more like stripes or bands hovering in the darkness. And some, he thought, were like jeweled crowns. Tareq nodded to the magnificence of the light, lowered the seat again, and fell asleep.

It was nearly midnight when they pulled up to the house. “Tareq,” she said softly, shaking his shoulder. “We’re here.” He rubbed his eyes and beheld the darkness.

Juliette had told him she lived in a rural area, but it had been a long time since he'd been somewhere without streetlights and buildings illuminated 24 hours a day. He got out of the car and looked up to the stars that shone like crystals in the clear winter sky. The air was fresh and cold, and he felt suddenly awake.

"I will get that," he protested as Juliette took his bag from the car.

"Then I'll take the small one," she replied, putting the strap over her shoulder.

"I like it," he remarked, looking at the farmhouse. Unlike the perfect right angles of Berlin, this house clearly shifted, both with the soil and with time. It looked nothing like anything in Cairo, but he found it familiar nonetheless.

"Let's get you settled," she said, welcoming him through the front door. She switched on the light in the foyer, which was dim, but strong enough for Tareq to begin to get his bearings. He put his bag down and looked around. To his left, he saw the fireplace with two comfortable chairs, and a sofa along the window. Beyond that, a room with a table and chairs that looked formal, but not excessively so. Straight ahead was an archway leading to what he thought must be the kitchen; he could see what looked like an oven with a microwave above. To the right was a staircase, and underneath that, a closet where Juliette now stood hanging her coat. A desk occupied a section of wall directly in front of him.

Juliette brushed her arm against his as she went to a cabinet by the front door. "I'll give you a tour tomorrow?" she offered as she opened the top drawer and placed her gloves inside.

"I would like to see the kitchen now," he said as he closed the drawer for her. "I am hungry."

"I can take care of that," she replied happily. "This way." She pointed to the archway Tareq had guessed led to the kitchen.

As they walked to the kitchen, Tareq saw a greeting card standing on the desk. It was decorated with lilies, and in large gold script it read, *In Your Time of Sorrow*.

"That's from Rana," Juliette explained. "You remember Rana?"

"I do." Tareq could see Rana clearly, sitting at her desk, her long black hair falling over her shoulders, her eyes wide, her smile slightly suppressed, as though keeping a joke to herself.

"That just arrived today. Mark's been gone seven months now, but I'm still getting the occasional card."

Juliette moved on casually from the card, but the image of Rana took root in Tareq's mind. If Rana were present, he knew what she would say, even if only with her eyes. *Tareq, you should not be here*, she would scold him. *You know you should not be here. Mark is dead less than a year. His widow is not for you. She is Christian, she is Mark's widow. Have you forgotten who you are?*

“No,” he said aloud to himself, but Juliette thought he spoke to her.

“Huh?” Juliette asked. He was lost in thought, but the kitchen was dark and she saw only the fatigue.

“Nothing.” He tried to shake Rana out of his head. He watched Juliette as she walked to the refrigerator and opened the door. The light from the refrigerator spilled out, illuminating her face like a work of art. That he loved her was not in question. He loved her so deeply that he knew he could never leave her side. Whatever happened in the future, it had to happen with her. *What did they say in American movies? He tried to remember a wedding scene. For better or for worse.*

The *better* was obvious: he gained Juliette. He had no doubt of that. She was his greater good, his provocateur, the one who pushed him toward his true self. She was his joy, his adventure, his deepest desire. To choose to be without her would be a form of suicide.

The *worse*, however, was equally obvious. Tareq knew the rules, and he knew the consequences of breaking them. To be with Juliette, he would leave Egypt behind, most likely forever. His plane ticket said he would return to Egypt in a few months, and then he would visit Egypt again after that. But he would live in America with her. And when he left Egypt behind, some people would leave him behind as well – people for whom he cared deeply.

