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Entre multilinguisme et multiculturalisme :  
Une nouvelle traduction d'*Incendies* de Wajdi Mouawad

by

Natalie Larson

Honors Thesis

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Advisor: Dr. Olivier Delers

## Introduction

*Incendies* de Wajdi Mouawad, écrite en 2003, est la deuxième pièce de la tétralogie intitulée « Le sang des promesses ». Les quatre pièces racontent des histoires différentes mais ont des thèmes similaires. *Incendies* est l'histoire de jumeaux, Jeanne et Simon, qui découvrent après la mort de leur mère que leur père, qu'ils n'ont jamais connu, est vivant et qu'ils ont peut-être un frère. Ils se lancent alors dans une quête de sens et d'identité, entrecoupée de flashbacks sur le passé de leur mère dans un Liban déchiré par la guerre. Avec son langage poétique qui évoque une tragédie grecque, la pièce de Mouawad traite des luttes intergénérationnelles, de la pauvreté, de la tradition, de l'amour, de la douleur, de la colère et de la violence insensée.

Cette histoire est loin d'être fictive pour le dramaturge Wajdi Mouawad. Né au Liban, le début de la guerre civile libanaise l'a amené, avec sa famille, à s'installer en France, et plus tard au Canada (Hussein 72). Il a vu son pays dévasté par la guerre à un âge où il ne comprenait pas ce qui se passait. Cela n'est pas sans rappeler ce que vivent Nawal et Sawda dans *Incendies*. Bien que le Liban et la guerre civile libanaise ne soient jamais mentionnés nommément, il est clair, d'après le contexte (et la préface), que c'est à cela que Mouawad fait référence. *Incendies* est un témoignage de la réalité traumatique à laquelle lui et d'innombrables autres personnes ont été confrontés. Cela devient encore plus clair si l'on considère la préface, « Une consolation impitoyable ». Mouawad décrit le processus d'écriture théâtrale comme une collaboration qui consiste à « révéler l'acteur par le personnage et [à] révéler le personnage par l'acteur, pour qu'il n'y ait plus d'espace psychologique qui puisse les séparer » (Mouawad 10). De cette manière, il est évident que, dès le départ, les personnages n'étaient pas censés être entièrement fictifs. Ils ont été largement influencés par les expériences vécues par les acteurs, y compris par Mouawad lui-même.

De la même façon, l'aspect collaboratif de la pièce que Mouawad décrit dans sa préface semble s'appliquer également à l'acte de traduction de la pièce. Il a travaillé avec de nombreuses personnes au théâtre - acteurs, techniciens et autres - qui ont donné vie à *Incendies* en même temps qu'il l'écrivait. À l'avant-dernière ligne, il écrit : « C'est important à dire, important à faire entendre : *Incendies* est né de ce groupe, son écriture est passée à travers moi » (11). De la même manière, l'écriture de cette œuvre est passée à travers moi et a été influencée par les nombreuses personnes qui m'ont aidée. En le traduisant, j'ai eu l'impression de contribuer à cette création collaborative, et j'ai gardé cette idée à l'esprit tout au long du processus. Je suis fière d'en faire partie, d'ajouter ma voix aux nombreuses autres qui ont influencé sa réalisation.

### **La première traduction anglaise**

Avant de commencer ma traduction, j'ai lu la seule traduction anglaise d'*Incendies* qui existe, *Scorched*, traduite par Linda Gaboriau. Une grande partie de ma motivation pour ce projet est venue de la faiblesse de cette traduction originale, dont la plus significative est ce que j'appellerai la « surtraduction ». Gaboriau a souvent traduit en anglais des parties du texte qui, à mon avis, auraient dû rester en français. Par exemple, des personnages comme Simon intercalent des mots anglais dans leur dialogue, et la traductrice a choisi de traduire la totalité de leur dialogue en anglais, effaçant ainsi l'aspect plurilingue du texte. Elle a également choisi de changer le prénom de l'un des personnages, Jeanne, pour la version anglaise du nom, Janine. Je suppose qu'elle a imaginé que « Janine » serait plus compréhensible pour un public anglophone, ce que je conteste vivement. Changer le nom, c'est changer l'identité du personnage, surtout lorsqu'il s'agit de changer un nom qui est si clairement français en un nom qui ne l'est pas. En général, le langage utilisé dans la traduction originale n'a pas le style poétique et éloquent du

texte français ; le texte en français semble imiter une tragédie grecque semblable à Œdipe. Ce n'est pas entièrement la faute de la traductrice, parce qu'il est difficile, voire impossible, d'exprimer le même style d'écriture en anglais. Cependant, je crois qu'il est possible que le langage s'améliore au moins si le traducteur/la traductrice fait des choix plus artistiques tout en gardant à l'esprit cette idée de la tragédie grecque.

### **Les enjeux de traduction**

Un des plus grands problèmes qui m'a sauté aux yeux avant même de commencer cette traduction était de décider comment traiter les mots français québécois. Je crois qu'il est important de distinguer ce texte d'un texte français parisien « standard » dans la manière dont il est traduit en anglais afin que sa « canadienité », et donc son étrangeté, puisse être reconnue. Le fait que l'histoire se déroule au Québec est absolument essentiel pour comprendre non seulement l'histoire dans son ensemble, mais aussi ses personnages. Pour cette raison, j'ai fait deux choix qui, à mon avis, expriment le mieux cet aspect du texte original. Premièrement, j'ai décidé de garder certains mots québécois et de les mettre en italique. Ces mots, qui sont presque tous des gros mots, ne nuisent pas à la compréhension du texte lorsqu'ils ne sont pas traduits. Il est évident pour le public, dans ce contexte, que ce sont des gros mots, même s'il ne connaît pas la signification du mot spécifique, et donc ces mots sont compris comme étant « étrangers » et donc canadiens. Par exemple, lorsque Simon est en colère après avoir entendu le testament de sa mère, il dit, « La salope ! La vieille pute ! La salope de merde ! L'enfant de chienne ! La vieille câlisse ! » (19) qui devient « That bitch! That old whore! Fucking shit! Son of a bitch! *Câlisse!* » et puis quelques lignes plus tard : « On se disait à chaque jour depuis si longtemps elle va crever, la salope, elle arrêtera de nous emmerder, elle arrêtera de nous écœurer la grosse tabarnak ! Et là,

bingo ! Elle finit par crever ! » (19) qui devient « We wondered every day if she would kick the bucket, that bitch, if she would stop fucking bothering us, if she would stop disgusting us, that big *tabarnak!* And then, voilà! She finally croaks! »

Le deuxième choix important que j'ai fait à ce sujet est de traduire de nombreux gros mots par des équivalents « religieux » en anglais, tels que « goddamn », « Christ », ou même « fucking Christ ». Cela permet d'exprimer le côté canadien du texte, car les gros mots du français canadien sont presque tous étroitement liés au catholicisme, comme « tabarnak » (« tabernacle » en anglais), « câlisse »/ « câlisse » (« chalice » en anglais), et « criss »/ « crisse » (« Christ » en anglais).

En même temps, comme je ne suis ni française ni canadienne, j'ai trouvé difficile d'évaluer le niveau de vulgarité de ces gros mots. Il n'est pas facile de dire si des mots comme « goddamn », qui est relativement peu vulgaire, ou « fucking christ », qui est beaucoup plus vulgaire, égalent la vulgarité des mots comme « la crisse de pute », « on s'en crisse-tu », ou « la vieille câlisse ». Je devais simplement évaluer le contexte de chaque situation individuelle, comme dans la scène ci-dessus où j'ai dû évaluer ce que je savais de Simon en tant que personnage, son degré de colère, sa façon de parler et donc le type de mots qu'il pourrait utiliser.

Un autre problème que j'ai fréquemment rencontré au cours de cette traduction est l'utilisation de l'anglais dans le texte original. Il était clair que je ne pouvais pas laisser ces mots en anglais. Cela aurait effacé l'aspect bilingue du texte ; ces personnages sont canadiens et emploient souvent quelques mots anglais dans leur dialogue. Je savais que si je rédigeais l'ensemble du texte en anglais, cet aspect serait perdu. Cependant, si je choisissais de traduire des mots anglais en français, je savais que le sens de ces mots devait être compris par un public anglophone. Pour cette raison, j'ai décidé de traduire les mots anglais en français et de les mettre

en italique en faisant particulièrement attention au choix des mots. Par exemple, lorsque Simon exprime sa colère contre sa mère après sa mort, il dit, « You bet qu'on va l'enterrer face contre terre ! You bet ! On va y cracher dessus ! » (19) et cela devient « *C'est sûr* we're gonna bury her face down! *C'est sûr!* We'll spit on her grave! ». Plus tard, il dit « Big deal ! On est ses enfants et vous en savez plus sur elle que nous ! Big deal que nos prénoms soient là ! Big deal ! » (21), qui devient « *La belle affaire!* We're her kids and you know more about her than we do! Who cares that our names are there! *La belle affaire!* » Même si le public ne comprend pas la signification de ces mots français, le contexte de la situation lui permet de comprendre ce qui se passe et que Simon est en colère, ce qui est tout ce qu'il a besoin de savoir. Ainsi, l'aspect canadien des personnages n'est pas perdu.

