

# Paris in the Shade

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(Syria)

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The Creative Forum for  
Independent Theatre Groups

Europe - Mediterranean

2010



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## ***Characters:***

- *Olga*
- *Selma*
- *Nadia*
- *Woman 1*
- *Woman 2*



# Scene One

## Wishes

A small room, with mess strewn everywhere. Glasses and bottles, both full and empty, dishes, bunches of flowers. From the confetti scattered about we can tell that it is New Year's Day. Nadia and OLGA are coming and going, tidying up the debris of the party and taking it into the kitchen. Selma, clasping a long-handled broom, dances with it to an old Russian tune on the gramophone as she sweeps, her face alight with happiness.

**OLGA:** Nothing happened!

**NADIA:** Every special occasion it's the same. You expect a surprise, and then when nothing happens you're all disappointed—haven't you had enough?

**OLGA:** But tonight's special. (**Throwing herself down on the sofa**) It's the start of the New Year!

**NADIA:** (interrupting) I see you've sat down!

**OLGA:** Please, let's just clean the house tomorrow. Please.

**SELMA:** (hearing the last phrase) Yes, Nadia, tomorrow, and you're not touching a thing. Olga and I will clean the house until it sparkles. Tomorrow's a holiday. Please, Nadia. You can hold me responsible.

**NADIA:** Always the same thing. Well, all right.

**SELMA:** (She hurries to the kitchen and fetches three clean glasses, filling them with what is left of the champagne) We'll have our own celebration now, just us.

**NADIA:** (Having washed her hands, she sits and takes a glass) Olga! Where are you!

**OLGA:** (She stands at the door and turns the lights on and off three times) Here I am (jokingly)

**SELMA:** (whispering to NADIA) She's up to her old tricks again!

**NADIA:** Hush. To us being housemates, and to our shared company! (**OLGA comes and takes a glass**)

**SELMA:** Wait, wait! Let's each make a wish.

**OLGA:** Not unless you tell your wishes afterwards.

(Silence.)

**NADIA/SELMA:** All right.

(All call out loudly: "Cheers!")

**OLGA:** Before we begin, I want to suggest a game we used to play at New Year's parties in Moscow.

**SELMA:** What is it?

**OLGA:** We get three candles and light them. When each of us is done telling her wish, she tries to blow out her candle from quite far away. If it goes out, it means she'll get her wish.

**SELMA:** And if it doesn't?

**NADIA:** (jokingly) With that level of intellect, I don't see how you understand that literature you're studying!

(**OLGA** rises and brings a candlestick with three candles, which she lights, and places it at a distance from the girls)

**OLGA:** Nadia, we'll start with you as usual.

**NADIA:** Is this one of those truth games? (jokingly) I can't bear those.

**SELMA:** We already said we'd do it. Besides, there's nothing new. It must be something about Omar.

(**SELMA** and **OLGA** laugh)

**NADIA:** Am I that tiresome?

**SELMA:** No, I didn't mean that, I...

**NADIA:** (interrupting her) Never mind.

(Pause)

**NADIA:** (rising towards the only window in the room, high and narrow) The air

is sticky with tobacco and sweat! (**She gets up on a wooden chair and opens the window**). Perhaps I don't mean it.

**SELMA:** (**in low tones**) Here we go again.

**OLGA:** Don't make a thing out of it. Maybe it's because he was missing his daughter. You know. And his ex-wife won't let him see her. Plus, you've put up with him through worse than this.

**NADIA:** That's still no excuse...

**SELMA:** (**eagerly**) But you love him. And love is...

(Pause)

**OLGA:** (**trying to change the subject, lightly**) Let's get back to the wishes. Don't try to wriggle out of it, Nadia.

**NADIA:** It's such an impossible wish—it's remote even if the candle does go out. Let me repeat it and maybe one day it'll come closer, or I might get tired of it and forget it and then maybe

it'll forget me or let it alone and then maybe it'll let me alone and...

**SELMA:** (interrupting her) Well?

**NADIA:** A house that's sunny, warm, far away from the damp of the cellars in Paris. Coffee on the table. Me seeing my kids off to school, wild and crazy like all children. Omar humming and going off to work and me by the window sipping my coffee and staring at the Rausha rock in Beirut. And during the long evenings, I'd go for walks. The streets would be empty except for me and Omar. The cafes of Hamra would breathe in our scent just as the night would be full of the echoes of our laughter... We'd get tired with laughing and talking and friends and noise, and then we'd slip off home and I'd hug my sleeping children, and go to bed. And very late, I'd wake to Omar holding me, and he'd give me a kiss and

go back to sleep. When I go back to Beirut, I'll go back to reporting as I always have. I've had enough of these nasty Parisian travel-agencies.

**(As she speaks, NADIA empties the table of everything on it - papers, books, cleaning supplies - and brings two empty coffee-cups, and arranges four empty chairs around the table, placing bunches of flowers on the chairs and caressing them as though her imaginary characters were actually sitting there. Finally, giddy, she sits down on one of them and rests her head on the table.)**

**(Pause)**

**OLGA:** It's not an unreasonable wish, it's not even that remote. But it does need more time and it needs you to make a decision. Marriage, children. You know that. And Beirut's there for you and Omar. You left because of the war, but that's all over now.

**NADIA: (distracted)** What's over! They'll

never let Beirut go back to what it used to be... and the children!

**(She gathers the bouquets on the chairs to her and places them under her dress in a pretend pregnancy)**

**OLGA:** (joking) A fetus like that (she points to the lumpy mess under NADIA's dress) seems a bit deformed! (NADIA looks at her reproachfully)

**SELMA:** (tiredly) Marriage, children... I don't want to project my own experience, but maybe one day out of every year is like your wish, your dream. The rest of the time it's fighting and screaming. Maybe one day your wish comes true, and you keep waiting for days, weeks, months after that for those happy times to come back, but... as time passes and the hours pile up, you realize they're not coming back, ever.

**(Pause)**

(NADIA sits, the flowers still under her dress)

**OLGA:** Don't generalize. Besides, you've never had kids and you wouldn't know...

**SELMA:** (interrupting) Marriage is a picture, painted in black and white. It shines in the sunlight at first but soon it fades ; the white fades into grey splotches and the black, faded scribbles, and all that's left of the painting is a page in monochrome. The lines are worn away and the shadows scatter. But it...