In Berlin he had been as honest with himself about these facts as his heart would allow. In his head, he had explained to himself objectively that his options were mutually exclusive. It was Juliette or Egypt, not Juliette and Egypt and certainly not Juliette in Egypt. He knew the price he had to pay. With Yasmeen, years earlier, he had paid the price of separation. With Juliette, he would pay the price of union.

But when he made the bargain with himself in Berlin, he was standing in a line for a visa. Now he was standing in her kitchen, and a card from Rana was on the desk. His stomach twinged. Tareq wasn't used to second-guessing himself, so at first he didn't recognize that this feeling wasn't just hunger. It was the possibility of regret.

“I should turn on a light!” Juliette exclaimed. She flicked on two switches at first. The kitchen became uncomfortably bright, so she turned off the bright light over the sink. That left only a red glass pendant lamp to illumine the square table that, Tareq observed, was not much bigger than his chess set at home.

Tareq steadied himself by surveying his environment. Given how big the house appeared from the outside, the kitchen's compactness surprised him. The kitchen was narrow, with a sink and a few appliances to his right, including the refrigerator where Juliette now stood. The table with two chairs lined the opposite wall; the open refrigerator door nearly touched one of the chairs and entirely blocked the archway to the dining room.

Tareq grabbed a slim wedge of counter to his left for balance, but his body betrayed him. He stumbled two steps back and felt cold glass against his back. He

turned his head around and saw a paned glass door that led to darkness. He leaned his back against the door again and closed his eyes.

“Why don’t you sit down,” Juliette told him, walking the few steps over to where he stood. She took his hand and guided him to the nearest chair. From the hard, wooden seat, he leaned over to look inside the refrigerator, but it was so crammed that he couldn’t actually make out anything that looked like food. This was his first introduction to Thanksgiving.

“So full?” he asked.

“Tomorrow we’re cooking Thanksgiving dinner.”

“You mean today,” he pointed to the clock above the archway into the dining room. It was past midnight.

“You’re right!” she nodded. No wonder she felt so tired. Five hours in the car round trip, plus nearly three waiting for him. “I know you ate a sandwich at the airport,” she said apologetically, “but do you mind a repeat?”

“Not at all.”

“You don’t by chance eat peanut butter and jelly, do you?” She asked partially in jest, but hoped against hope that the answer would be yes. She was not keen to dig into the carefully packed refrigerator.

“Just peanut butter. No jelly.”

“Really?”

“I have worked with many Americans.” *This is my culture, too*, he shot back at Rana in his mind.

“I’ll join you.” She closed the refrigerator door and brushed his shoulder on her way to the cupboard for the peanut butter. She pivoted around to the countertop between the sink and the oven, found some bread, and made them each a sandwich.

“Tea?” she asked as she pulled out plates for the sandwiches. Tareq didn’t answer; his head was now resting on the wall behind his chair and his eyes were closed. “Tareq?” she asked quietly. “Still awake?”

“Yes,” he half-moaned.

“Tea?”

“Please,” he replied fully, lifting his head with difficulty and forcing his eyes open.

Juliette put the kettle on to boil, grabbed some tea bags from the cupboard, and then joined him at the table with the sandwiches. Tareq ate, expecting the funny feeling in his stomach to subside. But it grew instead.

“Take the tea to the living room?” Juliette suggested when she was done with her sandwich. He nodded, finished his last bite, and followed her.

Juliette sat down on the sofa, but Tareq detoured to the fireplace where an array of picture frames on the mantle had caught his attention. Even in the low light, Tareq recognized Emily and the younger Mark from photos that the older Mark had shown him. In one photo, the younger Mark had his arm around a young woman, presumably Samantha. Tareq worked his way down the line and ended up at a photo of Mark and Juliette, Mark’s arms around Juliette’s shoulders like a clamp, his fingers locked.

Juliette watched Tareq from the sofa, and as he neared this photo, she got up and joined him at the fireplace. She put her arm around his waist and squeezed, but said nothing. She had wondered if she take the photo down before Tareq arrived, but couldn’t see the point.