Néanmoins, cette question devient plus difficile lorsque l'anglais est utilisé plus largement dans le texte original et de manière plus complexe. Dans les scènes où Nihad est un jeune homme, il chante « The Logical Song » de Supertramp, et le texte précise que son anglais est « approximatif ». Je savais que je ne pouvais pas le faire chanter dans un anglais médiocre puis lui faire dire son texte dans un anglais parfait. J'ai donc décidé qu'il dirait tout son texte dans un anglais approximatif avec un accent français. Par exemple, « NIHAD (*speaks in broken English with a French accent*). "I don't want die!" "I don't want die!" That is the sentence most stupid I've ever heard! » J'ai également gardé certains mots en français qui étaient très similaires en anglais, comme « I am *photographe* ». De cette manière, « l'étrangeté » de Nihad est accentuée comme elle l'est dans le texte original. Il n'est pas non plus difficile pour lui de prononcer tous ses dialogues de cette manière, car ses dialogues dans cette scène sont minimes, de sorte que l'anglais approximatif était le plus logique. J'ai décidé de faire la même chose pour la scène où Nihad fait semblant de participer à un talk-show américain et parle dans un anglais

approximatif. Pour cette partie, j'ai simplement copié le texte original et j'ai mis les mots français en italique parce qu'ils semblaient bien s'intégrer au reste de la traduction de son mauvais anglais ; par exemple, « Kirk, I am very happy to be here at "Star T.V. Show"... Thank you to you, Nihad. So Nihad, what is your next song? My next song will be a love song. A love song! Yes, a love song, Kirk. It is new on you *carrière*, Nihad. ». De cette façon, il n'y a pas de changements bizarres dans sa capacité à parler anglais. L'aspect bilingue de son dialogue est perdu, mais j'ai essayé de le compenser en lui donnant un accent français, ce qui le rend très visiblement français. Si je l'avais retraduit en français, le public anglophone ne l'aurait pas compris. Le texte anglais ne fonctionne dans l'original que parce que le dramaturge suppose que le public comprend au moins un peu d'anglais, parce que l'anglais est une deuxième langue presque universelle, alors qu'on ne peut pas supposer la même chose avec le français pour un public anglophone.

Le titre de la pièce lui-même a également posé un problème important pour la traduction anglaise. « Incendie » fait référence à un feu qui est généralement accidentel et qui cause souvent de gros dégâts, comme un incendie de forêt ou un incendie de maison. Le titre, « Incendies », est la forme plurielle de ce nom. Cependant, je ne choisirais pas le mot « Fires » parce qu'il ne semble pas décrire de manière adéquate la spécificité de ce nom et ce qu'il représente. En anglais, « Fires » peut être perçu comme quelque chose de positif ou même d'intentionnel, comme un feu dans une cheminée. Il peut aussi être considéré dans un sens métaphorique, comme dans des dizaines d'expressions anglaises indiquant l'inspiration ou l'amour. En même temps, je n'aimais pas le titre de la première traduction anglaise d'*Incendies*, « Scorched ». Le premier problème que je trouve avec l'utilisation de ce mot est qu'il s'agit d'un adjectif, alors que « Incendies » est un nom. Cela lui donne une connotation complètement différente. Qu'est-ce qui est « scorched »



exactement ? La terre ? Des personnes ? Des maisons ? De plus, ce mot, à mon avis, implique que le feu a déjà été éteint. « Scorched » au lieu de « scorching » ou « being scorched ». Il décrit les dégâts causés sans donner l'image d'un feu qui continue à faire rage. Ceci est particulièrement important si l'on considère le sens de la pièce. Nous ne savons peut-être pas exactement ce que Mouawad a voulu dire par « Incendies », mais les thèmes de sa pièce sont clairs : Les luttes intergénérationnelles, la tradition, la pauvreté, la douleur, et, surtout, la colère- la colère insensée qui conduit à un cycle de violence sans fin. Il ne s'agit pas d'une pièce sur des incendies qui ont pris fin - ce sont des incendies qui continuent de brûler tout au long de la pièce, et même dans le monde entier, même aujourd'hui – et il faut « casser le fil ».

Après avoir examiné les mots « scorched », « fires » et d'autres mots en anglais, je ne pense pas qu'il existe un mot dans la langue anglaise qui soit suffisamment proche de la signification du mot « Incendies » ; j'ai donc décidé de garder ce mot en français. Cela fonctionne bien pour plusieurs raisons ; tout d'abord, ce n'est pas complètement incompréhensible pour un anglophone. La racine latine commune nous donne plusieurs mots similaires en anglais, tels que « incendiary » ou « incense ». Même si ces mots n'ont pas exactement la même signification que « incendies », ils donnent au public l'image du feu. D'autre part, le fait de garder le titre en français rappelle au public les origines canadiennes de cette pièce. Comme mentionné précédemment, je crois qu'il est important que le traducteur/la traductrice n'efface pas complètement l'aspect bilingue de ce texte. Il est nécessaire de se rappeler qu'il a été écrit à l'origine en français et que le dramaturge, ainsi que les personnages eux-mêmes, sont canadiens. C'est une partie essentielle de l'identité de Jeanne et de Simon, et la traduction doit donc la respecter.

Comme j'ai décidé de garder le titre en français, et pour souligner davantage l'aspect bilingue de la pièce, j'ai choisi de traduire le titre de la tétralogie en anglais : « Le sang des promesses » devient « The Blood of Promises ». Ce titre est composé de mots beaucoup plus simples qui sont faciles à exprimer en anglais, mais pas du tout compréhensibles en français pour un public anglais. De plus, ce titre est assez poétique en anglais, tout comme il l'est en français, et il était donc plus logique de le traduire de cette manière.

### **Le processus de traduction**

Mon processus de traduction a d'abord consisté à traduire de petites sections à la fois, de manière régulière tout au long de chaque semestre. J'ai souvent suivi une routine consistant à traduire une page par jour. Au cours de la traduction, je n'ai jamais consulté la traduction anglaise de Gaboriau, parce qu'il me semblait important qu'elle n'influence pas mes choix. Je voulais choisir mes mots selon le texte français et ce que je pensais être le plus approprié, plutôt que d'être coincée dans une comparaison avec l'anglais de Gaboriau. Je traduisais une phrase à la fois, souvent à un rythme péniblement lent, mais de plus en plus rapide au fur et à mesure que j'avancais et que mes compétences en traduction s'amélioraient. Ma tendance au perfectionnisme est devenue très apparente au cours de ce processus. Si je n'étais pas satisfaite d'une phrase que j'avais traduite, je la retravaillais encore et encore jusqu'à ce que je trouve quelque chose qui me convienne. J'ai souvent consulté d'autres personnes, en particulier quand j'avais tellement réfléchi à une phrase que mon cerveau ne fonctionnait plus. Dans ces situations, je demandais à ma colocataire ou à mes amis de choisir l'option la plus naturelle parmi deux ou trois possibilités. Le fait qu'ils ne comprennent pas le français n'avait pas d'importance, parce que c'était généralement avec l'anglais que j'avais besoin d'aide. Malgré cela, j'ai souvent passé beaucoup de temps à réfléchir à un mot ou à une phrase sans réussir à trouver une bonne solution. Dans ce cas, je

surlignais simplement le mot ou la phrase et je passais à la partie suivante ; j'y suis retourné plus tard. J'ai découvert qu'il est souvent plus facile de laisser la traduction de côté pendant un certain temps et d'y revenir lorsque j'ai des difficultés.

Ce projet m'a également obligé à faire un certain nombre de « recherches » linguistiques. Le texte original contenait de nombreuses expressions québécoises que je ne connaissais pas, par exemple. Il y a un moment où le personnage Hermile Lebel dit « Vous êtes connu comme Caracas dans la passion ». Ce personnage utilise régulièrement des expressions avec des mots erronés tout au long de la pièce ; l'expression est toujours identifiable et compréhensible, mais le public la reconnaît comme étant incorrecte, et souvent humoristique. Dans ce cas, après avoir fait quelques recherches, j'ai découvert que la véritable expression québécoise est « être connu comme Barabbas dans la passion », qui fait référence au personnage biblique Barabbas (remplacé par Hermile avec la capitale du Venezuela) et qui signifie être célèbre ou très connu. Le sens de l'expression semblait être à peu près équivalent à « to be a household name », et il est donc devenu « you're in household fame » pour s'adapter à la façon de parler d'Hermile Lebel. Certains autres mots et expressions ont nécessité des recherches pour être bien traduits en anglais. Il est ainsi devenu clair pour moi que la traduction implique toujours un apprentissage - même si on pense connaître l'intégralité d'une langue, on rencontrera toujours quelque chose d'inconnu.

J'ai aussi effectué des recherches importantes tout au long du semestre sur l'histoire du Liban et la guerre civile libanaise, ce qui m'a aidé à comprendre le contexte d'*Incendies*. Bien que des recherches aussi approfondies n'aient probablement pas été nécessaires, j'avais un intérêt particulier pour ce sujet et j'ai donc réalisé une étude indépendante sur le Liban avec mon professeur d'arabe. Cela m'a permis de comprendre les nombreuses complexités politiques et

religieuses de l'histoire libanaise, y compris celles qui ont déclenché la guerre, ce qui m'a donné une meilleure perspective sur le contexte du traumatisme subi par des personnes comme Nawal et Sawda, tout en améliorant mon vocabulaire en arabe.

### **Une réflexion sur le projet**

Depuis que j'ai commencé ce projet en août, j'ai évidemment beaucoup appris sur la traduction et j'ai amélioré mes compétences en la matière. Cependant, j'ai également appris beaucoup de choses auxquelles je ne m'attendais pas. Par exemple, avant de commencer, je n'avais pas compris à quel point il serait difficile de traduire du français vers l'anglais. Il est vrai que c'est plus facile que de traduire de l'anglais au français, mais j'ai sous-estimé la difficulté de la traduction vers ma langue maternelle. Très souvent, je comprenais une phrase du texte en français mais je n'arrivais pas à trouver les bons mots en anglais pour l'exprimer. Même lorsque les mots me venaient à l'esprit, il m'était très difficile de former des phrases qui me semblaient naturelles. C'était un défi inattendu sur lequel j'ai dû faire un travail tout au long de ce processus. J'ai parfois consulté des amis anglophones pour m'aider à trouver les bons mots parce que je passais tellement de temps à penser à certains mots anglais que mon cerveau ne les comprenait plus.