(Pause)

**NADIA:** But what?

**SELMA:** Sometimes, it has a beauty that you may never find all your life. It's like newspapers that yellow with age, and time just erases the lines and letters and one forgets the events they told, no matter how important...

(As she speaks, SELMA pulls a number of photographs from her dress, all of her with her ex-husband. She clips them to the chairs set out by NADIA with clothespins)

**NADIA:** Mine's an impossible dream. (She blows on the candle. It remains lit. She laughs)

**OLGA:** It's only superstition.

**NADIA:** (jokingly) That's certainly not the reason.

**SELMA:** What is, then?

(Pause)

**NADIA:** (looking at SELMA's pictures) Last night I broke it off with Omar. I suddenly had the feeling that we were strangers. I just had no desire to go on. I can't take any more; what was left of our dreams is just scattered to the winds and I'm not so young that I can afford to fritter away what's left of my life here

and there on impossible dreams and pretty wishes. Even that dream of mine's got nothing to do with Omar. I could substitute any other man to have kids with and keep me warm - to settle down with. To give me a life with more answers than questions.

**(She crushes the flowers in her stomach and one intact rose falls to the floor. SELMA and OLGA are still stunned at what they have just heard)**

**SELMA:** Broke it off? How?

**OLGA:** After six years... just like that! Why?

**(Pause)**

**NADIA:** I don't know. I got tired of his lies, his fake suffering - ready-made stories to squeeze every last penny out of every woman he's known - cheating, over and over, and lame excuses. And he doesn't want kids, and

that's a priority for me right now. Yes, my love for him is dead. (She sings) Since the loveliest rose dies/ and the bird, no matter how high it flies/I thought how you loved me/No one loved me more/But why shouldn't this love die?/Hey, the sun dies, and so do we/So why shouldn't this love die? Not die—is dead.)

**(While NADIA is singing, she picks up the intact rose from the floor and buries it in a nearby empty plant-pot, pouring earth over it)**

**(Pause)**

**OLGA:** It's not as simple as that.

**NADIA:** Even that wish no longer means anything to me. I don't want it. I think I'm better off now. The most important thing to me is to be rid of everything that's bothering me. All I want is...

**SELMA:** **(interrupting)** Just the child without the man?

**OLGA:** Even that's possible. But you wouldn't be going back to Beirut in that case.

**(Pause)**

**NADIA:** **(joking)** I think I've answered the question. We're not analyzing dreams and situations. It's your turn. Come on. **(Taking OLGA's hand)** We'll talk about it later.

**(Pause)**

**SELMA:** Olga, you're the eldest.

**OLGA:** **(laughingly)** There's nothing I want.

**(Pause)**

**SELMA:** **(jokingly)** Moscow, Red Square, your favourite theatre, treading the boards and playing Ophelia—your greatest part? I'm just trying to jog your memory.

**OLGA:** **(looking SELMA straight in the eye)** You won't find my memory. It's no use talking.

**NADIA:** I feel guilty. I've depressed us all.

**OLGA:** No, no. It's a year like any other year. Maybe I'll give over the habit of expecting strange and wonderful surprises. The difference is I'm another year older. I'll fill it with work like the last; I'll send money to my family and they'll be happy and write them long letters about the happy life I'm living: a good job and a charming house and starring roles in the best Parisian theatres. They'll pretend to believe it and pretend to be happy, but deep down inside they know; oh yes, they know.

**(During her monologue, OLGA stands before the mirror and paints wrinkles on her face and neck and paints them with colours that make her appear aged.)**

**SELMA:** (quietly) Are you afraid of getting older?

**OLGA:** No. **(Beat.)** Yes, I'm afraid of old

age—of being alone. I imagine how things will be after you two have gone away - you to Syria and you to Beirut and me here alone in this stinking room. The walls, the chairs—the empty ones—I'll put them up on the tables just as they do in a café when the last of the customers has gone. I'll wait for someone to come and sit in them... that's good, to have something to wait for... better than not waiting, and that's when memory will come in handy. Then it'll be good for something; my face will be full of wrinkles and the veins will pop out in my hands and feet, and my nose will become enormous and my lips will get droopy. I'll look just like a clown, but without the paint. **(She puts on a mask and performs clownish antics)** Then no-one will look at me. Today I play insignificant roles, almost an extra, on the miserable little playhous-

es of Paris; when that time comes I'll be a cleaner there, a clown whose helplessness makes others laugh, only he doesn't find it funny. But I'll keep listening to my music, to my old records. I'll keep company with our old victories and dream of the ones to come...

**(As she speaks, she places the chairs atop the table, then spreads out her many records on them.)**

**(Pause)**

**NADIA:** Don't worry. We shan't leave.

**(They laugh, teary-eyed)**

**SELMA:** **(in low tones)** And Boris?

**NADIA:** **(looking at her watch)** By now he'll be up late with his friends, discussing Current Affairs and the Situation. He'll dream, and so will they, and make momentous decisions to do this and that and change the world.

A little later, he'll take his girlfriend in his arms and fall asleep peacefully, dreaming of a year where so many things will be different, after he's drunk toast after toast to his girlfriend. He's like Moscow; neither believes in tears. **(sings)** *Moscow doesn't believe in tears. The charming city lives forever/ Always shall it spread its smiles/Immortal its beauty shall be/One day we'll realize that it is life/Ugliness will disappear/Then how wonderful the world will become/Lilies shall cover everyone...*

**(As she sings, she approaches the nosegays, touching them, inhaling their perfume, and putting them back in place)**

**(Pause)**

**OLGA:** My wish is not to be alone, and for us to stay together, no matter where. (She laughs, rises and switches the

light on and off three times) To be loved a little; I'd prefer a lot; and to get a lot of calls tomorrow wishing me a Happy New Year.

**(She blows on her candle. It also does not go out.)**

**NADIA:** It's not an unreasonable wish.

**SELMA:** **(laughing)** Reasonable, and modest, and my advice to you is to sell your records and forget about loneliness.

