



TRANSLATORS' RINCON de TRADUCTORES CORNER



“On the Road to Houmt Souk”
by Soledad Puértolas

translated by
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Introduction

Soledad Puértolas is one of the most distinguished authors of today's Spain. Her creative coming of age coincided with the democratic transition that was marked by artistic ferment and a proliferation of women writers. Since her first novel *El bandido doblemente armado* (Premio Sésamo, 1980) she has published twelve more novels and seven collections of short stories, as well as several volumes of essays. Soledad Puértolas received the Premio Planeta for *Queda la noche* (1989), the Anagrama Premio de Ensayo for *La vida oculta* (1993), and many more honors and distinctions, notably her election to the Real Academia Española (RAE) in 2010.

“On the Road to Houmt Souk” (from *Adiós a las novias*, Anagrama 2000) combines several themes, motifs and situations that recur throughout the author's narratives. A chance encounter leads to an epiphany, an experience that both triggers reflection and empowers. Openness to the other—people and cultures—provokes fortuitous engagement that relieves the loneliness of modern, urban life. Travel both instigates and parallels the inner journey.

Like so many of Soledad Puértolas's protagonists, the unnamed narrator of “On the Road to Houmt Souk” is a traveler; a thoughtful, somewhat solitary and passive woman. An old boyfriend's invitation to spend the New Year's holiday on the Isle of Djerba thrusts her into the path of a mysterious young woman who embodies the island's beauty and magic. The desert light sparks inner clarity, the glimpse of change, and affirmation of the self. The narrator's second encounter with “the goddess of dusk” illustrates her fear of being sidetracked on her path to autonomy, a journey that culminates in a decision as radical as it is logical. “On the Road to Houmt Souk” can be read as an eco-feminist tale and as an example of female agency in contemporary Spanish fiction.



About the translator

Francisca González Arias completed her doctorate at Harvard University with a dissertation on the nineteenth century novelist and short story writer Emilia Pardo Bazán, and she has taught in various universities in the New England area. Her research interests are focused on women writers of the Spanish-speaking world. She has numerous translation projects underway of works by Soledad Puértolas and the Mexican author Cristina Rivera Garza. Her translation of Soledad Puértolas's second novel *Bordeaux* appeared in the European Women Writers Series of the University of Nebraska Press (1998), and her translations into Spanish of Emily Dickinson were published by the University of Valencia Press: Fascicles 7 & 8 (2016) and Fascicles 9 & 10 (2018).

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ON THE ROAD TO HOUMT SOUK

Ernesto called me the fifteenth of December and told me that he couldn't take it any more: people were harassing him, constantly asking him to do things, inviting him here and there. He wanted to get away, and had thought of the isle of Djerba in Tunisia, of a hotel lost among the dunes, where the only thing to do was walk, take a dip in the sea, swim in the fresh water pool, play tennis, and lie in the sun. He told me he had thought of me because I loved to swim, and also played tennis, though not very well, and finally, he said, I knew some French.

It wasn't a very passionate invitation, but I accepted. Our meetings, fewer and further apart, always left me with an uncomfortable sense of disappointment. Perhaps we should try to be friends, I said to myself, only friends. Maybe he too had come to the same conclusion.

There had been a time when I was in love with Ernesto. Before he became famous and rich as a result, I had listened with loving patience to his angry complaints about rampant bad taste, and of the difficulty of trying to succeed in a society so manipulated that its only measure of value is money. I tried to comfort and encourage him, and to tell him to hold out, for that was the only thing worth doing. Then, suddenly, he was famous, and his paintings drew impressive sums. I don't know if by then I was that much in love with him, but I still liked him. With me he had a habit of complaining; I wonder if he did the same with others. He deplored social climbing, envy, the loss of tranquility and time, the lack of respect.... People wouldn't leave him alone. His friends were the worst. They took advantage of him, and unfortunately he was incapable of saying no. But all that had to end. He wasn't a social institution. He was simply a man, a person who painted.

I liked him better when he talked about painting: of proportion, forms, harmony, symmetry, tones, chiaroscuro, transparency, light. I ended up understanding something about all that.

But, once I realized that he was in no way the man of my dreams, I lost interest in his complaints and artistic conversations. What friendship could there be between us, I wondered when I hung up the phone after telling Ernesto that, yes, I'd go with him to the isle of Djerba.