Tareq could feel Juliette’s arm around him, but at that moment, he was much more aware of Mark. He could see Mark, standing at Rana’s desk, chatting. And then, in his mind’s eye, Tareq watched Mark turn to him and ask, *What are you doing in my living room?*

*I am in love with Juliette,* Tareq replied in his head.

*Like hell you are.* Tareq could feel Mark’s fist striking his face. Tareq did not think of Mark as a violent person, but this was Juliette, and Tareq knew how he would feel if another man announced to him that he was in love with her. Tareq rubbed his cheekbone just to make sure the blow was imaginary.

Juliette felt him blanch. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s have our tea.” She pulled him to the sofa where they sat together in the half-light, tea in hand. They said nothing. They were still comfortable in each other’s silence, but he was now far less comfortable in her presence.

“I want to be here,” Tareq said aloud to himself, and to Juliette, Rana, and Mark.

“I want you to be here, too.” Juliette drew her legs up on the sofa and cuddled up next to him. She reached back for a quilt and spread it over them. He bowed his head toward her, and she drew her face to his. “These have been six of the longest weeks of my life,” she whispered.

*Had it only been six weeks?* Tareq thought to himself. *Six weeks since they had walked through the night and kissed with the sunrise?*

“Juliette,” he replied softly, looking at the clock standing sentinel amidst the photos above the fireplace. “It is past 1 am.”

“I know,” she nestled into his chest. “Just let me rest here a minute. Don’t make me move.” Tareq felt her fall asleep, leaned his head back on the sofa, and drifted off himself.

Tareq’s eyes opened the next morning in the same place they had closed the night before. He had not moved all night, and his neck was stiff. He blinked into his surroundings, lingering on his first view of her asleep, and listened to the rhythm of her breath. Her head was now at the end of the sofa, resting on a cushion, and her legs were stretched out over his.

Moving his eyes away from her, he noticed the colors he had not seen in the dark: the reddish stained wood of the dining room chairs, the evergreen trees out the window beyond, the pale yellow of the walls. The wooden floors were dark, too, with crimson rugs that reminded him of Egypt. The upholstery varied from chair to chair to sofa, a pleasantly controlled mismatch that also looked intentional.

He slid from under her knees and found his suitcase where he had left it in the foyer. He opened the case as quietly as he could and removed his coffee maker. He required few things to feel at home, but this was one of them. He walked to the kitchen and scouted for a spot on the counter. A systematic search of the kitchen yielded some coffee beans and a grinder that was clean in a way that made Tareq suspect it was rarely used. He plugged it into the wall, and then stopped, his finger on the button.

He walked back to the sofa and kneeled down beside her. She was sleeping so soundly that the grinder might not wake her. Then again, she was sleeping so peacefully, he didn’t want to take the risk. He stroked her head lightly and observed the contrast between his skin and her fair hair. He picked up their cups from the table and returned to the kitchen for tea.

He drank his tea at the kitchen table, this time with his back to the dining room. He imagined her in the same spot, eating, talking to him on the computer, reading the paper. He was in her world, her kitchen, and he wondered how to establish his place in it. He was deep in thought when Juliette appeared, still half-asleep. She stretched and yawned as she walked toward him. She pulled the second chair around next to his, sat down and leaned against his shoulder.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Tareq.”

“Happy Thanksgiving,” he replied, keeping his hands around his nearly empty mug of tea. The thought of reaching for her hand hovered, but an image of Mark stood before him like a human stop sign.

“Today’s the real Thanksgiving,” she went on. “It’s always on a Thursday. But we’ll have ours tomorrow.”

“I will be thankful today,” he replied, inclining his head toward hers, “and then tomorrow as well.”

“Good idea,” she replied with a chuckle.

He put his arm along the back of her chair, memories of Berlin tugging him one way, and voices in the present resisting the pull. “You must explain this Thanksgiving to me,” he asked.