**OLGA:** My records are all I have left of my dream. Just let them alone. They make me feel I ought to live.

**(They laugh)**

**SELMA:** As for me, I have another reason to live.

**NADIA:** **(surprised)** Why this sudden change?

**SELMA:** I—I love this city. Paris. It brings happiness, it brings good luck. **(She jumps up to the bouquets, pluck-**

ing a rose and sits on the sofa) He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not, he loves me... **(She laughs with pleasure)**. I want to hug everybody, I love them all! I feel I'm flying! I shall dance in the streets and fill them with my laughter. I'll go to the cafes, the clubs, the temples... yes, I'll pray for this happiness of mine to last!

**OLGA, NADIA:** So you're in love.

**SELMA:** Yes.

**OLGA:** Finally! At last, you've fallen in love with Ayman.

**SELMA:** **(confused)** Ayman? Ayman who? Oh! **(She laughs.)** No.

**OLGA, NADIA:** **(stunned)** Who, then?

**(Pause)**

**SELMA:** Hazem...

**OLGA:** **(astonished)** Hazem? But he's...

**NADIA:** (interrupting her) ...old enough to be your father!

**OLGA:** You can't be serious! Who?

**SELMA:** (stiffly) It really is Hazem.

(Pause)

**NADIA:** That Omar. No good ever comes of him. It was he who invited him to the Christmas party and introduced you to him! And besides, you only met him last week! What's with this crazy whirlwind romance?

**SELMA:** It's the first time I've ever trembled like this. It's the first time I've ever wanted to be a better person, to be beautiful enough for Miss World, to care about every second of my life, to live for me, for every day, not spend my days waiting for the white cloth to be wrapped around me. His love has made me hate death. I feel that a woman like me ought to live a

thousand years.

**OLGA:** But you're not Zorba. You'll crash and burn. You're happy now, but with time...

**SELMA:** He adores me! He said I'd made him remember all over again what it meant to love a real woman, and he's made me remember what it feels like inside to be a woman. He's rung bells I never heard, peeled away dead, broken skin and replaced it with fresh new growth. He was waiting for me. He stayed in Paris for me and me alone. He cancelled his lecture in Marseilles just on the off-chance of meeting me at in our regular bar. He wrote on the palm of my hand that he loved me ... I feel as though I'm in a dream and I never want it to end.

**NADIA:** You said it, a dream! Happy because he wrote "I love you" on the palm of your hand... Second childhood!

**OLGA:** A man his age, carrying on with a girl

young enough to be his daughter. Has he no shame? And you, believing he's in love!

**SELMA:** (grabbing OLGA by the shoulders and shaking her) Nobody made him tell me these things! He doesn't have to lie.

**NADIA:** Watch out. You're the one who fell in love with him from the start. You read his work and developed an infatuation, put him on a pedestal and gave him a halo. You've unconsciously been shoving yourself into his path, doing your level best to get an introduction. Well, you've got his attention now, but...

**SELMA:** But what?

**NADIA:** You'll end up like all his other women. Perhaps he's in love with you now; yes, he's not lying. You inject poetry into his life; you're his Muse. (Mockingly) But what's the next step? Have you thought about it? Did you

forget when he told you that his dream was to love a woman for twenty days unfettered by beliefs or values. I saw your face; you were so impressed with that remark. But have you thought what will become of you when the twenty days are up?

**(Pause)**

**SELMA:** I thought you two would be happy to hear the news. How many times have you said, Nadia, and you, Olga, that you wish me love, and that I would never be rid of my depression until I felt that warm pulse... that then I would not think of this art of madness...

**NADIA:** But not Hazem!! Besides, what's the use of your relationship if it starts now?

**(Pause)**

**OLGA:** **(rising and closing the window)** Selma, let life make you happy, for once

at least. Just enjoy it, all the little things, all the beauty. We've a been in love, we know what love is. It's life. It's rare to have that feeling of being on top of the world, queen of creation and maybe what comes after. God and the devil together.

**(Pause)**

**NADIA:** Selma, please don't let him have you, because then...

**SELMA:** **(interrupting)** I'm taking a shower. **(She exits the room. We hear the sound of water from behind a frosted-glass partition, and SELMA's voice singing)** *He says I'm a woman to evoke envy in the sun/ He says I'm a pearl to which the very seas will run/He says that my description would baffle every tongue/That I to him am love and life, there and gone in one /He says I am a river of beauty and Lord, how he loves me and my flirtatious glance/*

*And how everybody loves a flirt...*

**(As she sings, NADIA and OLGA continue their conversation after OLGA turns the lights out so that the candlelight is the only illumination)**

**NADIA:** I'm worried about her. She's still so young.

**OLGA:** Young, at twenty-six? She's an adult, she knows what she wants.

**NADIA:** She'll have a breakdown. I know Hazem. There hasn't been a woman who could stand him. They can't stand his carelessness, his recklessness. She can't see that he's just a ruin, a wreck of the Lebanese War. He's trouble, and he'll be nothing but trouble for her.

**OLGA:** But maybe...

**NADIA:** **(interrupting)** Maybe what?

**OLGA:** This is the first time I've seen her without that pessimism of hers; she's happy and enthusiastic about life. That's a good thing, maybe...

**NADIA:** Happy and enthusiastic now, but what about tomorrow?

**OLGA:** Only time can fix these things. Let her go through it all. We've all had our share of stormy love affairs that ended badly. But we're still fond of them. They're a breath of fresh air; we live for them, for another one like that. Her love for him will make her want to study, to live.

**NADIA:** To die.

**OLGA:** Don't be a pessimist.

**NADIA:** I'm a realist.

**OLGA:** She's been through worse, and got over it. Don't baby her. Maybe she can get centered and finally decide to go back home.

**NADIA:** Damascus? She never thinks of going back, though she swallows down all her homesickness along with her tears.

**(Pause)**

**NADIA:** We've got to stop her going to Mar-  
seilles. Let her call him on the phone.  
Let him come to see her here in Par-  
is.