J'ai également découvert que la traduction fait ressortir le côté perfectionniste de ma personnalité. Je pourrais passer des heures à chercher le bon mot à utiliser et ne pas être satisfaite de ce que j'ai trouvé. J'ai passé beaucoup de temps à réfléchir à chaque partie de cette traduction, et je crois que c'est ce qui a permis à la version finale d'être la meilleure possible, malgré le nombre peut-être excessif d'heures qui y ont été consacrées. De la même manière, j'ai appris que je devais être satisfaite de ne pas toujours l'être. Une traduction « parfaite » n'existe pas, parce

que la traduction est un processus de substitution. On peut trouver un mot dont le sens est le plus proche, mais il est impossible qu'il soit équivalent. Parfois, il n'est pas possible de trouver une bonne traduction d'un mot ou d'une phrase en particulier, et il faut choisir la meilleure option parmi plusieurs options qui ne sont pas très bonnes.

En outre, la réalisation de ce projet m'a rappelé à quel point la traduction est un défi en général. Même lorsque la traduction ne concerne pas un texte au style artistique unique comme celui-ci, elle peut être incroyablement complexe. Ce fait n'est souvent pas intuitif pour les personnes qui n'étudient pas les langues étrangères - elles pensent que la traduction nécessite seulement de parler couramment une autre langue. Cependant, cette expérience a souligné pour moi le fait que la traduction est une compétence unique qui va au-delà du simple apprentissage d'une langue. Il est possible de parler très bien une autre langue et d'avoir en même temps de très mauvaises compétences en matière de traduction. Pour obtenir de bons résultats, la traduction doit être pratiquée encore et encore. Il est évident pour moi, à la fin de ce projet, que mes compétences dans ce domaine se sont considérablement améliorées au cours de cette année académique.

J'espère surtout que cette pièce touchera ses lecteurs anglophones de la même manière que l'original l'a fait pour les francophones. Je l'ai écrite avec amour ; elle est la représentation de ma passion pour cette pièce et pour la langue française.

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Incendies: The Blood of Promises  
By Wajdi Mouawad  
Translated by Natalie Larson

For Nayla Mouawad  
And Nathalie Sultan  
One Arab, the other Jewish  
Both my blood sisters

## A RUTHLESS CONSOLATION

*Incendies* is the second part of a tetralogy that began with *Littoral* in 1997. While it is not a narrative sequel, *Incendies* revisits the question of origin. Even though I still don't know exactly where the next installment will lead me and when I will tackle it, I know that, for a short time now, a word has been lingering in my mind. Perhaps it is a title, or perhaps it is a setting, but this word, I suspect, is the premonitory dream of a third part. This word is *Forêts*.

Like *Littoral*, *Incendies* would have never seen the light of day without the involvement of the actors. In that sense, the way in which the play was written and directed is also a continuation of *Littoral*, since it too was written during rehearsals that took place over a period of ten months.

I would like to emphasize how crucial the commitment of the actors was. Simon never would've been a boxer if Reda Guerinik hadn't been a part of this project. Sawda never would've been so angry if it weren't for Marie-Claude Langlois, and Nihad would probably not have sung if I hadn't worked with Éric Bernier. It was a matter of revealing the actor through the character and revealing the character through the actor so that there was no emotional distance separating them. The only kind of space that prevented the actor and the character from merging completely was that of fiction, pretending, and imagination. So, before even a single line was written, we talked about consolation. The stage as a place of ruthless consolation. For me, it was already a step into the tunnel. A light. A feeling. Words were beginning to appear. I began to move forward in the dark, guided by the voices of the actors. One day, a question arose. "What do you want to do on the stage? What do you want to say? What action, what dream do you want to achieve?" Nothing was off-limits. From the most playful to the most serious, from the most grotesque to the most conventional. It didn't cost much. So, Réda spoke to me about boxing, and Marie-Claude came to me about playing the role of a best friend. Annick Bergeron, who will play the part of one of the three Nawals, had always wanted to tap dance, and Richard Thériault, who will bring to life the part of Hermile Lebel, wished to sing Tom Jones songs. It was both amusing and fragile to watch everyone confess their childhood fantasies, but every desire carries an undeniable truth, and every desire, expressed so simply one day in May, sitting around the table, became a path for me that I never would have thought of on my own. Not all were taken into consideration, but many were key to shaping the story. The most surprising example of this is the clown nose. Isabelle Roy, who was going to be the youngest Nawal, admitted that she dreamed of playing the role of a sad clown. There was a great distance between Nawal and a sad clown, but this idea took a surprising turn and became one of the silent messages of the story. Aside from childhood fantasies, there were the ideas and words of each of the actors. There was talk of mapping, rebuilding, the Lebanese Civil War, Noah, and Abitibi. There was talk of

marriage, divorce, theatre, and God, as well as today's world and the war in Iraq, but also yesterday's world: The discovery of America.

Then the writing began, and the rehearsals followed. The set designers also had to adapt to the fact that the play was still in the process of being written as it was being performed, and, throughout this process, I felt that it was above all the theatre company, with its crew and its actors, who created a path for the story. Without the attentiveness, participation, and active commitment of each member of the team, I would not have been able to write this. It's important that I say this, and even more important for this to be heard: *Incendies* was born from this group. It made its way through me onto the page. Step by step until the very last word.

WAJDI MOUAWAD, March 23, 2003

## CHARACTERS

Nawal  
Jeanne  
Simon  
Hermile  
Antoine  
Sawda  
Nihad

## THE FIRE OF NAWAL

### 1. Notary

*Day. Summer. Notary's office.*

HERMILE LEBEL. Of course, yes, I'd rather be bird watching. But now's not the time for that: From here, instead of birds, I see cars and the shopping center. Before, when I was on the other side of the building, my office overlooked the highway. It wasn't much, but I hung up a sign in my window: *Hermile Lebel, Notary*. At rush hour it gave me a ton of publicity. Now, I'm on this side and I have a view of the shopping center. A shopping center, well, it's just not the same as the birds. Before, I used to say *pir*. It was your mother who taught me to say *bird*. Forgive me. I don't want to talk about your mother due to the misfortune that has just struck, but we must take action. Carry on living, as they say. That's the way it is. Come in, come in, come in- don't just stand in the hallway. This is my new office. I'm moving in. The other notaries have left. I'm all alone on this floor.

Here, it's much more pleasant because there's less noise, the highway is on the other side. I can no longer advertise during rush hour, but at least I can keep my window open, and seeing as I don't yet have air conditioning, that's quite nice.

Yes. Well.

Certainly, this isn't easy.

Come in, come in, come in! Don't stand in the hallway, it's just a hall!

I understand, though, I understand if you don't want to come in.



Well, I wouldn't go in.

Yes. Well.

Of course, well, I really would have liked to meet you under different circumstances, but the road to hell is paved with good circumstances, so it's rather difficult to plan for anything at all. Death, it's unpredictable. Death has no words. It destroys all of its promises. You think that it will come later on, then it comes when it wants. I loved your mother. I'll tell you that, in every possible way, I loved your mother. She often talked about you. Well, not often, but she mentioned you. A little bit. At times. Like that. She used to say "the twins", or "the girl", or "the boy". You know how she was, she never said anything to anyone. I mean, long before she stopped talking completely. Even then, she wouldn't say much and she wouldn't tell me anything about you. That's just how she was. When she died, it was raining. I don't know. It really upset me that it rained. In her country it never rains, so a will- that's really bad weather. It's not like the birds, a will, certainly, it's something else. It's strange and bizarre but it's necessary. I mean to say that it's a necessary evil. Excuse me.

*He bursts into tears.*

## 2. Last Wishes

*A few minutes later.*

*Notary. The twins.*

HERMILE LEBEL: The last will and testament of Ms. Nawal Marwan. The witnesses who attended the reading of the will at the time of its registration are Mr. Trinh Xiao Feng, owner of the restaurant "Vietcong Burgers" and Ms. Suzanne Lamontagne, server at the restaurant "Vietcong Burgers".

It's the restaurant that was just down the block. At the time, whenever I needed two witnesses, I went down to see Trinh Xiao Feng. Then, he came back with Suzanne. Trinh Xiao Feng's wife, Hui Huo Xiao Feng, was watching the restaurant. The restaurant is closed now. It closed down. Trinh passed. Hui Huo Xiao Feng got remarried to Réal Bouchard who was an assistant here for Mr. Yvon Vachon, a colleague. That's just the way life goes. Anyway.

The opening of the will is done in the presence of her two children: Jeanne Marwan and Simon Marwan, both 22 years of age and both born August 20, 1980, at the Saint-François Hospital in Ville-Émard, not far from here.

According to the wishes of the testator and in accordance with the regulations and rights of Ms. Nawal Marwan, Notary Hermile Lebel is appointed as the executor of the will.

*The notary opens the envelope.*

All of my assets shall be shared equally between Jeanne et Simon Marwan, twin children born from my womb. The money shall be bequeathed equally to both of them and my furniture shall be distributed according to their wishes and agreements. If there is any dispute or disagreement, the executor shall sell the furniture and the money shall be divided equally between the twins. My clothes shall be donated to a charity of the executor's choice.

To my friend, Notary Hermile Lebel, I leave my black fountain pen.  
To Jeanne Marwan, I leave the green army jacket with "72" written on the back.  
To Simon Marwan, I leave the red notebook.

*The notary takes out the three objects.*

Burial.

To Notary Hermile Lebel.  
Notary and friend,  
Bring the twins  
Bury me naked  
Bury me without a casket  
Without clothes, one with the Earth  
Without a prayer  
And with my face to the ground.  
Leave me at the bottom of a pit,  
Face down against the world.  
As a farewell,  
You shall each  
pour a bucket of fresh water on me.  
Then you shall cover me with dirt and seal my grave.

Tombstone and epitaph.  
To Notary Hermile Lebel.  
Notary and friend,  
No stone will be placed on my grave  
Nor will my name be engraved anywhere.  
No epitaph for those who do not keep their promises.  
And one promise was not kept.  
No epitaph for those who stay silent.  
And the silence remained unbroken.  
No tombstone  
No name on the tombstone  
No epitaph for an absent name on an absent stone.  
No name.