“Too early,” she complained, pressing her forehead against his.

“I will make you coffee.”

“You won’t like my coffee maker.”

“I have brought my own.”

“You have?”

“Of course.”

“Well that’s good for both of us.”

“It is,” he confirmed.

“Make me some coffee, then, and I’ll tell you about Thanksgiving.”

Juliette moved her chair to the other side of the table so that Tareq could get up. After he maneuvered around her, she moved her chair back to its side of the table and then sat down to watch him as he busied himself with coffee. Once the grinder had stopped roaring, she recounted all that she could remember about the pilgrims and their move to the new world for religious freedom. “Only problem is,” she explained, “we haven’t always practice what we preached.” She grimaced. “But it was still the beginning of an idea, I guess.” Juliette recounted the harsh winter, the lack of food, and the positive relationships, however short-lived, with the indigenous population.

“And this is what Thanksgiving means today?” he asked further, handing her coffee in a heavy ceramic mug imprinted with words he could read but did not understand. He leaned back against the sink with his own coffee in hand, the sunlight from the window casting him in silhouette.

“Today? Today Thanksgiving means football!”

“It does?” He was genuinely confused.

“Not really,” she shook her head with a chuckle. “It’s still about giving thanks for your blessings, but it’s also a day when people watch a lot of football on TV.”

“And there is food,” Tareq ventured, recalling the bursting refrigerator.

“Lots of food,” Juliette confirmed. “We’ll cook today. Is that okay?” She got up and opened the refrigerator for his inspection. “Turkey, potatoes, sweet potatoes,”

she pointed inside. “We’ll make creamed spinach and some green beans. And cake. I hope you don’t mind, but I’m not making pumpkin pie.”

“Why would I mind?”

“Pumpkin pie is an inviolable Thanksgiving tradition. But I hate pumpkin pie. No one in the family likes it. Sam may bring some leftovers from her parents.”

“If no one likes it, why will she bring it?”

“Maybe because they’ll be trying to get rid of it!” Juliette laughed out loud. “At any rate, you probably should try it just once. But I promise I won’t make you take more than one bite.”

“If not pumpkin pie, then what do you like?”

“Dark chocolate cake with ganache,” she responded, eyeing him as though sharing him into a secret. “Which was definitely not on the original pilgrim menu. But that’s what we’re having.”

“What do you say? *Throwing caution to the wind?*”

“And the pumpkin pie with it,” Juliette added in relief. She looked up at him from the table and reached out for his hand. He took her hand briefly and then let go. For a moment the air felt calm and relaxed, and he let her eyes remain on his. “I’m glad you’re here, Tareq.”

“As am I,” he replied. He leaned toward her, and the light from the window slanted over him in a way that made him look overexposed.

“Sit?” Juliette called to him.

He joined her at the table and looked at her without Rana and Mark in his line of sight. Juliette held onto his eyes with her own, determined not to let that look go. But when she reached out again for his hand, his eyes retreated.

“Juliette,” he implored quietly. “Please forgive me.” He exhaled slowly and then closed his eyes tightly as though protecting them from the elements.

She didn’t ask him to explain. She knew that he couldn’t, at least not right then. “You want to cook?” she asked.

“Yes!” he exclaimed with an enthusiasm that had no obvious source. “But first, I would like to shower and change my clothes.”

Juliette looked at Tareq and then down at herself, registering that they were both wearing the same clothes as the day before. “Good idea,” she said. “Let me show you upstairs.” Tareq grabbed his suitcase in the foyer, catching a glimpse of Rana’s card as he re-zipped his bag. Juliette gestured *after you* with her arm, and he started up the stairs, holding tight to the bannister. “Don’t worry about the creaking steps,” Juliette told him. “Old house.”

“It is not me, then?” he replied.