**OLGA:** I agree with you; she mustn't go.

**(NADIA refills the three glasses as SELMA  
emerges from the bathroom)**

**NADIA:** Here's your glass, A toast! To our  
new life and our hopes!

**SELMA:** (reassured by her words) Thank  
you, Nadia.

**SELMA, NADIA, OLGA:** Cheers!

**(SELMA stands over the candlestick and  
blows out the three candles)**

**(Blackout)**

**NADIA:** But you haven't told us your wish!

**OLGA:** That's right!

**SELMA:** With that level of intellect, I don't  
know how you two got jobs in the  
press, and in theatre!

(They all laugh)

**OLGA:** But you're not supposed to put out the candles like that!

**SELMA:** I don't know when you're going to let go of that thing you have about light.

## Scene Two

### Incident

(Two months later. A wide hospital corridor; we can tell by the number of covered gurneys passing by from time to time. A number of waiting-room chairs. NADIA is sitting alone; OLGA is just arriving.)

**OLGA:** (panting) What happened? An accident? A breakdown?

**NADIA:** (interrupting) Suicide attempt.

**OLGA:** (shocked) Suicide!

**NADIA:** (She raises her head slowly.) He drank a lot of alcohol and mixed it with barbiturates. Or sleeping pills, I don't really know what he... (Cries.)

(Pause)

**OLGA:** He'll pull through, of course he will. Omar's strong, he always is. It must have been a moment of weakness—he'll laugh at himself when he wakes

up! I'm sure of it, Nadia! He'll be as good as new, better. Believe you me.

**(Pause)**

**NADIA:** Thank you for the money. But where did you...

**OLGA:** I told them at the theatre that I needed an... advance. They gave it me, and there you are. The main thing is that Omar be all right. **(Smiles tenderly)**

**(Pause)**

**OLGA:** He'll pull through, I know it.

**NADIA:** **(slumping from the chair and sliding to the floor)** He could have said something to me! He could have talked about what he was going through. I was alone too, with the stench of dead bodies around me **(She lies on the floor, hands crossed over her chest as though in a coffin)** My throat was full of the stench of death. I was

waiting for a jasmine-scented coffin to conceal the smell for ever... Maybe... No, I left him alone in a confused, confusing situation. We haven't spoken at all in the past two months. I gave him half-truths, half-spoken, half of everything, half my feelings and—love—I was selfish! That's how I always am, thinking only of myself! **(She rises, as though from a coffin, to stand at the window)** I sought my own salvation without sparing him a thought...

**OLGA:** It's not too late. Everything will go back to the way it was.

**NADIA:** **(ignoring OLGA)** I was the one to break it off, but I always thought: Oh, he'll call. I'll hear a knock on the door and he'll be standing there bringing me flowers... he'll give me a hug and say, Are you still mad at me? He'll laugh, and everything will be all

right. I was selfish. I put my pride first—I never called.

**OLGA:** You did the right thing.

**NADIA:** No, don't make excuses for me. I know you only want to make me feel better. I'm in the wrong.

**OLGA:** I'm not trying to make you feel better—

**NADIA:** (**interrupting**) He could have made things go back the way they were, no, better. He could have put the colour back into our life, the light back in our eyes, instead of letting our faces be swallowed up by the dark of night—but he chose to run away by committing suicide... Maybe I never gave him a chance. I should have seen how sensitive he was. He didn't want to pressure me after I told him not to try and meet me. I was cruel, I was a monster! The only man who loved me that much, and I cast him

aside because I couldn't stand it any longer, just like that! But I've suffered. I wanted a child, but I **(bursts into tears)** Olga, I'm never going to have a baby!

**OLGA:** You did not cast him aside all of a sudden. Must I remind you of everything he did, all his shit? Every time he was a beast to you? All the times he cheated on you? And why on earth can't you have a baby? Are men going extinct or something? God, you Arab women!

**NADIA:** **(interrupting)** All that matters is for Omar to make it.

**(Enter SELMA, exhausted and pale. She draws NADIA into a strong embrace)**

**SELMA:** The nurse said you could see him now.

**NADIA:** **(delighted)** He's all right! He's strong, he's always been. **(She rushes to the room)**

**SELMA:** What the hell happened?

**OLGA:** Suicide attempt.

**SELMA:** The whole point was for it to fail. We haven't seen the last of Omar and his miserable messes.

**OLGA:** Shh.

**SELMA:** Nadia's gone.

(Pause)

**SELMA:** (She pulls a wad of banknotes out of her pocket the same way OLGA did, crumpled and jumbled) These should do the job.

(They smile.)

**OLGA:** (looking at the money still in her hand) How did you manage to...

**SELMA:** I went to see the mother of those two kids I take care of and asked for an advance on my salary. She gave it to me. That's all. We want Nadia to be all right, that's what matters.

(Pause)

**OLGA:** (holding out the money in her hand to SELMA) Don't lie to me.

**SELMA:** What about you. Where did you...

**OLGA:** I sold the records and the record player. (In a rush) But don't tell Nadia.

**SELMA:** (stunned) Sold them? But...

**OLGA:** It's no use remembering, living in the triumphs of the past—which were all illusions anyway—fading into the defeats of today—the main thing is to try and succeed now, isn't it?

**SELMA:** But you sold them all?

**OLGA:** I've one left. It's enough. (Her eyes fill with tears and she laughs.) After the second stiff one, I can't tell the difference between one song and another; and I only listen to them when I'm drinking. So all I need is one. Don't fret.

**SELMA:** You didn't make copies?

**OLGA:** There wasn't time. Nadia said to be at the hospital at three. I didn't understand a word when she called me at the theatre, only that she needed money. I made a mad dash for the records and then I thought of the antique dealer who's always been on at me to buy them. And anyway, their charm is in the vinyl. It's the sentimental value.

But you, where did you...?

**SELMA:** **(abstracted)** I asked all my friends and acquaintances **(She acts out the dialogue of everyone she met in her search for money)** 'Sorry, Selma, I've no cash on me, but if you come home with me we can take a break from lectures and I can give you some money.'

'Sorry, Selma, but it's my mother's birthday today and I've got to buy her a gift.'

'Sorry, Selma, but I'm chipping in for that party we're giving Andrea tonight.'