To Jeanne and Simon, Simon and Jeanne.  
Childhood is a knife stuck in the throat.  
It cannot be easily removed.

Jeanne,  
Notary Lebel will give you an envelope.  
This envelope is not for you.  
It is for your father,  
Yours and Simon's.

Find him and give him this envelope.

Simon,  
Notary Lebel will give you an envelope.  
This envelope is not for you.  
It is for your brother,  
Yours and Jeanne's.  
Find him and give him this envelope.

When these envelopes have been given to their recipient,  
A letter will be given to you  
The silence will be broken  
And a stone can then be placed on my grave  
And my name engraved on the stone in the sun.

*Long silence.*

SIMON: She fucked us over right until the end! That bitch! That old whore! Fucking shit! Son of a bitch! *Câlisse!* That bitch! That motherfucker! She seriously fucked us over until the end! We wondered every day if she would kick the bucket, that bitch, if she would stop fucking annoying us, if she would stop disgusting us, that big *tabarnak!* And then, voilà! She finally croaks! But, surprise! It's not over! Fucking shit! We didn't see this coming, *hostie* I did not see this coming! She carefully planned out her every move, strategically calculated everything, Christ, that bitch! If I could kick her corpse! *C'est sûr* we're gonna bury her face down! *C'est sûr!* We'll spit on her grave!

*Silence.*

Well, me, anyway, I'll spit on it!

*Silence.*

She's dead, and just before she died, she wondered how she could fuck us over even more! She sat down, she thought about it, then she found a way! Writing her will! Christ, her fucking will!

HERMILE LEBEL. She wrote it five years ago!

SIMON. I don't give a fuck about when she wrote it, Jesus!

HERMILE LEBEL. Listen! She is dead! Your mother is dead! Look, I mean, she is someone who has passed. Someone we don't know very well, but still, she was someone. Someone who was young, who was an adult, who was old, then someone who died. So there must be an explanation behind it all! There must be something there! I mean, that woman always lived an unusual life, that must count for something!

SIMON. I won't cry! I swear to god that I won't cry for her! She's dead! Christ, I don't give a fuck about all this, *tabarnak!* I don't give a fuck that she's dead! I don't owe that woman anything, Not a single tear, nothing! People can say whatever they want! That I didn't cry when my mother died! I'll tell them that she wasn't my mother! That she was nothing! You think I don't give a fuck? I'm not going to start pretending, start crying over her! When did she ever cry for me? For Jeanne? It wasn't a heart she had inside her, it was a brick. You don't cry over a brick, you just don't. Not a heart! A brick, fuck, it was a brick! I don't want to hear it anymore! I don't want to know anything else!

HERMILE LEBEL. She did, however, express a last wish to you. Your names are there, in her last will and testament...

SIMON. *La belle affaire!* We're her kids and you know more about her than we do! Who cares that our names are there! *La belle affaire!*

HERMILE LEBEL. The envelopes, the notebook, the money...

SIMON. I don't want her money, I don't care about the notebook... She thinks she can get to me with her goddamn notebook! That's really great! Her last wishes! Find your father and your brother! Why didn't she find them herself if it was that important?! *Tabarnak!* Why didn't she care about us, the bitch, if she absolutely needed another son somewhere?! Why is it that in her fucking will she doesn't even use the word "my children" ONCE to refer to us? The word *son*, the word *daughter!* I'm no fool! Why does she say "the twins"? "The twin boy and girl born from my womb", like we're a pile of vomit, a pile of shit that she was forced to dump! Why?!

HERMILE LEBEL. Listen, I get it!

SIMON. What do you "get", you prick!

HERMILE LEBEL. I understand very well that after listening to what you've just heard you might find yourself turned downside up, wondering what's going on, who you are, and why *you!* Look, I get it! It's not every day that you learn that your father who you thought was dead is still alive and that you have a brother somewhere in the world!

SIMON. There's no father, there's no brother, it's all bullshit!

HERMILE LEBEL. Not in a will! Not with these kinds of things!

SIMON. You don't know her!

HERMILE LEBEL. I know her in a different way!

SIMON. Either way, I don't want to talk to you!

HERMILE LEBEL. You have to trust her!

SIMON. I don't want to...

HERMILE LEBEL. She had her reasons.

SIMON. I don't want to talk to you about this! I have a boxing match in ten days, so I don't want to know anything! We'll bury her and that's it! We'll go to a funeral home, we'll buy a casket, we'll put her in the casket, put the casket in the hole in the ground, put dirt in the hole, a tombstone on the ground and her name on the tombstone, and we'll all fuck off!

HERMILE LEBEL. That's impossible! Those are not your mother's wishes and I will not allow you to go against them!

SIMON. And who are you to go against us?

HERMILE LEBEL. I am, unfortunately, her executor, and I do not have the same opinion as you about this woman!

SIMON. How can you take her seriously? I mean, come on! For ten years she spent her days at the courthouse attending endless trials of psychopaths, lunatics, and murderers of all kinds, then, overnight, she stopped speaking, didn't say a word! Five years without speaking is a fucking long time! Not a word, not a sound, nothing comes out of her mouth! She goes crazy, ballistic, she blows a fuse you could say, and she invents a husband who is still alive, who's actually been dead for ages, and another son who never existed, a perfect fabrication of the child she would've liked to have had, of the child she would've been able to love, that bitch, and now she wants ME to go and get him! And you think you can talk to me about "last wishes"...

HERMILE LEBEL. Calm down!

SIMON. If after all that you think you can convince me that these are the last wishes of someone who is still in their right mind...

HERMILE LEBEL. Calm down!

SIMON. Fucking hell! Motherfucking *câlisse*, Christ, fuck...

*Silence.*

HERMILE LEBEL. I know, I know... but you have to admit that what you suggest is what's most convenient for you... I don't know, it's really none of my business, you're right, she kept quiet for such a long time without us knowing why, and yes, yes it's the act of an insane person at first sight, but maybe not! I mean, perhaps it was something else; I don't mean to offend you, but if she had truly lost her mind she wouldn't have started speaking again. And then the other day, after all that, or the other night, you know- you can't deny it- you got a call that she spoke. And you can't tell me that it was a coincidence, that it was random! I don't believe in that! I'm telling you, it was a gift from her to you! The most beautiful gift she could have given you! I mean, that really is something! On the day and time of your birthday she started speaking again!

And what does she say? “Now that we’re together, everything is better.” “Now that we’re together, everything is better!” That’s not a normal sentence! She didn’t say, “Hey you! I’d like a hotdog with onions, relish, and mustard”, or “Pass me the salt!” No! “Now that we’re together, everything is better.” Yeah! The nurse heard her. He heard her. Why would he make that up? He couldn’t have. He couldn’t have invented something so true. You know it, I know it, we all know it, a sentence like that sounds just like her, like a pea in the pod! But, well, I agree with you! It’s true! She hadn’t spoken for years. I’ll give you that- if she had remained in that state I would have had my doubts, too. So you’re right! But still, you must not forget that- you must, I think, take this into consideration. It was an act of reason, of lucidity. “Now that we’re together, everything is better!” You can’t say no. Deny it. Deny your birthday! You just can’t deny this kind of thing. Now, I know, it’s true, you have the freedom to do what you want, you have the freedom to ignore your mother’s wishes. You are not obligated to do anything. But you can’t expect others to do the same, certainly not me or your sister. The facts are all there: your mother asked for one thing from each of us, these are her last wishes, and we can each do what we want with that. Even prisoners on death row have the right to last wishes. Why not your mother...

*Simon exits.*

I have the envelopes. I’ll keep them for you. Today you don’t want to hear it, but maybe later you’ll change your mind. Rome wasn’t built during the day. Give it some time. You can call me anytime...

*Jeanne exits.*

### 3. Graph theory and peripheral vision

*Classroom where Jeanne teaches. Overhead projector.*

*Jeanne turns on the overhead projector.*

*Beginning of class.*

JEANNE. I cannot say today how many of you will make it through the challenges that await you. Mathematics as you know it up to now has been about arriving at a strict and definitive answer by starting with strict and definitive problems. The mathematics that you will engage in by taking this introductory course on graph theory is of a different nature since it will be about unsolvable problems that will lead you, every time, to other problems that are just as unsolvable. People in your life will tell you repeatedly that what you are working towards is useless. The way you talk will change, and more importantly, so will the way you *don’t* speak and the way you think. This is precisely what people will be the least accepting of. You will often be criticized for wasting your intelligence on absurd theoretical exercises, rather than using it to work on AIDS research or a cure for cancer. You will have no argument to defend yourself because your arguments themselves are of an exhausting theoretical complexity. Welcome to pure mathematics, also known as the land of solitude. Introduction to graph theory.

*Gym. Simon with Ralph.*

RALPH. You know why you lost your last fight, Simon? And do you know why you lost the one before that?

SIMON. I wasn't in shape, that's all.

RALPH. That's not how you're going to qualify. Put your gloves on.

JEANNE. Consider a basic polygon with five sides named A, B, C, D, and E. Let's call it polygon K. Now imagine that this polygon represents a house where a family lives, and that one of the family members is at each corner of this house. Let us replace for a moment A, B, C, D, and E by the grandmother, the father, the mother, the son, and the daughter living together in polygon K. Let us then ask the question, who, from the point of view of each person, can see whom. The grandmother sees the father, the mother, and the daughter. The father sees the mother and the grandmother. The mother sees the grandmother, the father, the son, and the daughter. The son sees the mother and the sister. Finally, the sister sees the brother, the mother, and the grandmother.

RALPH. You're not looking! You're blind! You're not watching the footwork of the guy in front of you! You're not watching his guard... We call that a problem with your peripheral vision.

SIMON. Okay, okay!

JEANNE. We call this the theoretical application of the family living in polygon K.

RALPH. Go warm up!

JEANNE. Now, let's remove the walls of the house and draw arcs only between members of the family that can see each other. The drawing we end up with is called the visibility graph of polygon K.

RALPH. There are three things to remember.