“Definitely not.” Juliette put her hand to his back as they reached the top. “Follow me.” She led him down the hall and opened the door to the guest room. “I put some towels for you on the bed,” she pointed but did not enter. “And the bathroom is that door over there.” She investigated his face for a reaction. She had discussed sleeping arrangements with Emily, but she and Tareq hadn’t talked about it at all. “Is this okay?”

Tareq nodded. His head felt heavy. “I’ll shower, and then keep me awake until 8?”

“Absolutely,” she caressed his neck and kissed his cheek lightly, but Tareq stepped back. They stared awkwardly at each other in the hall until Tareq broke the silence.

“The shower is there?” he pointed at the bathroom.

She nodded. “Meet me in the kitchen after you’re cleaned up?”

They puttered through the rest of the day chopping, slicing, pureeing, and melting. They worked shoulder to shoulder because the kitchen’s size required them to work that way, and because the kitchen forced them to stand so close, they stayed in the kitchen. Their hands cooked and their mouths sampled what they made.

By noon, the refrigerator interior looked entirely different. Where raw materials had been piled high that morning, glass dishes were beginning to stack precariously on top of each other, and covered pots found an uneasy footing.

“What do we do with this?” he pointed to the turkey.

“Brine it,” she replied, and “then I’ll put it in the oven first thing tomorrow.”

Tareq pulled his phone from his pocket and asked her how to spell *brine*. He focused intently on the phone’s screen and then announced, “I will brine.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

“Knock yourself out,” she replied, handing him the sea salt. “I already brought the pot up from the basement. It’s on the dining room table.” She watched Tareq leave the kitchen and counted the seconds until he returned. “Thank you, Tareq.” She began to take the pot from him, and for a moment they stood across from one another, all four of their hands on the stockpot. Juliette began to move her fingers toward his, but then he let go entirely.

“Probably easiest to work here,” she said, putting the stockpot on the kitchen table. Tareq shook the salt in the air like a percussion instrument and nodded.

By early evening, the preparations for the next day were well in hand. The only challenge ahead of them was dinner. In all her planning for the delayed Thanksgiving, Juliette had given no thought to their own Thursday dinner. She peered into the freezer while Tareq loaded the dishwasher. "I'm not much of a host," she muttered. "I don't have anything to feed you on Thanksgiving Day."

"Should we go out?" Tareq asked.

"There wouldn't be much open around here right now," she explained. "In the city, we'd find plenty open. But not here. Here everyone's at home with family."

"At home with family is good," he said to her, brushing his hand across her back. Working with his hands had restored some of his equilibrium. He walked over to the pantry, opened the door and inspected the cans, boxes and bags within. He pulled out rice, pasta, beans, and tomatoes. "Do you have garlic? Onions?" She nodded. He scanned the spice rack hanging on the pantry door and grabbed some chili pepper. "I will make *koshary*."

For the first time in memory, perhaps in her life, Juliette did not have turkey and trimmings for Thanksgiving. And she didn't miss it at all. Thanksgiving had nothing to do with the food, she knew, and everything to do with the people with whom you shared the meal. As they ate their *koshary* in the kitchen, they reminisced about Youssef and Mariam, and wondered how many people in Cairo knew about their *koshary* in Berlin. This evening, though, they ate *koshary* in private; no one in Cairo would know that they had dined together.

When they were done eating, they cleaned up their dishes. The dishwasher was full and running, so they washed their few plates by hand. Tareq stood at the sink, Juliette next to him with a towel. Lifting the last dish from the water, he took the towel from her and finished off the chores himself. He found the right spot in the cabinet, put the dish away, and closed the door. He braced his arms on the counter and looked out the window. "Juliette, I like to wash dishes with you."

She put her arms at his sides and turned his body toward her. "I like washing dishes with you, too." She leaned into him and waited. He had yet to tell her that he loved her, but she could see it in his eyes. But she could see something else in his eyes as well, something she could not fully interpret, but it reminded her of grief. She knew that look from the mirror. "What is it?"