Sorry this, sorry that. One told me of his dire straits, another about the elderly neighbour she has to support, and one even dragged me into a long discussion about the evils of globalization and their effect on the psyche! And on and on. Eliza even said if I came up with any money, to lend her some! Olga, I was so surprised! All of them, Arabs or French, they're well off! It was the poorer ones who managed to secure me some cash. They did all they could, but it wasn't enough. It's a lonely life we lead. Cold. If I'd been in Damascus... **(She looks into OLGA's eyes)**... I wouldn't have managed a thing either. The world's grown desolate. **(Mockingly)** A barren island in space. It's all the same, all that changes is the names and the cities.

**OLGA:** So where did you finally...?

**SELMA:** Imagine that, I went to Catherine's—

she really is the au pair mother I told you about—and she said she wanted some security before giving me an advance, especially since I was an Arab! I'm automatically suspect.

**OLGA:** Take no notice. Arabs have a reputation for stealing and backwardness and terror; Russians for whoring. Or maybe we get mixed up in those two accusations too, who knows. And what can you do? Pretend? Protest? They'll tell you, cold as ice, 'Go back where you came from' to our beautiful cities; beautiful, but poor.

(Pause)

**OLGA:** So?

**SELMA:** I sold the barometer.

**OLGA:** But it was your only gift from Hazem.

**SELMA:** (dreamily) I still have Hazem. He'll buy me another.

**OLGA:** Still? Didn't you break it off with him— at least, that was what you told us.

**SELMA:** You call it a relationship? That's why I sold the barometer.

**OLGA:** Fooling yourself now?

(Pause)

**SELMA:** The only thing that matters is that Nadia be all right. Your records are so much more valuable, and yet you gave them up. The barometer is just an outdoor clock, and I don't need to know the time after today. I want no more of that mercurial time. Although there are still words etched into me... **(she smiles)** They give off a perfume... Those words I'll never sell, you can be sure of it.

**OLGA:** Nobody'd buy them either, you can be sure of it. **(dryly)** Perhaps during the sales.

(Pause)

**SELMA:** Do you know, Olga... words have a scent, just like places and memories and they have a taste as well.

(Pause)

**OLGA:** And what does Marseilles taste of?

**SELMA:** (surprised) I've never been, and you know it! (Pause) ...Smoke. (She lights a cigarette.)

**OLGA:** (grabbing the cigarette) Is that why you've been smoking so much? To keep his taste in your mouth? To remember?

**SELMA:** Life is memory. Maybe death is, too. When I'm with him I can't help smoking and that's why I associate the taste of smoke with him. The taste of bitterness. Don't tell anyone, Nadia, there's no need...

**OLGA:** (interrupting) The weather will be much nicer now that it's March. I'm fond of spring.

**SELMA:** (with a laugh) I hate it when a perfectly normal person turns into a weather forecaster. Sometimes I do it when Hazem or my family call, or with my friends when the conversation gets tense and awkward and it's no use talking.

(Enter NADIA. She approaches, weeping copiously and laughing hysterically)

**OLGA:** Is he stable?

**NADIA:** Oh, he's stable all right.

**SELMA:** Has something happened? A relapse?

**OLGA:** Nadia, answer us!

**NADIA:** (falling to her knees) Empty, fragile, cold, dirty!

**OLGA:** (in low tones) Has he left us?

(Pause)

**NADIA:** Not dead, though.

**SELMA:** Is he in a coma?

**OLGA:** He's not paralysed, is he?

**SELMA:** Stop being a harbinger of doom! (**OLGA's eyes fill with tears**)

(Pause)

**NADIA:** He couldn't be happier. He had too much to drink and then took too many painkillers for his hangover, that's all. He was spent the night with his girlfriend as usual, only she went off to work in the morning—he does too, usually. He kept his old address book. My name's still listed in it as an emergency contact. He's just been planning to marry her because he found out he can't live without her! All the years I was with him he never once said anything of the sort! I could hardly believe how—how comfortable he looked. Why...

(Pause)

It's a dirty life we lead.

(**OLGA and SELMA splay their palms, letting**

the banknotes flutter to the white hospital floor)

**SELMA:** My records!

**OLGA:** My barometer!

**NADIA:** (raising her head slowly, she looks at the notes and then crouches over them) The records... The barometer... No.

**OLGA:** The colours of money look quite exciting on that white floor.

**SELMA:** They do give it a bright shine.

**NADIA:** (touching the money scattered on the floor and covering her tear-stained face with it) God will never forgive me for this.

**OLGA:** (taking her arm and pulling her close) Never mind God, what about us? (smilingly)

**SELMA:** I do believe the opening of Catherine's café is tonight—and now we can

afford to go.

**OLGA:** (smiling at SELMA) And the weather is fine!

**NADIA:** Let's be reborn today, with all the pain and hope of childbirth. We'll stay up all night and kiss our stupid depression goodbye forever. Let's draw up different dreams from the ones we're used to. No booze for you, though, Selma. We haven't seen you sober for days, and over what, I'd like to know! Wasn't it you who called those times "Nice to remember but never again"?<sup>1</sup>

(Blackout)

**SELMA, OLGA:** (bursting mockingly into song)

*Nice to remember but never again*

*Don't call me, I'll call you, my one-time friend*

*Live well, have kids, have fun, but forget me!*

**(NADIA joins in)**

*Every joy is chased by sorrow*

*Here today and gone tomorrow*

*Nothing lasts forever!*

**(They laugh)**

## Scene Three

### A Night Out

(**OLGA, NADIA, SELMA** in the café. No-one else is there, just the three women, the sound of their laughter filling the café)

**NADIA:** So nice of Catherine, to shut up shop and let us stay!

**OLGA:** We used to do that a lot in Moscow.

**SELMA:** In Damascus it's considered odd for women to sit at a café at this hour, and over drinks, too!

**OLGA:** Whatever for?

**SELMA:** It's an affront to their femininity!  
(**They burst out laughing**)

**NADIA:** If this were Beirut we'd go on a pub-crawl. Not in the same way, though (**rising and acting**) Catherine, we're so tired... we need to sit here for a while after the café closes. We'll take good care of the place. We'll

keep watch (**jokingly**) and for free!  
We won't touch a thing.

**OLGA:** (**laughing**) 'We'll keep watch!' And she believed you because...?

**SELMA:** She sensed the endless addiction to the black beats of our hearts. She felt we were at rock-bottom, going lower and lower.