JEANNE. So there are three parameters that we will be juggling with over the next three years: the theoretical applications of polygons...

RALPH. You're the strongest man alive!

JEANNE. Visibility graphs of polygons...

RALPH. No mercy for the guy in front of you!

JEANNE. Finally, polygons and their nature.

RALPH. If you win, you'll go pro!

JEANNE. The problem is the following: for any basic polygon, I can easily- as we have demonstrated- draw its visibility graph and its theoretical application. Now, how can I, using a theoretical approach like this one, draw the visibility graph and therefore find the shape of the corresponding polygon? What is the shape of the house, represented by this application, where the members of the family live? Try to draw the polygon.

*The bell sounds. Simon attacks immediately and boxes into his coach's gloves.*

RALPH. You're not here, you're not focused!

SIMON. My mother is dead!

RALPH. Exactly! The best way to get through it is to win your next fight! So get up! And hit! If you don't, you won't be able to do it!

JEANNE. You won't be able to do it. All graph theory is essentially based on this problem, which for now is impossible to solve. But it is precisely this impossibility that is beautiful.

*Bell signaling the end of the match.*

4. The conjecture to be solved

*Evening. Notary's office.*

*Hermile Lebel and Jeanne.*

HERMILE LEBEL. Yes, it's true, there are times in life like this when you have to act. Dive in. I'm glad you came back, for your mother's sake.

JEANNE. Do you have the envelope?

HERMILE LEBEL. Here it is. This envelope is not for you, but for your father. Your mother wished for you to find him and give it to him.

*Jeanne prepares to leave the office.*

HERMILE LEBEL. She also left you this green army jacket with the number "72" on the back.

*Jeanne takes the jacket.*

Do you believe your father is alive?

*Jeanne exits. Pause. Jeanne comes back.*

JEANNE. In mathematics,  $1 + 1$  does not equal 1.9 or 2.2. It equals 2. Whether you believe it or not, it equals 2. Whether you're in a good mood or a very bad one, 1 plus 1 is 2. We're all part of a polygon, Mr. Lebel. I thought I knew my place in this polygon I belong to. I thought I was at a



spot where I could only see my brother Simon and my mother Nawal. Today, I learned that it is possible for me, from my point of view, to see my father. I also learned that there is another member of this polygon, another brother. The visibility graph that I have always drawn is wrong. What is my place in the polygon? To find out, I have to solve a conjecture. My father is dead: that's the conjecture. I have every reason to believe that that is true. But nothing proves it. I haven't seen his body, nor have I seen his grave. It is possible, therefore, between 1 and infinity, that my father is alive. Goodbye, Mr. Lebel.

*Jeanne exits. Nawal (14) is in the office.*

*Hermile Lebel exits his office and calls out from the hallway.*

HERMILE LEBEL. Jeanne!

NAWAL (*calling out*). Wahab!

HERMILE LEBEL. Jeanne! Jeanne!!

*Hermile Lebel comes back, takes out his cell phone and dials a number.*

NAWAL (*calling out*). Wahab!!

WAHAB (*in the distance*): Nawal!

NAWAL (*calling out*). Wahab!

WAHAB (*in the distance*): Nawal!

HERMILE LEBEL. Hello, Jeanne? It's Mr. Lebel. I just thought of something.

NAWAL (*calling out*). Wahab!!

WAHAB (*in the distance*): Nawal!

HERMILE LEBEL. Your mother met your father when she was very young.

NAWAL (*calling out*). Wahab!

HERMILE LEBEL. I just wanted to tell you- I wasn't sure if you already knew.

WAHAB (*in the distance*): Nawal!

5. Something in there

*Dawn. Forest. Rock. White trees. Nawal (14). Wahab.*

NAWAL. Wahab! Listen to me. Don't say anything. No. Don't speak. If you say a single word, it could kill me. You don't know yet, you don't know the happiness that will become our misfortune. Wahab, I feel that as soon as I let the words escape from my mouth, you will die, too. I'm going to keep quiet, Wahab, promise me you won't say anything, please. I'm tired, please, let there be silence. I'll keep quiet. Don't say anything. Don't say anything.

*She falls silent.*

I called out for you all night. I ran all night. I knew I would find you at the rock by the white trees. I wanted to shout it so the whole village could hear it, so the trees could hear it, so the night could hear it, so the moon and the stars could hear it. But I couldn't. I have to whisper it into your ear, Wahab. After I do this, I will no longer be able to ask you to stay in my arms, even though it's what I want most in the world, even though I am convinced that I will forever be incomplete if you're not with me; even though, when we were barely more than children, I found you, and with you, I fell into the arms of my destiny, I won't be able to ask you for anything more.

*He kisses her.*

I have a child in my womb. Wahab! My womb has a part of you. It's incredible, isn't it? It's magnificent and it's horrible, isn't it? It's an abyss and it's like freedom for wild birds, isn't it? No words can describe it! Only the wind! When I heard Elham tell me, an ocean burst in my mind. A fire.

WAHAB. Maybe Elham is wrong.

NAWAL. Elham isn't wrong. I asked her, "Elham, are you sure?" She laughed. She put her hand on my cheek. She told me that she has been delivering all of the babies in the village for forty years. She delivered me from my mother's womb and she delivered my mother from her mother's womb. Elham is never wrong. She promised me that she wouldn't say anything to anyone. "It's none of my business," she said, "but in two weeks at most, you won't be able to hide it anymore."

WAHAB. We won't hide it.

NAWAL. We'll be killed. You first.

WAHAB. We'll explain everything to them.

NAWAL. You really think they'll listen to us?

WAHAB. What are you afraid of, Nawal?

NAWAL. And you're not afraid at all, then? *(Pause)*

Give me your hand. What is this? I don't know if it's anger, I don't know if it's fear, I don't know if it's happiness. Where will we be, you and I, in fifty years?

WAHAB. Nawal, listen to me. Tonight is a gift. And maybe I'm just not thinking straight when I say that, but I have a heart, and it is strong. It is patient. They will yell, and we will let them yell. They will insult us, and we will let them insult us. None of it matters. In the end, after all of their yelling and their insults, there will be just you, me, and our child. Your face, my face, together in the same face. I feel like laughing. They will knock me down, but I will always keep our child deep in my heart.

NAWAL. Now that we're together, everything is better.

WAHAB. We'll always be together. Go home, Nawal. Wait until they wake up. At dawn, when they see you sitting there waiting for them, they'll listen to you because they'll know that something important has happened. If you're afraid, just remember that at the same time I'll be at home, waiting for everyone to wake up. And I'll tell them. Dawn isn't long from now. Think of me just like I'll be thinking of you, and don't get lost in the fog. Don't forget: now that we're together, everything is better.

*Wahab exits.*

## 6. Carnage

*Nawal (14)'s house.  
Mother and daughter.*

JIHANE. This child doesn't concern you.

NAWAL. He is in my womb.

JIHANE. Forget your womb! This child doesn't concern you, your family, your mother, or your life.

NAWAL. I put my hand there and I already see his face.

JIHANE. What you see doesn't matter! This child doesn't concern you. He doesn't exist. He isn't there.

NAWAL. Elham told me. She said, "you're carrying a child".

JIHANE. Elham is not your mother.

NAWAL. But she told me.

JIHANE. It doesn't matter what Elham told you. This child doesn't exist.

NAWAL. And when he's here?

JIHANE. He won't exist.

NAWAL. I don't understand.

JIHANE. Dry your tears!

NAWAL. You're the one that's crying!

JIHANE. It is not me who is crying, it's your whole life that is trickling away! You come back from God knows where, Nawal, you come back with your foul womb and you stand right in front of me, telling me, here, like a child: I love and I have all of my love in my womb. You come back from the forest and you say that I am the one who is crying. Believe me, Nawal, this child does not exist. You're going to forget it.

NAWAL. I can't just forget my own womb!

JIHANE. You can.

NAWAL. I won't be able to!

JIHANE. Then you must choose. Keep this child and right now, at once, take off the clothes you are wearing that don't belong to you, leave this house, leave the family, your village, your mountains, your sky and your stars and leave me...

NAWAL. Mama.

JIHANE. Leave me, naked, with your womb and the life it holds. Or stay and kneel, Nawal, kneel.

NAWAL. Mama.

JIHANE. Leave your clothes or kneel!

*Nawal kneels.*

You will stay inside this house just like the life that is inside of you. Elham will come and take this child out of your womb. She will take it and give it to whomever she wants.

## 7. Childhood

*Nawal (15), alone in a bedroom.*

NAWAL. Now that we're together, everything is better. Now that we're together, everything is better. Now that we're together, everything is better.

NAZIRA. Patience, Nawal. You only have a month left.

NAWAL. I should've left, grandmother, not knelt. I should've given up my clothes, given up everything, and left the house, the village, all of it.

NAZIRA. All of this comes from poverty, Nawal. There is no beauty around us. Only the anger of a hard and hurtful life. Hatred at every corner. No one to talk things over with gently. You're right, Nawal, the love that you had to experience, you experienced it- and now the child you are going to have will be taken away from you. You have nothing left. Fight against poverty, perhaps, or fall into it.

*Nazira is no longer in the bedroom. There is a knock on the window.*

VOICE OF WAHAB. Nawal! Nawal, it's me.

NAWAL. Wahab!

VOICE OF WAHAB. Listen to me, Nawal. I don't have much time. At dawn I'm being taken away from here and away from you. I'm going back to the rock by the white trees. I said goodbye to my childhood, and it is filled with memories of you, Nawal. Nawal, tonight, childhood is a knife that has been stuck in my throat. I will forever have the taste of your blood in my mouth. I wanted to tell you. I wanted to tell you that tonight my heart is so full of love, it's going to explode. People tell me that I love you too much, but I don't know what it means to love too much, I don't know what it means to be far away from you, I don't know what it means when you're not here anymore. I will have to learn to live without you again. I understand now what you meant when you asked me, "Where will we be in fifty years?" I don't know. But wherever I go, I will carry you with me. We used to dream of seeing the ocean together. And Nawal, I swear to you, the day I see it, the word "ocean" will explode in your mind and you will burst into tears because you will know then that I am thinking of you. No matter where I am, we will be together. There is nothing more beautiful than being together.