"I am tired," was all he was prepared to explain. He had been arguing with Rana for most the day, and his bruises from Mark had multiplied.

She accepted his self-evaluation, but knew there was more to the story. "Time for bed, then." She looked over his shoulder to the clock above. "You made it to 8!"

Upstairs again, they stood uncomfortably in the hall, not knowing how to say goodnight. Juliette thought about following him into the guest room, and then thought about leading him to her bedroom instead. But then she heard herself say, "And in the morning, if you get up before me, just help yourself to anything in the kitchen."

He nodded slightly, his eyes looking over her shoulder at the family photos hanging on the white wall behind her.

“And the sound of the coffee grinder won’t bother me.” They both laughed. With laughter came eye contact, and she studied his face again. It was grief in his eyes, she was sure of it. “Tareq,” she started, looking for any words she thought might assuage the agony. He shook his head to say “no” to a question she had not asked. “Tareq,” she repeated. He placed one hand on her back, and she rested her head on his chest in reply.

With one finger, he lifted her face up to his own. He kissed her once on each cheek and hugged her tightly. “You’re tired,” she told him, “I’ll let you sleep.” He nodded again and then went to the guest room, leaving the door slightly ajar. The hallway was dark, and she could see the sliver of light that escaped between the door and the frame. She took a step toward the door, but then the light was gone, and she heard the rustle of sheets as he got into bed.

Juliette rose early the following morning. She got dressed, opened her bedroom door quietly, and peered down the hall. She tiptoed to the guest room door and opened it just far enough to observe Tareq sleeping. His back was toward her, his head on one pillow and his arms around another. She waited to watch his torso rise and fall with breath.

She went downstairs, wincing at the creaking floorboards. As she passed the desk in the foyer, she picked up the card from Rana. The gold lilies looked dull in the dim morning light. Juliette re-read Rana’s note, flipped the card over to make sure she hadn’t missed any message on the back, and then stuck the card in a side drawer in the desk.

The view out of the kitchen window was gloomy and damp, opaque with the sort of autumn mist that contradicted the celebrated warmth of the holiday season. She boiled water for tea, carefully turning off the kettle seconds before it whistled. Leaving the tea bag to steep, she went to get the paper. A deer greeted her as she opened the door. Standing still on the gravel drive, it looked at her with the sort of poise that comes from possessing sophisticated senses of scent and sound. And then, fearing no danger, the deer walked calmly on to the woods, its agile legs stepping with soft confidence in the morning frost.

The morning chill snapped at her, and she stepped back inside, the paper tucked under her arm. She retrieved her tea in the kitchen and held the cup to warm her hands. The morning was still: the birds did not sing, and the stream was practically a dry bed. The trees had no leaves to rustle in the wind. But the silence was not solitary. He was in the house, and soon she would hear his noise.

She was just finishing the newspaper when she heard his door open, followed by the sound of his steps down the hall. Then the sounds of the top step, followed by the others. She met him at the bottom of the stairs and reached out her hand. She wanted to run her fingers through his rumpled hair, but her hand reached only to his shoulder. “Sleep well?”

He nodded unconvincingly. “When will the others arrive?”

“Not for a few hours. We’ve got time.”

“Should I make *koshary* for breakfast?” he asked with a yawn.

“Not necessary,” she teased back. Her hand now pushed the hair off his forehead. “I have plenty for breakfast.”

Tareq followed her into the kitchen, sat at the table and watched her as she put things out for breakfast. Yogurt from a plastic tub but, she assured him, better than what he remembered. Bread, butter, jam. “Cereal?” he shook his head. “Tea?” he nodded. He would make coffee later.

She joined him at the table and gave his hand a little shake. “You okay?”

“What time will the children arrive?” he asked again. It was not like him to repeat a question.

“Noon. Something the matter?”

He leaned his head back against the wall, rubbed his closed eyes, and then opened them as far as he could. “What if they do not approve of me?”