(**Pause**)

**NADIA:** Not again; going back to depression, are we?

**SELMA:** Has it ever let go of us?

**OLGA:** Have we ever let go of it?

**NADIA:** Just a little while ago. I mean... we said, we decided no more depression! We're young, we've no reason to fear the future!

**OLGA:** (**bitterly**) Young!

(**Pause**)

**OLGA:** Selma, you're the young one who's not

afraid. **(Rising)** You're supposed to be the happiest one among us, with a warm love-affair in Paris' clear winter.

**SELMA:** Don't make fun of me. These things don't bear joking about. **(NADIA looks at OLGA reproachfully)**

**OLGA:** I was just trying to make a joke.

**NADIA:** Did you meet him again?

**(Pause)**

**SELMA:** Olga, today someone brought me some of those long, red cigarettes from Damascus, and some matta. Wouldn't you like to make the acquaintance of that dangerous drink?

**OLGA:** All right. Let me fetch it. **(She takes the box and goes to the bar where coffee and drinks are prepared)**

**NADIA:** Anything new?

**SELMA:** **(dreamily)** I'm only twenty days from

his fiftieth... but I still can't stay away from the light in his eyes... from his alluring, mysterious smile. His voice is like church-bells under the warm sun, with a calm sea...

(Pause)

**NADIA:** (pulling SELMA's head close to her breast) It's a good thing you didn't go to meet him. You never did go to Marseilles, did you? It was a fantasy romance, that's all. Remember the good times. Don't regret anything you've already done—regret does you no good and soon enough you'll sweat his love out with the rest of the toxins in your body. You'll heal and stand tall again. You're still young, young enough to eventually treasure in your memory the affair you once had under the skies of Paris...

(Pause)

**NADIA:** You're too young for this grief. You've

got your whole life ahead of you. It was an irrational choice from the start...

**SELMA:** Young?! That's nothing but a silly phrase to ease the pain, sometimes—no, not ease it, numb it, until it comes back worse than before. **(Smiles.)** I've used it myself to comfort lots of people. I always saw them look away. They never believed it. Not once, Nadia.

**(Pause)**

I'll break it off with him... this time.

**NADIA:** Did you even start? It's nothing but a bunch of phone calls. Love in the ether and through the wires! You made it up to fill a vacuum—emotional, psychological, material. Your love for Hazem is just an illusion.

**(Pause)**

**OLGA:** **(Entering with a teapot and cups)**  
Here are your drinks.

**SELMA:** (catches sight of **OLGA** and bursts out laughing) D'you think it's tea, or coffee?

**NADIA:** That's not how it's made. (**OLGA** moves to prepare another in the traditional method) Forget about him and come here. Sit down. (**SELMA** fetches a bottle of wine from a shelf.)

**OLGA:** Selma, we had an agreement. You can't get drunk again!

(Pause)

**SELMA:** (Pulling a cigar out of her handbag and crushes it, pouring the tobacco into a dish. Covering it with the cigar-leaf, she sets it alight. Sweet, thick smoke curls up out of it. She dances with it.) It's the scent of Marseilles.

**NADIA:** Marseilles! (**OLGA** looks at **NADIA** and motions her to be silent)

**SELMA:** The first time my feet touched its ancient flagstones, I arrived at around noon. My longing was mixed with such fervent prayers that I would get there in time! I walked for so long—I hadn't the money to take a bus. I walked, spurred on by a burning passion for him. I asked so many people for directions to the university where he teaches. Some of them looked at me coldly but I didn't care. I was going to see him! My dream was going to come true! I'd wrap myself in his desire and we'd go down paths untrodden; he would tell me things to make me dream for years to come, to keep me happy for so, so long... He would wait for me, as he used to do in Paris...

**NADIA:** And what happened?

**SELMA:** At last I arrived. I met him and we made a date to meet in a café by the

sea in two hours' time. Two hours in Marseilles, do you know what that means? Then he talked about irrelevant things—the university, the humidity, and then the weather—the weather, Olga—then about Beirut, Nadia. I left quietly, thinking 'it's all right, he's probably uncomfortable because he's at work.'

(Pause)

**NADIA:** Why didn't you go back to Paris? You could have...

**SELMA:** (going on with her tale, ignoring NADIA) Perhaps there's a special kind of untruth. It goes into you and then settles, floating around inside you. That city draws you in. It captivates you. You walk for hours through the streets, wishing for one person to greet you, to hold out a hand... their faces are dry, pale around the edges, hurrying along, terrified of one an-

other. I don't know, perhaps it looks like every strange place where you're waiting to meet someone. I walked for miles, and sat on empty benches. Perhaps they weren't empty, I don't know, but I was lying to myself with great skill and precision. I made excuses for him and waited. I thought of you, Nadia. I thought of you, Olga. I asked myself why I insisted on suffering so, on tiring myself out so. From a distance, Damascus is smiling. It looks breathless because of all the dust and smoke in the atmosphere. I had sex with him to take him out of it, but he went against everything men do in our time—from the East and men from the West—he stayed. He stuck to it, he was committed to it, he couldn't stand to be separated from it! I got tired of it all and gave in to him. But in spite of that, it still looked beautiful and

tender. I miss him. He's waving to me from a distance. I wish he was here. His words would erase all my misery, but he's completely wrapped up in Damascus, his beautiful, affectionate lover, whose filthiest alley soars above all disappointments. And here I sit, my breath clogged up of shame and humiliation.

**OLGA:** It's not as bad as all that.

**(Pause)**

**SELMA:** He wants my body? He can have it! But let me touch the grain of his silence that says in a moment that he loves me. At his house, he said he had an important appointment. I left with him. I felt sick, it burned in my heart and in my throat. I don't think the feeling will ever go away. I feel that I smell of it! I wish I had gone out and walked barefoot, in the streets of a city by the sea. I want-

ed to scream, to wail... to kill everyone I saw. I hated the children for laughing, the sun for shining and the moon because people loved it...

**OLGA:** You're stronger than all that shit. It may not happen today, but time is a healer. I was just like you and I've gone through the same thing, maybe worse. But today...