Going with him is a little like going alone, I told myself. He doesn't know many things about me, partly because he never asked many questions: he always preferred to complain about something or other. And partly because I'm becoming a silent, perhaps overly solitary person. I've never been to Tunisia, I thought. One has to be open, see the world. I shouldn't close myself off so much. I'd have preferred to go to Sousse or Hammamet, which seemed to be more lively, worldly places, but Ernesto was looking for peace and a little bit of desert, and the truth is I had also been fascinated by the call of the desert at one time. The vibrating line of the horizon, mirages, oases, the supple, highly evocative palm trees, the blazing sun, and the cold nights... Yes, I had dreamed of all that, inspired surely by oriental tales. On the isle of Djerba I could swim in the fresh water pool, dive into the sea, walk by the waves, be in the desert.

We arranged to meet at the Barcelona airport because Ernesto was coming directly from Brussels where he'd been to an exhibition opening, and the flight he had chosen for the day after Christmas left from Barcelona. The airport was full of people, luggage, and carts loaded with suitcases. It was hot, because the day wasn't very wintry, and the heat was on too high, but as in all airports, once in a while there were drafts, and a little fearful, I said to myself that it was the ideal situation in which to catch a bad cold, because when I travel my defenses are down and I catch all kinds of illnesses. I also get them when I don't travel. In my family I have a reputation for being very delicate, and my relatives still listen to my grumbling, but the rest of the world doesn't pay me much attention, and Ernesto fell into that category. He'd never paid much attention to me, not even when I was completely healthy. In reality he had never known me to be ill, didn't know anything about my weak spots.

I saw Ernesto in the cafeteria. He was holding a book, one of those treatises on architecture he likes so much. For a while we talked about how things had gone in Brussels and of the commitments he had just taken on, and that he wanted to forget about right away. Our flight was delayed, and when Ernesto submerged himself once again in his reading, I went to the bookstore and bought a novel by a young American author, because, although it's hard to believe, it hadn't occurred to me to put a book in my bag, and it seemed like a good idea to select a work by an American author because Americans know a lot about airports and maybe they also write about them. In fact, the first paragraph described the protagonist's arrival at the Los Angeles airport. I read it several times because it was very good. But as soon as the protagonist got home, he dived into a whirlpool of comings and goings, parties, trivial conversations, cocaine at one's



discretion—or rather, without any discretion—and beds. He'd get into any bed that was occupied, and didn't seem to care by whom. He said he was very bored. I got to page twenty-seven and when we left the cafeteria I put the book on a chair, in case it could be of use to someone else.

It was night by the time we were able to join the check-in line. There are a lot of people who think that when you're queuing, you're obligated to sneak to the head of the line. There are true masters in the art of managing to move their luggage ahead of everyone else's. They push you surreptitiously with their suitcase. They tend to be solitary people, and it's obvious they're in no hurry to get anywhere, but they've gotten it into their heads to inconvenience their fellow human beings. Perhaps life has never given them anything at the appointed time, and so they push to see if finally they reach their goal before anyone else. Many people got in front of us while Ernesto, seated on his suitcase, which seemed to be very solid, continued reading, and I began to feel terribly tired. Just behind us, two children, a boy and a girl, about ten and twelve years old, dragged sports bags bulging with tennis rackets. Looking at them it dawned on me that I'd forgotten to bring my racket. Ernesto hadn't brought his either. Perhaps you could rent them at the hotel.

The tennis children had a father with a resigned look who dragged his own sports bag with a racket handle sticking out. I didn't see the mother anywhere. They were Catalan. The children called their father Enric. You didn't need to be very clever to understand that he was a divorced parent and had picked up his children that very afternoon at his ex-wife's house so they could spend part of their Christmas vacation with him. And it had occurred to him to take them to Tunisia, to one of those hotels with all kinds of equipment and opportunities for entertainment—pool, tennis courts, horse-back riding . . .—that the travel agency brochures show you. Exactly the same idea that Ernesto had had, and I agreed to. I felt a little sorry for that man, because he was wrapped in an air of infinite patience. He knew what that vacation meant, and was ready for anything. Besides, I found him rather attractive and gave him a look of encouragement. I feel a deep affinity for divorced men who make an effort to entertain their children. There was a time when there were a lot of divorced men, but now there are fewer and fewer. I smiled at him as we stood in line, and later, as many times as I could throughout the trip: on the bus, in the plane, and at the Tunisia airport. And I even had a chance to smile at him in the small plane that took us from Tunisia to the island of Djerba, because they were going there too.

After that long, slow line, and the usual amount of time at the gate, we boarded the plane for Tunisia, tightly packed and weary, without knowing if we were hungry, or sleepy, or hopelessly



tired. I ate what I could of whatever it was they gave us, closed my eyes, and slept a little. It was pitch-dark when we arrived in Tunisia. They welcomed us with shouts on the other side of the glass door. “Passengers traveling to Tunis!” “To Djerba!” There were very few of us headed for Djerba, and I wished there were even fewer. It was better to stay in Tunis no matter what. We filled out forms, made new lines, if you could call lines those shapeless groups of people who tried to get near the counter, and, completely convinced that our luggage was going to stay in Tunis forever, we again boarded a plane, this time a small one.