“Why wouldn’t they approve of you?” As soon as Juliette asked the question, she realized it was irrelevant. No inventory of characteristics or qualities that the kids might like or dislike would address this concern. “Tareq,” she took both of his hands. “I’m sure they will approve of you.”

He eyed her with uncertainty. “And if they do not?”

“What do you mean *if they do not*?”

“What will you do if they do not approve of me?”

The thought had never occurred to her. She knew with absolutely certainty that they would approve of him, and she was nearly as certain that they would genuinely like him. She knew, too, that they would need to adjust to the idea of her having someone in her life, that there would be questions, maybe even a rough spot or two. But she never doubted that they would accept him.

“I can’t even imagine that. You’re a wonderful man, Tareq. They’ll see that.”

“But they loved their father.”

“Yes, they did. They do. Still.”

He looked at her as though that settled the matter.

“Tareq, Mark’s gone. They know that. They want me to be happy.”

“But Juliette. It is less than a year.”

“I know. It’s all gone pretty fast.” There was no need to go in reverse, she thought, but maybe idling wasn’t a bad idea. “But I don’t want you to worry. I know they’ll like you. Trust me.”

Tareq did trust her. But he also knew that within a few hours, he would pass through a checkpoint run by three guards who were only slightly older than adolescents. He would face scrutiny, he was sure of it, and his documents would be thoroughly examined, perhaps even rejected.

“Why don’t you make us some coffee?” Juliette suggested.

He smiled. Coffee he could control to perfection.

After breakfast, Tareq spent much of the morning listening for a car to approach. He read until the jet lag caught up with him, then dozed off on the couch. Juliette milled about, accomplishing and inventing last minute tasks. Eventually she sat down on the floor by the sofa and watched him sleep. He was on his side, and she sat where she could study his face. She ran her finger across his forehead, pushing his uncombed hair into place.

“What time is it?” she heard him say, his eyes still closed.

“You’re awake.”

“I am.” He opened his eyes to hers and then looked up at the clock on the mantle. The kids would be arriving any minute. He put his hands over his face and held them there hoping that when he opened them again, the clock would tell a different story. His signet ring was now squarely in her view. She’d noticed it many times, but had never really looked at it before.

“Why does your ring have a cow head on it?” she asked.

“It is the symbol of the goddess Hathor.”

“Hathor?”

“The goddess of music and foreign lands, among other things.” He sat up and took off the ring so she could look at it closely.

She turned the ring around in her fingers and then slid it back onto his finger. “It’s beautiful.” She was just about to say that she didn’t remember seeing much of Hathor in the museums in Berlin when they heard car wheels on the gravel driveway.

Tareq stood up and walked to the front door. He pulled at his shirt to make sure it was straight and ran his hand once through his hair. Then he opened the door resolutely and breathed in the cold air. He slipped on his shoes as an afterthought, and then walked to the car as the engine stopped.

He opened the front passenger door. “I am Tareq,” he introduced himself, placing his hand over his heart. “You must be Samantha.”

“I’m easy to spot these days,” she pointed to her expanding waist. “Nice to meet you.”

Mark and Emily rounded the front of the car. “I’m Mark,” Mark said, shaking Tareq’s hand. “Great you could join us for Thanksgiving.”

Tareq caught himself staring. “I am sorry,” he apologized. “You are so very much like your father.”

“Everyone says that,” he chuckled. It was his father’s chuckle.

“I’m Emily!” Emily announced, kissing Tareq on each cheek. “I recognize you from mom’s photos of Berlin. Welcome to New York!” And with that, Tareq realized, he had crossed this particular checkpoint without producing any passport at all. “Mom!” Emily saw her mother standing on the porch.

Juliette walked toward the car. “Everybody’s been introduced?” she asked.