**SELMA:** (interrupting angrily) But today what? Let's be frank, Olga. You can't break free of your OCD and your neuroses. And neither can I, and you, Nadia, you turn the light on and off three times, and that thing with putting out the candles, and your charms—those folded pieces of paper you put under your pillow—each with a prayer written on it that has to be repeated a certain number of times—you think we don't notice it all? (Grabbing OLGA's hand) Let's

stop fooling ourselves, we're riddled with disease! Diseases have wormed their way into our nervous system, into the cells that never die. Let's stop this ridiculous... **(mocking)** 'Stronger!' 'Stronger', when all of us are hollow to the bone.

**NADIA:** **(applauding sarcastically)** Filibuster over? You think you've got troubles? For your information, your big crisis is nothing. What if you had been through poverty, hunger, cold...war?

**SELMA:** It's cold now, isn't it? ...Go on, tell us about the imaginary war in Beirut. Who were your enemies? Windmills, were they?

**NADIA:** I wish you could go through a war like that. You wouldn't be so ready to make fun then. Sick, am I? Yes, I'm sick, and it comes of watching Beirut burn.

**SELMA:** You're just like Hazem. You both hang your frustrations and isolations

and failures at love and life on that war.

**NADIA:** (**angrily**) You never lived through it! You never touched it! You never broke into pieces with an entire nation, as Olga did, you never experienced an absurdity such as the Fifteen Years' War. The mere shock of a failed marriage brought you to Paris. Our girl can't stand the nightmares of Damascus anymore now that she's left her husband!

**SELMA:** You can't imagine that Damascus burns inside. That's the war in Damascus.

**OLGA:** (**shouting**) Shut up! ...Each of us is walking around with her own tragedies, our weaknesses, our illnesses, our defeat. It's best we shut up.

(Pause)

**SELMA:** I'm feeling sick again (**She rushes to the bathroom**)

**OLGA:** We must stand by her. She's stood by us through worse. God, she's a mess.

**NADIA:** I warned her. Her and everyone else who's an accident waiting to happen. I can't take this now.

**OLGA:** Not a word of this shit to Selma.

**(Pause)**

**NADIA:** The air's heavy. It's stuffy, yes, close. Olga, don't be disgusted at me, but my demons are no better than hers. And perhaps it's you who's got the worst of it...

**OLGA:** I've had enough of this. We have got to shake off this black mood. Our life's nothing but a hallucination groaning under the weight of all our dreams.

**(Pause)**

**SELMA:** **(Enters, weeping, a hand over her face)** Forgive me, Olga, please! Na-

dia, forgive me. I didn't mean... I'm weak, I'm exhausted. (**Taking NADIA's hand, she places it over her heart.**) It's broken, but it does love you.

(Pause)

**SELMA:** I am strong, at least that's what I tell myself for comfort. The ring of it comforts me for a while, but then I feel it retreating behind a mask, and I go back to thinking of nothing, and the water inside me plays upon tissues that have come to prefer silence and dryness and would really rather stop beating altogether.

**NADIA:** In our darkened room we lie, staring at one another for ages, wondering whether we're dead or alive. Perhaps we only think of death; perhaps we're the ones who are dead. In a lonely darkness I hear a creaking breath—yes, it comes from you, Olga, from

your chest—to prove to Selma and I that we're still alive, and waiting for it to come out, to delight our ears, and confirm: Yes, I am alive, no doubt about it.

**SELMA:** We play that game for a long time: we contemplate a past experience that we regret, many times over. In spite of the pain when you cough, we enjoy it. What sadists we are! And in the morning, we always think: We must find a flat that's higher up off the ground, because the cellars of Paris are bad for your asthma... but we never have a penny to spare.

**OLGA:** You sit alone in your room, writing rubbish and fantasies, just to smell the ink again. You write without seeing what you're writing, the darkness is so enveloping. I don't know how long I've been used to writing in that black atmosphere, like being used to

treading the boards in the dark. You light a candle, bring it closer to the mirror... you wait and wait for someone to appear from behind you so you can paint in his face in your imagination. You want everyone to love you as you love them, but feel rejected every time... because you're not used to kissing ass... which creates more neuroses. And I can't control them. I feel that something terrible will happen if I don't manage to, do you think I'm happy? But I'll try... I'll try.

**(As OLGA is speaking, she stands before a mirror in the café, taking a candle out of her bag and talking to herself in the mirror.)**

**SELMA:** (lying on the table among the glasses and bottles) Even when I try to write something, I write in the masculine. That's the irony. Are you so afraid to be a woman? Why? Do you hate the feeling within you, do you

want to bury it in a deep well and be rid of it, and wear masks for everyone as you wear laughter and smiles, to bury your face in make-up to appear bold and invincible to them? Not to cry... a woman who doesn't cry, because she's strong, because she cares for nothing. Who said that apathy was a pretty picture? **(As she speaks, SELMA takes her make-up bag out of her handbag and powders her face white, still reclining prone)**

**OLGA:** But I've cried many times to attract someone I fancied, on trains, in museums, corridors, I don't know...

**NADIA:** I can feel the loneliness tearing through to my fingers, peeling off my skin, staying only on my heart beating with hatred and love, freedom and imprisonment, war, peace... remembering and forgetting... Bei-

rut, Beirut, why do you persecute me? I'm so lost.

(Pause)

**OLGA:** Last night I dreamed I was in Red Square, that I was buried next to Lenin's monument with a Catholic cross on top! In my breast I had my prayers and on my head was a red star.

**NADIA:** What's wrong with that?

**OLGA:** You can't combine things that don't belong together. They don't fit.

**NADIA:** In the East, we all live among crosses and moons, mosques and incense, prayers written on little pieces of paper by holy men, and red stars fluttering high.

**OLGA:** I can't tell anymore.

(Pause)

**SELMA:** I've traveled a lot.

**OLGA:** I've seen a lot of doors slammed in my face.

**NADIA:** I've had so many abortions. I cut up my fetuses. I shall never bear children again.

**SELMA:** I cut up my heart and my dress... I'm naked.

**NADIA:** Beirut's been stripped naked.

**OLGA:** I've practiced strange rituals of prayer...

**NADIA:** They didn't work, though. Our cities still burn, and we move from one city to another until we burn to ashes.

(During this exchange, **OLGA** takes out her one remaining vinyl record and turns around, holding it; we hear an old Russian tune. She keeps turning, revolving round and round while also going round the tables, pulling from her breast a number of little folded pieces of paper with prayers written on them, in different colours, and tossing them on the table.