NAWAL. I understand, Wahab.

VOICE OF WAHAB. Don't dry your tears, because I won't dry mine all night, and when you bring this child into the world, tell him about my love for him, my love for you. Tell him.

NAWAL. I'll tell him, I swear to you I will tell him. For you and for me. I will whisper in his ear, "No matter what happens, I will always love you." I will also go back to the rock by the white trees, I will also say goodbye to my childhood, and childhood will be a knife that I stick in my throat.

*Nawal is alone.*

*Night. Nawal is giving birth.  
Elham gives the child to Nawal (15).*

ELHAM. It's a boy.

NAWAL. No matter what happens, I will always love you! No matter what happens, I will always love you!

*Nawal slips a clown nose in the child's blankets.  
The child is taken from her.*

ELHAM. I'm heading south. I will take the child with me.

NAZIRA. I feel as though I'm a thousand years old. The days pass and the months go by. The sun rises and sets. The seasons change. Nawal no longer speaks, she is silent and she wanders off. Her womb is gone and I feel the call of the old earth. Too much pain has been following me for too long. Give me the bed. With the end of winter, I hear the footsteps of death in the coursing water of the streams.

*Nazira is bedridden.*

9. Read, write, count, speak

*Nazira is dying.*

NAZIRA. Nawal!

*Nawal (16) rushes to her side.*

Nawal, there are things we want to say before we die. Things that we would like to say to the people we have loved, who have loved us... to tell them... to help them one last time... to set them up for happiness! One year ago, a child came out of your womb and ever since then you have been walking with your head in the clouds. Do not fall, Nawal, do not say yes. Say no. Refuse. Your love is gone, your child is gone. He turned one only a few days ago. Don't just accept, Nawal, never accept. But to be able to refuse, you have to know how to speak. So arm yourself with courage and work hard! Listen to what a dying old woman has to tell you: learn to read, learn to write, learn to count, learn to speak. Learn. It's your only chance to not be like us. Promise me.

NAWAL. I promise.

NAZIRA. They will bury me in two days. They will put me in the ground with my face to the sky, they will throw a bucket of water on my body but they will not mark anything on the tombstone because none of them know how to write. But you, Nawal, when you know how, come back and engrave my name on the stone, "Nazira". Engrave my name because I kept my

promises. I am leaving, Nawal. It is ending for me. We, our family, the women in our family, have been stuck in our anger for so long: I was angry at my mother and your mother is angry at me just like you are angry at your mother. You too will leave your daughter a legacy of anger. You must end the cycle. So learn. Then leave. Take your youth and all the happiness you can and leave the village. You are the sex of the valley, Nawal. You are its sensuality and its scent. Take it with you, and pull yourself away from here as one pulls oneself away from their mother's womb. Learn to read, to write, to count, to speak: learn to think. Nawal. Learn.

*Nazira dies.*

*She is taken from the bed.*

*She is placed in a hole.*

*Each person throws a bucket of water on her body.*

*It is night.*

*Everyone is silent in reflection.*

*A cellphone starts ringing.*

## 10. Nawal's Burial

*Cemetery. Day.*

*Hermile Lebel. Jeanne. Simon in a cemetery.*

*Hermile Lebel answers the phone.*

HERMILE LEBEL. Hello, yes, this is Hermile Lebel, notary. Yes, I called you- I've been trying to reach you for two hours. What's going on? That's just it, nothing! There were supposed to be three buckets of water in front of the pit, but there are none. Yes, it was me who called for the buckets of water. What do you mean "what's the big deal, there's no problem"? There is a big problem! I'm telling you there were supposed to be three buckets of water and they're not here. We're at the cemetery, where else would we be, you idiot! Are you stupid? We're here for the burial of Nawal Marwan. Three buckets of water. Of course it was what we agreed on. I even came there myself, I warned everyone: this is a special burial, we just need three buckets of water. It didn't seem like too much of a hassle. I even said to the cemetery manager, "Do you want us to bring the buckets of water ourselves?" He said, "Oh no, we'll get them for you, you've been through enough!" I said okay, now we're here in the cemetery and there are no buckets of water and we're presented with one issue after the next... I mean, seriously! It's a burial, it's not all fun and flames, you know! Look, we aren't asking for much: no casket, no tombstone, nothing, the bare minimum! Simple, we're making this simple; we're only asking for three measly buckets of water, and then the administration says, "Ha!" Oh, you're not used to requests for three buckets of water? But we're not asking you to be used to it, we're asking for three buckets of water! It's not rocket physics. Yes, three. No, not one, three! Well, that's not possible, we need three. No, we can't use just one and fill it three times! We want three buckets of water filled only once. Yes, I'm sure. Well, what do you want me to tell you? Go find some.

*He hangs up.*

They're going to go find some.

SIMON. Why are you doing all this?

HERMILE LEBEL. All what?

SIMON. All of this. The burial, the last wishes. Why are *you* doing all this?

HERMILE LEBEL. Because this woman who is at the bottom of this hole, face down, who all my life I called Ms. Nawal, is my friend. My friend. I don't know if that means anything to you, but at the time, I didn't realize how much it would mean to me now.

*Hermile Lebel's cell phone rings.*

*He answers it.*

Hello, yes, Hermile Lebel, notary. Yes, okay, so what's going on? They were prepared and placed in front of a different grave. Well, there's a mistake. Nawal Marwan. Your efficiency is unbelievable.

*He hangs up.*

*Each person takes a bucket and empties it into the hole.*

*Nawal is buried and they leave without placing a tombstone.*

## 11. Silence

*Day. On the stage of a theater.*

*Antoine.*

JEANNE. Mr. Antoine Ducharme? Jeanne Marwan, I'm Nawal Marwan's daughter. I went to the hospital, but I was told that you haven't been a nurse there since my mother passed, and that you now work in this theater. So I came here. I wanted to know if she had said anything else.

ANTOINE. Your mother's voice still echoes in my ears. "Now that we're together, everything is better." Those were her exact words. I called you right away.

JEANNE. I know.

ANTOINE. For five years it was always the same silence. I'm sorry.

JEANNE. Thank you anyway.

ANTOINE. What are you looking for?

JEANNE. She always told us that our father died during the war in her home country. I'm looking for proof of his death.

*Pause.*



ANTOINE. I'm glad you came, Jeanne. Since she passed, I hesitated- I wanted to call you and your brother. To tell you, to explain. But I hesitated. Today, you are here, in this theater- that's great. So I'll tell you. Throughout all these years I spent at her bedside, I became dizzy from hearing your mother's silence. One night I woke up with a peculiar idea. Maybe she talks when I'm not there. Maybe she talks when she's by herself. I brought a tape recorder. But I hesitated. I had no right. If she talks when she's alone, that's her choice. So I promised myself I would never listen to it. Record without ever knowing. Just record.

JEANNE. Record what?

ANTOINE. The silence, her silence. In the evening, before leaving, I used to start the recording. One side of the tape recorded an hour. I couldn't find one better. The next day, I'd turn the tape over, and before I left, I'd start the recording again. I recorded more than five hundred hours. All the tapes are here. Take them. That's all I can do.

*Jeanne takes the box.*

JEANNE. Antoine, what did you do with her all that time?

ANTOINE. Nothing. I often just sat next to her. I would talk to her. Sometimes I'd also put on music, and she even danced.

*Antoine puts a cassette in the tape recorder. Music plays. Jeanne exits.*

## THE FIRE OF CHILDHOOD

### 12. The name on the tombstone

*Nawal (19) in front of her grandmother's grave.  
She engraves the name "Nazira" in Arabic.*

NAWAL. Noon, alif, zain, ya, rra<sup>1</sup>! Nazira. Your name lights up your grave. I came to the village by the road coming down from the hill. My mother was standing there, right in the middle of the path. She was waiting for me, I think. She must have suspected it. Because of the date. We stared at each other like two strangers. One after the other, the villagers arrived. I said, "I came back to engrave my grandmother's name on her tombstone." They laughed, saying, "You know how to write now?" I said yes. They laughed. A man spit at me. "You know how to write but you don't know how to defend yourself." I took the book that I had in my pocket. I hit him so hard with it that it bent the cover and he fell over, unconscious. I continued on my way. My mother watched me until I got to the fountain and turned to go up to the cemetery to get to your grave. Your name is engraved, and I'm leaving. I'm going to find my son. I have fulfilled

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<sup>1</sup> "Ra" pronounced with rolled "r" sound

my promise to you, and I will fulfill my promise to him, which I have kept since the day he was born. No matter what happens, I will always love you. Thank you, grandmother.

*Nawal exits.*

13. Sawda

*Nawal (19) on a path beneath the blazing sun.*  
*Sawda.*

SAWDA. I saw you! From afar, I watched you engrave your grandmother's name on her tombstone. Then you got up suddenly and ran away. Why?

NAWAL. Why did you follow me?

SAWDA. I wanted to see you write. To see if it was really true. Here, the rumor spread very quickly this morning. After three years, you were back. In the refugee camp, people were saying, "Nawal is back, she knows how to write, she knows how to read." Everyone was laughing. I ran to wait for you at the entrance to the village but you were already there. I saw you hit the man with the book, I saw the book trembling in your hand, and I thought of all the words, all the letters burning with the anger in your face. You left, so I followed you.

NAWAL. What do you want?

SAWDA. Teach me to read, to write.

NAWAL. I don't know how.

SAWDA. Yes, you do! Don't lie! I saw you.

NAWAL. I'm going away. I'm leaving the village. So I can't teach you.

SAWDA. I'll follow you. I know where you're going.

NAWAL. How would you know that?

SAWDA. I knew Wahab. We were from the same refugee camp, the same village. He's a refugee from the South, like me. The night he was taken away, he was screaming your name.