“Yep,” Emily confirmed. She hugged her mom close. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

Juliette hugged Samantha next, and then Mark. The family returned inside, heated and re-heated and prepared what still needed to be prepared. At last, they sat down to Thanksgiving dinner. Tareq inventoried the foods before him and mentally flipped through snapshots in his memory bank. His concentration was evident. He had helped prepare all of the food, but it wasn’t until he saw it arranged on the table that something clicked. “What is it?” Juliette asked.

“I have eaten Thanksgiving before,” he said to himself with surprise.

“When?”

“In Damascus,” he replied, still surprising himself with the realization. “It was a feast hosted by Americans. I was invited to attend. I sat with Mark. But I did not understand then that it was Thanksgiving.” He nodded at each dish around the table. “Juliette,” he said her name emphatically and touched her shoulder. “I have had pumpkin pie.” His mouth twisted with the memory. “I am glad you have chocolate cake.”

Mark put his hand on Tareq’s back. “You’ve got good taste, buddy.”

But this Thanksgiving dinner, this dinner at all, was like nothing Tareq had ever experienced. Samantha teased Mark, who in turn teased Emily, who then unleashed her wit on Tareq. Juliette laughed at it all. The conversation ranged widely and touched on topics that Tareq felt were too personal to bring up in front of a stranger. Either they had different understandings of privacy, or they did not view him as stranger. He wasn’t sure which. They told stories he did not entirely understand and used English words he had never heard before. They competed

over what seemed like nothing, were passionate about winning, but didn't seem to care if they lost. Sometimes he didn't know whether he should laugh or be offended. They always laughed.

When the dinner plates were empty and thoughts of seconds and thirds were past, Mark announced that dessert and the annual Trivial Pursuit game would begin in 15 minutes. Everyone should clear their places and grab their beverage of choice. The serious part of the day was now upon them.

"Honey, not me this year," Sam begged off. "I've got to lie down."

"Okay, excused this year. But stay on the couch so you can pass me answers if I get stuck."

"So what're the teams?" Emily asked.

"You and me against Mom and Tareq. Generational warfare." Americans could use warfare as a metaphor, Tareq thought. This younger Mark, unlike his father, did not know how lucky he was.

Juliette produced the game box, and Emily began the set up. "Help me in the kitchen?" Juliette called to Tareq. He followed her to the coffee maker. "It's going okay, yeah?" she asked.

"Yes," he agreed. He looked around to make sure no one was looking and put his arm around her waist.

"Told you so," she replied. "Now impress everyone with your coffee."

Emily burst into the kitchen and Tareq released Juliette instantly. "Tareq, have you ever played Trivial Pursuit?"

"No," he replied. His eyes focused on the coffee maker while he listened to her explain the game. Geography and history should be fine, he thought. Art and literature and science and nature as well. Sports and Leisure? Unlikely. Entertainment? Tareq couldn't even figure out what that meant. Maybe music would fall into that category.

When they returned to the living room, Mark had set up the game on the coffee table near the sofa where Sam was outstretched. He and Emily leaned up against the sofa, and Samantha rested her hand on Mark's shoulder. Juliette and Tareq sat on the other side of the low table, and Tareq studied the game board.

"We'll start so you can see how it's done," Emily offered. And they were off. They rolled the dice, answered questions, and filled in their respective pie pieces. Tareq turned out to be very well-equipped for the game.

"Hey mom, this isn't fair," Mark joked at one point. "He knows all the history stuff we don't. You can't keep the foreigner all to yourself."

“You can have him on your team at Christmas. For now, he’s mine.” She pressed her hand against Tareq’s, hidden on the floor beneath the table. No one protested Juliette’s ownership.

They played late into the night, everyone demanding rematches and more slices of cake. Samantha slept soundly on the sofa despite the din. Eventually, everyone agreed to call it a night. Before Tareq disappeared into the guest room, he caught Juliette in the hallway. “You did tell me so.” He took her hand in the safety of the darkness and looked toward the room where Mark and Samantha were settling in for the night. He assessed the risk of one of them appearing unannounced, kissed her quickly, and said goodnight.