**NADIA**, walking slowly, draws -on the same table - labeled maps of cities and streets, drawing on the walls as well: she lays out a number of maps of French cities on the chairs, while **SELMA** keeps smoking voraciously, staring contemplatively at everything she sees, reaching out and touching it.)

**NADIA**: Other times, I waited. My stomach would get big—but then I'd bleed again.

**SELMA**: Every time I waited, my dream would get bigger and bigger, filling up the whole place and the air around it, but every time it would shatter.

**OLGA**: My dreams shattered on different sets of rocks, but the end result was the same.

**SELMA**: I can't even forget him.

**NADIA**: Hazem's drowning like the rest of us.

**SELMA**: He's dreaming a deadly nightmare. He

sees faces and features of friends who died, or betrayed him. He's got no more gardens, no more skies.

**NADIA:** He's got no more anything.

**OLGA:** He's just empty. He's like us, weak and fragile.

**SELMA:** He runs away; he puts on masks of being uncaring, strong, saying nothing matters.

**OLGA:** We're experts at wearing masks.

**SELMA:** But every day we chew on cold, dark nothingness.

**NADIA:** We'll never manage to let it go. We'll keep coming back to the fog of another life.

**SELMA:** He's tempted by my silence. Silence always does tempt one to go down a golden passageway... to nothing.

**OLGA:** Go back to Damascus. It's waiting for you.

**SELMA:** I haven't achieved anything yet. I took a bet from my father, and I won't let him laugh at me this time, not when every time I come back empty-handed, a failure.

**NADIA:** He won't laugh at you now. Believe me, he's the same as us; we're all the same in the end...

**OLGA:** But the smartest are the ones who can hide it behind a mask.

**SELMA:** And why don't you go back to Beirut?

**NADIA:** I'm afraid.

**OLGA:** What of?

**NADIA:** Nothing. Of the dead... of death. Time is slow.

**OLGA:** The dead lose nothing when they're dead. You don't remember anything about dying when you're dead. I pray that we never need to ask anyone for anything, and just let the dead bury their dead.

**NADIA:** Paris was my dream and my refuge. Now I've been deep inside it, it just looks barren. Paris is a light in a dream.

**OLGA:** Or a prima donna in the spotlight.

**NADIA:** But who knows what it's really like when it's in the shadows? We experience Paris in the shadows, full of phantasms and contradictions. The wind blows the wrong way here.

**SELMA:** The wind never blows the wrong way.

**(Pause)**

**OLGA:** I shall go back to Moscow.

**(NADIA and SELMA draw near her)**

**(Blackout)**

**NADIA:** How shall our cities be, now?

**SELMA:** Nameless. Featureless. But...

**OLGA:** We will go back.

## Scene Four

### Room

NADIA, OLGA and SELMA are in their room packing. The Arabic song "They Say My country is Young" is playing on the stereo. then we hear snatches of various French, Arabic and Russian songs, and a flight boarding announcement.

(Blackout)

NADIA, OLGA and SELMA outside the door of their room with their closed suitcases. Paper planes fly about them. A verse of the song "In a Café at the Crossroads" plays. To the sound of the aeroplane, OLGA, NADIA and SELMA soar about in the space on stage.

Blackout

## Scene Five

### Truth

(*OLGA, SELMA and NADIA, in skintight gold dresses, hop and skip joyfully in a large field of wheat. But a rope, tied around their waists, pulls them suddenly to the ground, as a strong wind blows up, blowing away all the wheat. OLGA, NADIA and SELMA roll away with it, giving way to a woman standing in the middle of the stage, looking up at a giant poster for a play entitled Paris in the Shadows. NADIA, OLGA and SELMA are on the poster.*)

**WOMAN2:** (two coffee-cups in hand) The plane won't take off until this weather improves; all they've got left at the airport cafeteria is coffee. (Smiling) The passengers have inhaled everything!

**WOMAN1:** And when is the weather expected to improve?

**WOMAN2:** They don't know.

(Pause)

**WOMAN1:** That's a lovely poster, isn't it? And the name, Paris in the Shadows. It seems like a lovely play.

**WOMAN2:** I've been. It's rubbish. The title has nothing to do with what's in it, it's just meant to rope you in like all publicity stunts.

**WOMAN1:** (still staring at the poster) I thought it would be beautiful—Olga from Russia, Nadia from Lebanon, Selma from Beirut, all in a big house in Damascus that has a bar and a room and a hospital in it...

**WOMAN2:** You're not making any sense. There's nothing in the play about these names or places or people. Besides...

(Pause)

**WOMAN2:** ...the house in Damascus is still floating around in your memory. I thought you decided to destroy it

and finally be free, and go to Paris, the city of your dreams?

**WOMAN1:** Maybe it isn't any more.

**(Pause)**

**WOMAN2:** Still vacillating, to go or to stay? Think of it as an experiment. If you don't like it, you can always go back. So, are you going or what?

**WOMAN1:** I don't know.

**WOMAN2:** The clock is ticking.

**WOMAN1:** Time is slow. I'm not sure whether to go or to stay.

**WOMAN2:** When it's too late, when time has flown by, then you'll know... you'll realize.

**(Pause)**

**WOMAN2:** Are you going?

**WOMAN1:** I don't know.

**(During this exchange, WOMAN1 and WOMAN2 are facing the poster that hangs in the center**

of the stage. When she says 'I don't know' she turns to the audience, whereupon we see that each of them is holding a mask representing half of the other's face, split down the middle. Finally, they come to stand behind one another and bring the two halves - the two masks - together, thus hiding their real faces behind them)

(Blackout)

**WOMAN1:** Out of the darkness I have come... I have lifted the veil from my eyes... I have seen a mass of ghosts and skeletons... They shall stay with me... They shall bury me... To the darkness I shall return, eyes closed.

END

## Footnotes

- 1       Translator's Note: This is a famous piece sung by Fairuz, Arab musical icon. I have translated to the best of my ability but believe it would be better for the stage director to substitute a European song.