It must have been about two in the morning when we got off the plane in the Djerba airport. There was no one there. It was dark and silent, and the group that got off the plane wasn’t up to making a lot of noise. Without much hope, we waited for our luggage. Miraculously, it appeared with the green sticker of the “Tour” in full view. I can’t help feeling astonished, with a stab of true joy, whenever I recognize my suitcase on the conveyor belt of an airport. I like suitcases when they’re open on my bed and I begin to put things in them. If I lose my suitcase, perhaps I lose that moment as well. The things I have at that moment, my life at that moment.

The commotion began when we went outside. We had an inkling when we looked through the window: the wind, the clumps of fallen leaves blowing level with the ground, the palm fronds shaking, on the verge of disappearing, of being pulled from the tree trunks. It wasn’t cold, but the wind, loaded with sand, thrashed our bodies. You could hardly take a step forward. We walked, feeling our way between the wind and the darkness, shouting the name of our hotel, in search of a bus that would, with all certainty, take us there. A man covered from head to toe came toward Ernesto and me and pointed to a bus, the most ramshackle one. We took our bags and found seats. People started getting in with the same uncertainty as we. Finally, another swaddled man looked at us, and without saying anything he got on the bus and turned on the ignition.

The ride seemed interminable, although, given the condition of the vehicle, which lurched violently from side to side, it seemed as if we were going very fast. Under the headlights we saw how the wind dragged the sand and small dry bushes that had been uprooted from the ground. Once in a while, small, inhabited towns would emerge with tenuously illuminated white houses on the sides of the road. There were arrows indicating the names of the hotels. But everything disappeared rapidly; our silent driver had been infected by the wind’s speed. We dashed through sandy roads, everyone silent, exhausted. Nobody asked any questions or pronounced the name of their hotel. It was of no use any more.



About an hour had gone by like that as we gazed at the island night, thinking perhaps we'd see the sunrise from that rickety bus, and, in the end, we couldn't complain since we were lost in the middle of the desert, and that was the reason why we had come, when finally the bus began to follow a road to a hotel. Then the stops at several hotels began. We let off groups of two, three and four people at the entrances to brightly lit hotels. The travelers would get off the bus and struggle against the wind and their suitcases, surrounded by men who raised their arms and pointed towards the glass doors as if they were warning the shaken voyagers to get into the hotel as soon as possible lest some kind of calamity occur.

We were the only ones left on the bus and Ernesto confronted the driver and pronounced the name of our hotel several times as loudly as he could. The man nodded, not angry or smiling, but somewhere between indignant and ironic, accustomed to episodes like that, seemingly in control of the situation and the bus's progress.

Finally we arrived at our hotel, the most remote and secluded of all. Nobody came out to welcome us at that hour of the night as the branches of the palm trees curved violently in terrible jerks.

While I find second-class hotels depressing, luxury hotels intimidate me. I have no idea how to behave on the plush carpets and under the untiring watchfulness of a whole troupe of doormen, waiters and messengers. Although it wasn't as bright as some of the hotels we had left behind, after the long journey breathing in the desert dust, that hotel seemed very luxurious to me. And it seemed cold. Everything –the floor and walls– was made of white marble. The crystal drops that hung from the ceiling accentuated the impression of coldness; in due time they probably lit up.

We were led through a wide hallway and opened the door of our room. It was then I found out that Ernesto and I were going to share a room, but at that moment it was all the same to me. The room was spacious and had everything it should; it didn't look out on the sea, but rather on the desert and the shaking palm trees surrounding the hotel. Ernesto immediately said he didn't like it, but our bellboy responded that nothing could be done that night; we should speak with the hotel manager in the morning. I knew who was going to speak to the manager.

I looked in the dark for my nightgown and toiletry case, undressed, and got into bed; fortunately, there were two beds. I fell asleep, lulled by the sound of the wind and the water that was filling the tub, because that's what Ernesto did as soon as he arrived, he took a bath.



The light woke me. We hadn't lowered the blinds. In the bed next to mine Ernesto slept profoundly. He was rather handsome when he slept. I looked at the clock: it was ten A.M. I showered and got ready to speak with the manager and insist on our rights as agreed to at the travel agency. I walked on the plush carpets and along the immaculate marble, passing leather armchairs and lacquered tables here and there, and large windows that did indeed look out on the sea. The blue and radiant sea we had come to contemplate.