NAWAL. And you want to find Wahab?

SAWDA. Don't laugh at me. I know where you're going, I'm telling you. It's not Wahab that you want to find. It's your child. Your son. See, I'm right. Take me with you and teach me to read. In exchange, I'll help you. I know how to travel and together we will be stronger. Two women side by side. Take me with you. If you're sad, I will sing to you, if you're weak, I will help you, I will carry you. Here, there is nothing. I get up in the morning, and people say, "That's

the sky”, but they don’t tell me anything about the sky. They say, “That’s the wind”, but they don’t tell me anything about the wind. They show me the world, but the world is silent. And life goes on and everything is hazy. I saw the letters that you engraved and thought, “That’s a name.” As if the tombstone had become transparent. One word and everything becomes clear.

NAWAL. What about your parents?

SAWDA. My parents don’t tell me anything. They don’t explain things. I asked them, “Why did we leave the South?” and they told me, “Forget about it. Don’t even bother. Don’t think about it. There is no ‘South’. It doesn’t matter. We’re alive and we have food to eat every day. That is what matters.” They said, “Here, the war won’t reach us.” I told them, “It will reach us. This land is wounded by a red wolf that is devouring it whole.” My parents don’t say anything. I said to them, “I remember, we fled in the middle of the night, men chased us from our home. They destroyed it.” They told me, “Forget about it.” I said, “Why was my father on his knees crying in front of the burning house? Who burned it?” They replied, “None of this is true. It was a dream, Sawda, it was a dream.” So I don’t want to stay here anymore. Wahab cried out your name and it was like a miracle in the middle of the night. If I was taken away, no name would escape from my lips. Not one. How can I love here? There’s no love, no love at all, and like they say to me, “Forget, Sawda, forget,” so I’ll forget. I will forget the village, the mountains, the camp, the face of my mother, and the ravaged eyes of my father.

NAWAL. You won’t be able to forget, Sawda, I promise you. Come with me anyway.

They exit.

#### 14. Brother and sister

*Simon facing Jeanne.*

SIMON. The university is looking for you. Your colleagues are looking for you. Your students are looking for you. I keep getting calls, people telling me, “Jeanne hasn’t been coming to the university. We don’t know where Jeanne is. The students don’t know what to do anymore.” I’ve been looking for you. I’ve been calling you. But you haven’t answered.

JEANNE. What do you want, Simon? Why did you come here?

SIMON. Because everyone thinks you’re dead!

JEANNE. I’m fine. You can leave.

SIMON. No, you’re not fine, and I won’t leave.

JEANNE. Don’t yell.

SIMON. You’re doing exactly what she did.

JEANNE. What I'm doing is my business and mine alone, Simon.

SIMON. No! It's my business too. You only have me and I only have you. And you're doing exactly what she did.

JEANNE. I'm not doing anything.

SIMON. You went silent. You don't say anything anymore. Like her. She came home one day and locked herself in her bedroom. She just sat there. One day. Two days. Three days. She didn't eat. She didn't drink. She disappeared. One time. Two times. Three times. Four times. She came back. She didn't say a word. She sold her furniture. You don't have any furniture left. Her phone would ring, and she wouldn't answer. Your phone rings, and you don't answer. She locked herself away. You locked yourself away. You went silent.

JEANNE. Simon. Come sit next to me. Listen to this, just listen.

*Jeanne gives one side of her headphones to Simon who puts it against his ear. Jeanne puts the other side against hers. They both listen to the silence.*

JEANNE. You can hear her breathing.

SIMON. You're listening to silence!

JEANNE. It's her silence.

*Nawal (19) is teaching Sawda the Arabic alphabet.*

NAWAL. *Alif, ba, ta, tha, jeem, haa, kha...*

SAWDA. *Alif, ba, ta, tha, jeem, haa, kha...*

NAWAL. *Dal, dhal, raa, zain, seen, sheen, saad, daad...*

SIMON. You're starting to lose it, Jeanne.

JEANNE. What do you know about me? About her? Nothing. You know nothing. How could we just go about our lives now?

SIMON. You throw away the tapes. You return to the university. You continue to teach your classes and you finish your doctorate.

JEANNE. Christ, I don't care about my doctorate!

SIMON. You don't care about anything!

JEANNE. There's no point in explaining it to you, you wouldn't get it. 1 plus 1 equals 2, you don't even understand that!

SIMON. Of course, you only talk in numbers! If your math teacher told you that you were going crazy, you would listen. But not your brother! He's too stupid, he's an idiot!

JEANNE. I said I don't care about my doctorate! There is something in my mother's silence that I want to understand, for *me* alone!

SIMON. And I'm telling you that there's nothing to understand!

JEANNE. You're really starting to piss me off!

SIMON. You're pissing ME off!

JEANNE. Go away, Simon! We don't owe each other anything! I'm your sister, not your mother, and you're my brother, not my father!

SIMON. It's the same thing!

JEANNE. No! Not the same!

SIMON. Yes, it is!

JEANNE. Leave me alone, Simon.

SIMON. The notary is expecting us to sign all the papers in three days. Are you going to come? .... Are you going to come, Jeanne? .... Jeanne.... Answer me, are you going to come?

JEANNE. Yes. Now go away.

*Simon exits.*

*Nawal and Sawda walk side by side.*

SAWDA. *Alif, ba, ta, tha, jeem, haa, kha, dal, dhal, raa, zain, seen, sheen, saad... taa... no...*

NAWAL. Try again.

JEANNE. Why didn't you say anything? Say something, talk to me. You're alone. Antoine isn't with you. You know that he's recording you. You know that he won't listen to any of it. You know that he will give us the tapes. You know. You understood everything. So speak! Why won't you tell me anything? Why won't you tell me anything?

*Jeanne turns on her Walkman.*

*Nawal (19) and Sawda walking along a path in the blazing sun.*

SAWDA. *Alif, ba, ta, tha, jeem, haa, kha, dal, dhal, raa, zain, seen, sheen, saad, daad, taa, dzaa, ayn, rayn, fa, kaaf, kaf, lam, meem, noon, hah, lam-alif, waw, ya.*

NAWAL. And that's the alphabet. There are twenty-nine sounds. Twenty-nine letters. They are your ammunition. Your bullets. You must always remember them. You put them together to make words.

SAWDA. Look. We're coming up to the first village in the South. The village of Nabatieh. Here, there is an orphanage. Let's check there.

*They cross paths with Jeanne.  
Jeanne listens to the silence.*

## 16. Where to Start

*Jeanne comes up to the theater stage.  
Blaring music.*

JEANNE (calling out). Antoine... Antoine... Antoine!

*Antoine enters.  
The music is too loud for them to talk.  
Antoine signals for her to wait.  
The music stops.*

ANTOINE. That's the sound technician. He's doing sound tests.

JEANNE. Antoine, help me.

ANTOINE. What can I do for you?

JEANNE. I don't know where to start.

ANTOINE. You have to start at the beginning.

JEANNE. There's no logic to any of it.

ANTOINE. When did your mother stop speaking?

JEANNE. The summer of '97, in August. It was the 20<sup>th</sup>. Our birthday. She came home and she refused to speak. That's it.

ANTOINE. What happened that day?

JEANNE. Around that time, she was following a series of trials at the International Criminal Court.

ANTOINE. But why?

JEANNE. It had to do with the war that ravaged the country where she was born.

ANTOINE. But that day?

JEANNE. Nothing. Nothing at all. I've read and re-read the transcript a hundred times to try and understand.

ANTOINE. You haven't found anything else?

JEANNE. Nothing, just a small photo. One that she showed me. It's her, when she was 40, with one of her friends. Look.

*She shows him the photo.*

*Antoine examines the photo.*

*Nawal (19) and Sawda in the abandoned orphanage.*

SAWDA. Nawal. There's no one here. The orphanage is abandoned.

NAWAL. What happened?

SAWDA. I don't know.

NAWAL. And the children, where are they?

SAWDA. There are no children here anymore. Let's search in Kfar Rayat. That's where the most important orphanage is.

*Antoine holds the photo.*

ANTOINE. Let me borrow this photo. I'll enlarge it. I'll look at it for you. I'm used to paying attention to small details. Let's start there. I miss your mother. I can still see her. Sitting. Silent. She didn't look crazy. She didn't look confused. No. Lucid and sharp.

JEANNE. What are you looking at, mom, what are you looking at?

## 17. The Orphanage of Kfar Rayat

*Nawal (19) and Sawda in the orphanage of Kfar Rayat.*

NAWAL. There was no one at the orphanage in Nabatieh, so we came here, to Kfar Rayat.

DOCTOR. You shouldn't have. There are no children left here either.

NAWAL. Why?

DOCTOR. It's because of the war.

SAWDA. What war?

DOCTOR. Who knows? No one understands it. Brothers shooting at brothers and fathers shooting at fathers. A war. But which war? One day 500,000 refugees arrived from across the border. They said, "We were forced out of our land, let us live alongside you." Some people said yes, some people said no, and some people fled. Millions of destinies. And we no longer know who is shooting at whom or why. That's war.

NAWAL. And the children that were here, where are they?

DOCTOR. It all happened so quickly. The refugees arrived. They took everyone, even the newborns. Everyone. They were angry.

NAWAL. Why?

DOCTOR. They wanted revenge. Two days ago, the militia hanged three teenage refugees who ventured outside the camps. Why did the militia hang three teenagers? Because two refugees from the camp had raped and killed a girl from the village of Kfar Samira. Why did these two men rape this girl? Because the militia had stoned a refugee family to death. Why did the militia stone them to death? Because the refugees had set fire to a house near the hill where thyme grows. Why did the refugees set fire to the house? To get revenge on the militia who had destroyed a well that they built. Why did the militia destroy the well? Because the refugees had burned their crops by the river where dogs romped around. Why did they burn their crops? There is surely a reason, but my memory stops there. I can't seem to go further back. But the story keeps going and going, one thing leading to another, from anger to more anger, from anguish to sadness, from rape to murder, back to the beginning of the world.

