



## THE REFUGEES

‘DON’T THINK of changing your name, Khalil,’ says Zenobia from the chaise-longue, naked on her back, thrusting with her legs upwards, urging on an upside-down horse, or donkey, into a gallop. ‘They’ll put you straight in jail. And you won’t have a document with either name to show. To get you out or keep you in more accurately.’

‘I’d be ready for anything, suspected of everything,’ says Khalil, ‘And innocent.’

‘Well,’ says Zenobia. ‘I for one shan’t visit. And if you’ve done nothing, there’ll be no one to lie for you.’

‘These rooms,’ Khalil says, ‘are built for rent. See the angles – you look right down over to other rooms built for rent, same smell – same scene on the divan! You can see the lino ageing into bark: there’s guys above looking down on ours. If there were hundred-franc notes beneath, you’d not want to burrow down for them.’

‘They’d be worthless anyway,’ says Zenobia.

‘Just big words,’ says Khalil, ‘and drawings. But the smart ones here, they had a continent of bourgeois, squabbling for them – the notes, the words, and sounding off. “I’m an ephemeral and not too discontented citizen....” That nailed it. No pictures, just “*la magie bourgeoise*”, from Le Havre to Kitezh. Then it was soiled or blown up, the massacres ... and these crap rooms were left. I don’t have a bourgeoisie behind me, Zenobia: just guys in uniform, smoked spectacles in place of eyes.... We should leave at once. We know where our next port is, there must be cash that waits for us.’

‘We can do anything at all,’ Zenobia says. ‘Here, in this city. You don’t seem able, Khalil.’ She’s angry, putting on some clothes.

‘The others should have come,’ says Khalil. ‘Zenobia – say goodbye to the guy over the road, up in the sky – the show is done, you’re ashamed and clothed.’

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‘I was a democrat then,’ Khalil recalls. ‘Was it yesterday? It’s easy when there’s two of you and you’re about to separate.’

‘They say in any group, one in three’s a spy,’ Zenobia says. ‘The spy – it could be you.’

‘In a group like ours,’ Khalil says, ‘it could be two of three. Maybe that’s why the others stayed away. We could be the two.’

‘The people here,’ Zenobia says, ‘have twice what we might want – and yet they’d like to throw us out. Even if we had twice more than them, we’ve lost it, so it’s just too bad. No rancour, just “move on”.’

‘That’s it,’ says Khalil. ‘If we had the same as them, they’d let us stay. Inside – we know we once had more. We’d not spoiled it quite so bad ... except we couldn’t do the politics, handle the cash, the arms, the visitors in all their shapes. The hopes, the scorpions. The exorcists.’

‘Thinking it over,’ says Zenobia, ‘it’s better that we both are spies. Only one – brings complications. Anyway – how would you want things back there to turn out different?’

‘Oh,’ Khalil says, ‘I didn’t come from there.... I want to be left to myself, and see the bad guys hung up high. But that is incompatible: changing things and being left unchanged yourself. We’ve learned too much. We people, who have only half of what the guys here think they possess – we travel round, we go everywhere we can and can’t.... It’s even in the religion we’re supposed to have.... The world is ours, because what’s right is right all over. I’ve already been all round one world.... I know how it ticks and tocks.’

‘Don’t ever say that, Khalil,’ Zenobia says. ‘It’s jail. Travel incriminates. They’ll know you are a spy, but won’t know who it’s for.’

‘It’s true,’ says Khalil. ‘Suppose you’re a philosopher, then I should go to jail for doing nothing. For being suspicious. Well, I am a suspicious type – so, you are too. But – since I’ve run in order to escape, it might seem a kind of failure, don’t you think, to shut me up? If you do something – what then? What should be the punishment? Run for ever?’

‘See?’ says Zenobia. ‘We look like everyone else here. Even unclothed – the same. Similar. You must never look the same as anything. That’s conspiracy. Somehow, you must be indistinguishable from other people who look the same but are

conclusively not the same.'

'I don't see this,' Khalil says. 'It will be hard, for sure, living in a place where we don't want to be, that reads so well in books but when you're here, it's dull and big, you never find the interesting things that other people do.'

'It's so for everyone,' says Zenobia, weary. 'It's the children who don't think like that...'

'I don't want your children, Zenobia,' Khalil says.

'Whose then? The choice is partly yours,' says Zenobia, not wanting kids with anyone.

'Genghiz,' Khalil says. 'He had a patrimony to leave, and all the children had lives quite remarkable; most existences and legacies you wouldn't want, but theirs were neither dull nor skimped.'

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