There, in the middle of the lobby, in the midst of the coming and going of luggage and tourists clad in pastel-colored running suits, mostly pink and blue with the occasional yellow, I defended our right, agreed to at the agency, and as Ernesto had told me before I fell asleep, to a room with a view of the sea. I fought so hard that I got it, despite the stubbornness of the manager who had decided to lodge a pair of German newlyweds in our sought-after accommodation. I told him that my husband was a very famous painter, and the Spanish consul in Tunis himself had recommended this hotel to him. If only I were capable of fighting for other things in life with the same passion that I fought for that room. But I think it was annoying enough to have to share a room with Ernesto, so the idea of not having a view of the sea was the last straw. At that moment, the room with a view was a matter of life or death. And I got it.

They transferred our luggage while we had breakfast in the almost empty dining room, blinded by the outside light, the white sand, and the bright blue line of the sea.

The wind continued and it wasn't hot at all. Tourists sunned themselves on lounge chairs around the swimming pool or, dressed warmly, strolled along the shore; some were on horseback or rode a camel. There was a stream of people that came and went and after learning that the tennis courts were booked for the entire week and that they didn't rent tennis rackets, Ernesto and I joined them. We walked a lot, in the direction of, and against, the wind, with the sun in our faces and at our backs. After lunch, we took a nap in the new room, from whose terrace you could observe the sea at the end of a series of soft yellow dunes. An island native was sitting among the dunes, waiting for his horse or his friend to return, or not waiting for anything; but there he was, looking around him with faint curiosity. He also looked at us, the people on the terraces.

The next day we rented a car. It was too cold and we couldn't spend the whole day strolling, and you had to be heroic to swim in the sea or in the pool, of fresh but ice-cold, water. I didn't see anybody swimming. We visited the fort that, as they told us, had been occupied by the Spanish; we ate in the square at Houmt Souk, bought sponges in Adjin, drove around the island,



and crossed the isthmus that connects it to the mainland, stopping in each town until we got to Gabes in search of the oasis. It took us a long time. We drove round and round until we found it at sunset, at the bottom of a giant gorge. The immense expanse of palm trees had been there for hundreds of years and would be there for many more. The sight was so thrilling because it evoked the memory of something lost, the beginning of the world or of faith, your very dreams or the dreams of humanity. We couldn't speak. We had tea near the beach while Tunisian music blared from a speaker above our heads.

Night was falling when we returned to Djerba inside a small ferry which we boarded after an hour wait, surrounded by tourists and natives who left their cars, vans, and motorcycles to climb the rose-colored hills that bordered the road to verify that the ferry was indeed coming and going, and that at some point it would come for us.

Ernesto felt cold, but he was in a great mood, marveling at the houses crowned by domes that emerged in the middle of the countryside. We had been seeing houses like those the entire day. We stopped a hundred times to see them more closely and take pictures. I didn't regret being with him, in the ferry, in the car, on the way to the hotel, both lost on the island of Djerba, avidly searching for directions at every road crossing.

The next day, Ernesto wanted to stay in the hotel. I gathered my courage and went to Houmt Souk. I left the car at the entrance to town and strolled through the streets, refusing offers of kilims and pottery. But I bought baskets and several trays of different colors. They were unbreakable and weren't very heavy, and I like to return home with gifts. I left the baskets in the car and went to have couscous and salad at a sidewalk café, surrounded by German and American tourists. Protected by them. To a certain extent, I wasn't as much of a tourist as they. The Spanish fortress was nearby, and the Spanish coast, not too far away. It was the hottest day so far and I took off my scarf and jacket. The tourists, with their bare legs and arms, looked at the sun. While we ate, natives with *chilabas* over their jeans and worn tennis shoes crossed the square slowly.

I began the trip back. The sun was setting and the desert had other tones. The road was very flat, the kind of road to take slowly. For a long stretch there wasn't anything. Only houses topped by domes in the distance. Then, the hotels began. That is, the hotel entrances, because you couldn't see the hotels, half hidden among the dunes. A little before reaching the hotel area, a figure emerged from the right side of the road. It wasn't anything too surprising. Along the length and breadth of Djerba on the desert terrain, once in a while, there's a person. You don't know



where they're coming from, or where they're going. There are no houses around, no trees, or shadows, but the person is there. You see him, he looks at you, and you leave. He stays.

That person on the right of the road was a woman and she signaled for me to stop. I didn't have time to think. I stopped and she ran towards me. She was very young, probably not yet twenty. She began to explain things that, naturally, I didn't understand. She moved her hands a great deal and smiled broadly. By her gestures, I understood that she wanted to get in the car and would tell me when to let her off. I opened the door and she sat next to me. Suddenly the young woman began to laugh. She couldn't stop. Although it seemed strange to me, it wasn't a bad thing to see her laugh. It would have been worse if she had begun to cry. And she seemed to be having such a good time that, even though she may have been laughing at me, I couldn't feel offended or uneasy. She'd wipe her tears with the back of her hand, look at me, and surrender again to her loud laughter. Finally, she made a gesture with her hands, as if to say she was sorry, and pointed to a patch on the road, the next turn-off. I stopped the car and she nodded. The girl had stopped laughing. Suddenly solemn, she took from the folds of her skirt a string of beads that she left in my hands, and before I could react, she got out of the car.

I didn't go to Houmt Souk the next day or rent a bicycle because Ernesto didn't feel well, and I felt guilty leaving him alone in the hotel. He had come down with a terrible cold and had a bad headache. He secluded himself in the room, drinking mineral water and taking aspirins, surrounded by notebooks and with the television's remote control in his hands. It was the last day of the year and the hotel was filled with a festive air. The employees came and went putting up a canopy of wreathes and ribbons. In the middle of the lobby, on a platform, they had placed a lectern holding up sheets to sign if you wanted to attend that night's party. There was the party in the hotel's large dining room, and there was another, in an upscale restaurant on the mezzanine. It was very windy again. No one was by the pool. I took a walk along the beach and sat down a while, half protected by a dune. The light was radiant and the sun burned, but you couldn't stay outside long because you got full of sand and couldn't breathe. Almost everyone was inside the hotel. The tourists were dressed in summer clothes and observed the sunny day through the large windows. I went from the cafeteria to the bar, and had lunch in the dining room, surrounded by hungry Germans. They left the dining room with their hands full of tangerines. Very fragrant tangerines with stalks and leaves. I brought Ernesto some.



“It was a mistake to come here,” he said. “This hotel is very isolated and with this unpleasant weather there’s nothing to do. We should have gone to Sfax. That was my idea at the beginning.”

“Just a few more days,” I said while I peeled one of the tangerines.

“But you shouldn’t have to count the days when you’re on vacation.”

“I’m having a good time.”

He looked at me with distrust.

“You’ve gotten a tan,” he observed. “But we’ve had bad luck with the weather. It’s not normal for it to be so cold and windy at this latitude.”

“It must be some kind of arctic wind.”

“That’s what they said. We’re in the middle of a cold snap.”

To console him I spoke about the festivities that were being prepared for that night.

“I have no intention of leaving the room.”

I understood then that the hotel’s atmosphere was exercising a powerful attraction on me and I was determined to spend the night going from party to party.

By mid-afternoon, people seemed rather animated. The women had already put on their gowns, and the men their jackets and bowties. The aroma of perfume wafted along the corridors. I got dressed in front of Ernesto’s cold gaze, and went to the bar to have a cocktail. I was already somewhat friendly with the bartender. He’d serve me a whisky sour every time he saw me. I had only gone two days, but right away he’d say to me: “Your usual, right?” The whisky sour had been a whim, but it was just right at mid-afternoon when, behind me, the people, all spruced up and scented, began to sound like they were at a party, and the sun shone outside without managing to warm the gusts of wind that hampered the tourists’ movement.

But it was dark inside the bar. Dark glass and artificial light, because that’s the essence of bars. Perpetual nightfall. I felt like talking with someone, whomever, although I resisted the thought of engaging in conversation with the Germans who were making a racket in a corner of the bar. It was getting full. The bartender brought me another whiskey sour. He smiled gaily as if everything he had seen of life and everything he was yet to see pleased him deeply. I was another tourist; he didn’t even know if I was American, English or Spanish. Although he finally found out. When he placed the drink on the counter, he asked me:

“France, Paris?”



I shook my head.

“America?”

“Spain,” I cut him short, “Madrid.”

He was surprised, just like all the world’s people are surprised when they encounter a Spaniard. In this, Tunisians were just like any other foreigner, if that smiling man was Tunisian, because I didn’t ask him.

What really aroused my curiosity were the groups of Arabs, Tunisians probably, who had started to fill the bar. Very elegant, rather more attractive and silent than the Germans. White-haired older men in formal attire. Young men with their hair slicked back. Women with long curly hair, tight dresses and very high heels like the kind you don’t see anywhere any more. Beautiful young women who reminded me of the incident the day before, when I returned from Houmt Souk at dusk with the trunk of the car full of baskets and my arm resting on the car’s open window, breathing in the afternoon air, and full of pleasant emotions. The sun gilded the sand and cast a shine on the water that had trickled beyond the dunes, soaking the roots of purple plants. In a way, the girl’s laughter wasn’t strange, if she felt as happy as I. Perhaps these elegant and modern young women with a fixed and provocative gaze, who crossed their legs sheathed in black stockings with dignity and ease, wore Arabic dress on other occasions. Maybe the girl on the road was dressed that night, New Year’s Eve, in a black velvet gown, long earrings and a pearl necklace.

They could be island residents coming to dine at our hotel to celebrate the New Year. Wealthy and Europeanized residents of the island of Djerba. I looked at them with curiosity. They spoke French, except when they murmured. They’d draw their heads close together and it was certain they didn’t speak French then. The unmistakable, guttural sound of Arabic resonated towards me.

We looked at each other, they and I. The Germans were drunk enough so as not to look at anybody. Blind with laughter, they constantly ordered more drinks from the bartender, my bartender of the whisky sours; never overwhelmed by the orders, he was always calm and smiling.

Finally, they left. It was almost dinnertime. I had signed up for the dinner, although what I really wanted was to dine with the Arabs. I sensed that they would eat in the other dining room, darker, more luxurious, more intimate, and, surely, devoid of Germans.

The bar emptied. Groups, laughing or composed, invaded the corridors on the way to the dining rooms. Among them, but not a part of any, I went downstairs and stepped on the plush



carpets. The Arabs turned toward the dining room on the mezzanine. I continued toward the basement. The grand dining room had been decorated profusely, almost all the tables were occupied, and euphoria reigned. The women's dresses shone and many of the guests had paper streamers around their bodies. I stepped back, as if I had suddenly forgotten something very important, and rushed upstairs. In the mezzanine, I looked into the other restaurant. In sharp contrast with the hotel's dining room, full of lights and vibrating with agitation, this restaurant was lit by candlelight and its occupants were discreet and courteous. There were hats and streamers on the tables, but nobody had made use of them yet. Then I saw a familiar face, a man who smiled at me. I recognized him at the moment he held out his hand. It was Enric, the single father who had traveled with us.

"What a coincidence!" he exclaimed. "Are you going to have dinner here?"

I told him that this was my hotel and I didn't know where I was going to dine because I hadn't made a reservation. Ernesto was ill, I explained to him, and the thought of going back to my room depressed me, so I had been wandering around the hotel since early that afternoon.

"Then you must dine with us," he said, taking my arm.

He took me to his table and introduced me to his friends; he had a chair brought for me, placed it at his right, and, finally, I was settled among one of those groups of Arabs that had so drawn my attention in the bar. They were Enric's friends and had invited him to go to that restaurant because it was the best one on the island. We were going to enjoy a sophisticated and traditional meal. Wasn't it incredible to have run into each other? And the children? At his hotel, at a special dinner organized for children. He wasn't worried. They were very responsible, used to being alone since they were little because his wife and he had separated soon after Mereia's birth and the children had always gone from one place to another. Today they were allowed to go to bed a little later.

What a marvelous night awaited us, without commitments or obligations, among dishes of exotic food and a series, not of Arabic, but European, or international, drinks, open smiles, shining faces, hands that came and went over plates. Suddenly, we all became animated. It was as if someone had pressed a button. There was background music, Tunisian music that reminded me of the tea Ernesto and I had had in the little snack bar at the beach in Gabes after having finally found the oasis. I spoke of that oasis to Enric, of everything we had seen and what had been most forcefully engraved in my mind: the road to Houmt Souk, the purple expanse, furrowed by



hundreds of canals and crossed by paths leading towards the beach, that narrow end of the island where we had gone the first morning of our stay, and where there was a house and a couple of palm trees that from the road looked like a small island where one could live outside the world, the other colored houses on the right with their evocative domes and odd composition. And I told him about the episode of the young woman I had picked up on my return, her fit of laughter, and her gift.

At that moment, a young Arab man who was sitting on my right turned toward me, interested, and asked me to repeat the anecdote in French, because he had understood something and wished to understand it all. I repeated it, more or less. The young man, with an enigmatic smile on his lips and a hint of serenity at the bottom of his dark, shining eyes, said to me:

“I think I know who that young woman is. There is a legend on the island, of the girl who wanders lost along the roads, fleeing her home. She has a crystalline, contagious laugh and many people have disappeared in pursuit of her. She is the goddess of dusk. They say her gaze intoxicates.”

“It was a girl who wanted me to take her to a crossing in the road; she was going to a hotel, perhaps she was an employee,” I replied, thinking he was teasing me.

“You can think what you want,” he said, placing one of his hands on my arm and piercing me once again with his extraordinarily intense gaze. “I can’t tell you either whether I believe it or not. But legends have their reason, and, in the end, some truth. And if they’re true, you’ve had a privileged encounter. Don’t think that the goddess appears to just anyone. A moment ago I heard you speaking about the road to Houmt Souk and I realize you’ve been captured by the island’s spell. That’s why the young woman appeared to you. It’s part of the magic.”

I had goose bumps. Enric put his arm around my shoulders. Each had his own point of view. Was I the bone of contention or was something much more important being posed?

“Forget it,” said Enric, laughing. “If it was something supernatural, it’s over.”

Later, he whispered in my ear: “Without a doubt that girl was a hotel employee somewhere. You mustn’t fall into these people’s traps.” And he winked at me.

But I couldn’t get it out of my mind, because there was something undoubtedly true in what my young dining companion had said: I had been caught up by the island’s magic. It seemed to me as if I’d spent a long time on the island, had known it for centuries, and that more than ever it was on my return from Houmt Souk after the meal in the sun, when a great joy had pervaded



me, a sense of plenitude, of knowing myself capable of delighting in the light's every hue, the warmth, the sweet approach of evening.

What was life like for Tunisian women? Enric didn't know much either. I suspected it was hard. His friends had been educated in France, and had an open mind, but in certain things they were impenetrable. He had never visited them at home. The women who were sitting at the table besides myself were a very elegant and silent lady, who never once opened her mouth and whose age was impossible to calculate, but who could have been around fifty; and two very beautiful and lively young women who would let out short cries, only to fall silent and look worried, and once again after a little while, laugh loudly. Very beautiful, very made-up. And the odd thing was that neither of the two was the wife of any of the men with us. Enric didn't know who those women were. The older one was the mother of one of the young men, he thought. But the young women were somebody's sisters, or sisters-in-law. Marriageable young women, in any case. What future awaited them? Their dark eyes, outlined in black, and their abundant hair with copper highlights, showed vitality, and, at the same time, some fear. There they were, spending New Year's Eve in an elegant restaurant, dressed like self-assured Parisian girls, but they were in Djerba, not far from their homes.

Meanwhile, Enric was proposing we see each other the next day, the first of January, in Houmt Souk. We could have lunch together and stroll through the medina. Having a date in Houmt Souk sounded very good. He asked me:

"I don't want to be indiscreet, but do you have any obligation to Ernesto? I mean . . ."

"Nothing," I said looking at my plate and emphasizing the denial with a determined movement of my head from side to side. A little later, we toasted the New Year.

The dinner was over. The music became louder. A dancer moved among the tables, violently shaking her hips and the long dark hair that reached her waist. We had coffee and a lot of drinks, while more dancers came and went from the restaurant, and finally, feeling very happy and comfortable with each other, we said good-bye. Enric's Arab friends had brought him and he had to leave with them. Djerba wasn't a city; Enric couldn't just walk back to his hotel. Djerba was an island and the hotels were rather far apart and were hidden among the dunes. It wouldn't have been easy to find a hotel in the middle of the night.

I said good-bye to the people in the group. Everyone was a little drunk, except the women, who hadn't had any drinks.



“See you tomorrow,” whispered Enric.

“Be careful of the island’s magic,” said the Arab man, and he held my hand tightly within his.

I returned to my room, dodging the drunks. Ernesto was sleeping. I undressed without turning on the light or making noise.

“What time is it?” he asked from his sleep.

“Two o’clock,” I said. “Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year,” he grunted.

It was three. There was no need to lie, but I like to lie when people ask me questions like that. What the devil did he care what time it was?

On the first day of January, Ernesto woke up with an intense feeling of urgency. He wanted to recuperate the time he had lost. He was going to get the car and drive through the island taking pictures. Did I want to go with him?

I had a hangover and could hardly sit up, but above all, I had a date in Houmt Souk.

“Very well,” he said, irritated when I said no, “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Fine,” I said turning over within the sheets.

It’s fantastic, I said to myself, how he’s disappearing from my life without any drama. There isn’t even any friendship left.

After an hour I got up. I showered, dressed, and rented a bicycle at the hotel entrance. The bicycle was too heavy, but it was the best I could find and I rushed out on the path towards the road to Houmt Souk.

Free, at any rate. Alone, once again, on the island of Djerba, the first of January, 1986. Once in a while you have to say it: the first of January, 1986. Dates. Facts. I tied a scarf around my head, put on my sunglasses and began to pedal. Again, happiness. The brilliance of the sun on a winter morning, blinding your eyes, extinguishing colors. Houmt Souk was far away, and I had to make a tremendous effort to pedal. The wind, the annoying wind of that Christmastime, was against me. It was a long trip; my whole body struggled so that the bicycle didn’t stop on the side of the road. The few cars that passed honked their horns. Their occupants looked at me with curiosity. What did they know about my fight against the wind?

When I finally got off the bike in the streets of Houmt Souk I was covered in sweat and my legs trembled, but since I was alone I couldn’t let myself faint. I left the bicycle leaning against



the curb and looked for the café where I was going to meet Enric. He was leaning against the wall, near the door. You could make him out immediately, surrounded by noisy Arab men of all ages.

“I think I’m going to faint,” I told him.

He took my arm and made me sit down inside the café. He brought me very hot, very sweet coffee and I began to recover my vision, but my legs still trembled a little.

“You’ve pushed yourself a lot, that’s all. It’ll go away in a moment.”

We had more coffee and went out into the street. My weakness was transformed into euphoria. A doctor told me once that happens fairly often. I felt the warmth of Enric’s body, his arm against my arm, the people who brushed against, and pushed us, the sun on our heads, and the smell of strong and indeterminate spices that came suddenly from an alleyway.

We ate at a sidewalk restaurant, this time surrounded by more natives than tourists. Everything tasted good to me: the salad, the couscous, and the wine. Enric spoke, offered his opinions about the world’s progress, lost pleasures, special moments. I agreed with him. He was pale in the resplendent light of the sun, and his delicate hands lit consecutive cigarettes. You go with one man, and return with another.

We walked through Houmt Souk, got lost in the medina’s streets, visited the mosque, sat in another café and concluded that the trip had been worthwhile. At dusk we looked for my bicycle in a tangle of bikes, and there it was, still leaning against the curb. Enric wanted to drive me to the hotel, but I had recuperated my strength and the trip didn’t scare me. The wind would be at my back, and I needed that ride and that time for myself. You have to go back home slowly.

It was slow, indeed, but easy. The bicycle glided gently along the road, and I didn’t have to make an effort. My head was full of fantasies, but I could appreciate the sweetness of the evening, its colors, and its immensity.

At the same curve where I had seen her the first day, I saw her again, the young Arab woman of the irrepressible laugh. I had no choice but to stop, among other things because she put out her arms towards the bike’s handlebar to stop it. And there, clutching the rusty handlebar, she continued to speak as if she had never interrupted her conversation with me. She raised her arm and pointed toward the other side of the road, toward the sand covered with purple underbrush, furrowed by paths that reached the line of the sea, and the dunes. In reality, she was pushing me with her radiant smile and her incessant chant. I saw a string of beads around her neck like the one she had given me, and she nodded, asking a question with a movement of her arms. I told her I



had put her gift in a safe place. She seemed to understand me. But she kept pulling my bike with all her strength. We were already at the other side of the road. I told her that whatever it was she wanted to show me, I was grateful, but couldn't accompany her; I was in a hurry, they were waiting for me at the hotel. "Hotel! Hotel!" I shouted and repeated, as if it were a magic word. She let go of the bicycle and I pedaled with all my strength until I left her behind. This time, the wind helped me. I arrived at the hotel in a quarter of an hour, without looking back or stopping for an instant.

Ernesto hadn't returned from his trip yet. I showered, dressed, and went to the bar to have my whisky sour. I wasn't thinking about Enric any longer, but of the episode with the young woman, my second encounter with the goddess of dusk. Men and women had mysteriously disappeared on the island. All islands have their legends, all peoples. But it's easier to disappear by the sea. Perhaps the only thing the goddess of dusk wanted was to be my guide, to show me a place you couldn't see from the road, on the other side of the dunes, a perfect place, paradise. I had preferred to observe nightfall from the counter of the bar, thinking of all the island's mysteries.

Ernesto arrived at the hotel when I was on my second whiskey sour. He had visited the synagogue of El-May at the end of a long trip around the mainland. He said everything was impressive, but he was in a bad mood. I felt that he was full of hate towards me.

We spent those two days hardly moving from the hotel. Ernesto returned the rental car. The wind died down a little and from nine in the morning on, the beach was full of people who came and went hurriedly; by noontime no lounge chair in the pool area was free, and on the way to the bar, you tripped over bottles of suntan lotion, books, towels, and empty glasses; the tennis courts were always full; appetites didn't flag and everyone left the dining room carrying a couple of fragrant tangerines. And one very early morning we went in a rickety bus to the airport, which was much nearer than the long ride of our arrival would have led us to believe.

I saw Enric in the darkness among the drowsy people who were getting ready to leave the island. He came over and greeted us. He spoke with Ernesto, and I with Enric's children. They had had a wonderful time. Enric slipped a card with his name and address, I suppose, into my hand, and I put it in my handbag where it was lost forever.

It was dawn when the plane rose above the island of Djerba. The orange-colored light dissolved little by little, and turned into a piercing white brightness among the clouds.