NAWAL. Where did they go?

DOCTOR. South. To the camps. Now everyone is afraid, just waiting for the next act of retaliation.

NAWAL. Did you know the children well?

DOCTOR. I'm the doctor that looked after them.

NAWAL. I'm trying to find a child.

DOCTOR. You won't be able to find him anymore.



NAWAL. I will find him. He's four years old. He came here a few days after he was born. It was Elham who took him from my womb and gave him away.

DOCTOR. So why did you give him to her?

NAWAL. He was taken from me! I didn't give him up. He was taken! Was he here?

DOCTOR. Elham brought many children to Kfar Rayat.

NAWAL. Yes, but she didn't bring many of them in the spring, four years ago. A newborn. A boy. From the North. Do you have the records?

DOCTOR. There's no record anymore.

NAWAL. There must be a housekeeper, a cook, someone who remembers. Remembers thinking that the child was beautiful. Remembers taking him from Elham's hands.

DOCTOR. I'm a doctor, not an administrator. I go to all the orphanages. You can't expect me to know everything. Go to the refugee camps. In the South.

NAWAL. And the children, where did they sleep?

DOCTOR. In this room.

NAWAL. Where are you? Where are you?

JEANNE. What are you looking at, mom?

NAWAL. Now that we're together, everything is better.

JEANNE. What did you mean by that?

NAWAL. Now that we're together, everything is better.

JEANNE. Now that we're together, everything is better.

*Night. Hospital. Antoine comes running.*

ANTOINE. What? What?? Nawal! Nawal!

SAWDA. Nawal!

ANTOINE. What did you say? Nawal!

*Antoine picks up a tape recorder at Nawal (64)'s feet.*

NAWAL. If I could turn back time, he would be in my arms...

SAWDA. Where are you going?

ANTOINE. Ms. Jeanne Marwan?

NAWAL. South.

ANTOINE. Antoine Ducharme, your mother's nurse.

SAWDA. Wait! Wait! Nawal, wait!

ANTOINE. She spoke. Your mother spoke.

*Nawal exits.*

#### 18. The Photograph and the Southbound Bus

*Antoine and Jeanne at the university. Photo of Nawal (40) and Sawda projected on the wall.*

ANTOINE. They're in your mother's country. It's summer, you can tell by the flowers behind them. They're wild grasses that grow in June and July. The trees are umbrella pines. They're everywhere there. On the bus in the background, there are words. I asked the shopkeeper on the corner of my street who's from the same country, and he told me that it says, "Refugees of Kfar Rayat".

JEANNE. I looked through the records of the trials. One of the longest chapters concerns a prison built during the war, in Kfar Rayat.

ANTOINE. Now, look at this. See, above her hand...

JEANNE. What is that?

ANTOINE. The end of a gun. Her friend has one too, there, it looks like, under her shirt.

JEANNE. What were they doing with guns?

ANTOINE. That, the photo does not tell us. Maybe they were working as prison guards. When was the prison built?

JEANNE. 1978. According to the trial.

ANTOINE. So, we know that your mother was, towards the end of the 70s, near the village of Kfar Rayat where a prison was built. She had a friend whose name we don't know, and they both carried guns.

*Silence.*

Jeanne? Are you okay, Jeanne?

JEANNE. No, I'm not.

ANTOINE. What are you afraid of, Jeanne?

JEANNE. Finding out.

ANTOINE. What are you going to do now?

JEANNE. Buy a plane ticket.

*Nawal (19) is waiting for the bus. Sawda is next to her.*

SAWDA. I'm coming with you.

NAWAL. No.

SAWDA. I won't leave you!

NAWAL. Are you sure there's a bus that comes down this road?

SAWDA. Yes, refugees take it to return to the refugee camps. The cloud of dust you see over there is probably from that. Nawal, the doctor said it would be better to wait. He said there would likely be attacks in the camps because of the children they took.

NAWAL. So I have to be there!

SAWDA. What difference does a day make, Nawal?

NAWAL. That's one more day that I could have him in my arms. Sawda, I look at the sun and I tell myself that he is looking at the same sun. I see a bird in the sky and think maybe he's looking at the same bird. If there's a cloud in the distance, I tell myself it's right above him, that he's running to protect himself from the rain. Every moment I think of him and every moment is like a promise of my love for him. Today he turned four. He knows how to walk and talk, and he must be afraid of the dark.

SAWDA. And if you die, what good will that do?

NAWAL. If I die, it means he's already dead.

SAWDA. Nawal.. Don't go today!

NAWAL. Don't tell me what to do.

SAWDA. You promised to teach me.

NAWAL. I didn't promise you anything. It's time we go our separate ways, Sawda.

19. The lawns in the suburbs

*Hermile Lebel's home, in his yard.*

*Hermile. Jeanne. Simon.*

*The sound of traffic and jackhammers nearby.*

HERMILE LEBEL. Not every day can be a holiday, sure, but once in a while it does you some good. I went to the office, and the owner of the building was there. I immediately suspected that I smelled something fish-like about all this. He said, "Mr. Lebel, you can't come in, we're redoing the floors and taking out the carpet." I told him, "You could've warned me, I have work to do, and I'm expecting clients." He said, "Well, you're always busy, so whether it was today or tomorrow, you would've complained about it." "I'm not complaining, I just would've liked to know," I said to him, "especially since it's the busy season." Then he looks at me and says, "That's because you're disorganized." Hey! Disorganized? Me? I said, "You're the one that's disorganized. You come here, completely out of the blue, to tell me, 'I'm redoing your floors!'" "Well, anyway!" he replied, so I said it back to him too, "Well, anyway!" and I left. Good thing I managed to reach you. Come on, come on out, don't stay in the house. I mean, it's hot in there. Come out into the yard. In this heat, the grass is turning yellow fast. I'll get the sprinklers going. That will cool us down.

*He turns on the faucet to water his yard.*

*Jeanne and Simon walk over to Hermile. Sound of jackhammers.*

HERMILE LEBEL. They're redoing the pavement. It's going to be like this until winter. Come on, come on out. Anyway, I'm glad to have you here. This is my parents' house. There used to be fields for as far as the eye could see. Today there's a Canadian Tire and a power plant. It's better than an oil tank, that's for sure. That's what my dad said just before he died. Death is better than an oil tank. He died here in his bedroom just upstairs. I have the papers right here.

*Sound of jackhammers.*

HERMILE LEBEL. Because of the construction, they diverted the bus routes. They put a stop right here, on the other side of my fence. Every bus that goes by stops here, and every time a bus stops, I think of your mother. I ordered a pizza. We'll eat together. It comes with the special: Sodas, french fries, and a chocolate bar. I decided on an "All Dressed" pizza without pepperoni because it's hard to digest. It's an Indian pizzeria, the pizzas are really good. I don't like to cook much, so I usually order out.

SIMON. Well, let's make this quick. I have a fight tonight and I'm already late.

HERMILE LEBEL. Good idea. While we wait for the pizza to arrive, we can sort out the paperwork.

JEANNE. Why do you think of our mother each time the bus stops?

HERMILE LEBEL. Because of her phobia!

JEANNE. What phobia?

HERMILE LEBEL. Her phobia of buses. All the papers are here and in order. Didn't you know?

JEANNE. No!

HERMILE LEBEL. She's never been on a bus.

JEANNE. Did she tell you why?

HERMILE LEBEL. Yes. When she was young, she saw a bus full of civilians sprayed with bullets right in front of her. What a horrifying experience.

JEANNE. How do *you* know that?!

*Sound of jackhammers.*

HERMILE LEBEL. She told me.

JEANNE. But why, why did she say that to *you*?

HERMILE LEBEL. Look, I don't know! Because I asked her!

*Hermile hands them the paperwork. Jeanne and Simon sign where he indicates.*

HERMILE LEBEL. So that paperwork settles her estate. Except for her last wishes. At least in your case, Simon.

SIMON. Why me?

HERMILE LEBEL. Because you still haven't taken the envelope addressed to your brother.

*Simon looks at Jeanne.*

JEANNE. Well, yeah, I took my envelope.

SIMON. I don't get it...

*Sound of jackhammers.*

JEANNE. What don't you get?

SIMON. I don't get what you're playing at!

JEANNE. It's nothing.

SIMON. Why didn't you tell me?

JEANNE. Simon, just taking the envelope was hard enough for me already!

SIMON. What are you gonna do, Jeanne? You're gonna run around yelling, "Daddy, daddy, where are you? I'm your daughter"? It's not a goddamn math problem! You won't get an answer! There is no answer! There is nothing left...

JEANNE. I don't want to argue with you, Simon!

SIMON. We have no father, no brother, just you and me.

JEANNE. What exactly did she tell you about the bus?

SIMON. What are you gonna do? Fuck! Where are you gonna go to find him?

JEANNE. What did she tell you?

SAWDA (*yelling*). Nawal!

SIMON. Forget the bus and answer me! Where are you gonna find him?

*Sound of jackhammers.*

JEANNE. What did she say to you?

SAWDA. Nawal!

HERMILE LEBEL. She told me that she had just arrived in a town.

SAWDA (*to Jeanne*). Have you seen a girl named Nawal?

HERMILE LEBEL. She saw a bus pass by...

SAWDA. Nawal!

HERMILE LEBEL. Packed full of people!

SAWDA. Nawal!!

HERMILE LEBEL. These men came running. They blocked the bus, they sprayed it with gasoline, then other men came with machine guns and...

*Long sequence of the sounds of jackhammers that completely drown out Hermile Lebel's voice. The watering cans spew blood and flood everything. Jeanne exits.*

NAWAL. Sawda!

SIMON. Jeanne! Jeanne, come back!

NAWAL. I was on the bus, Sawda, I was with them! When they sprayed us with gasoline I yelled, "I'm not from the camp, I'm not a refugee, I'm like you. I'm looking for my child who they took from me!" So they let me get off, and then, after that, they started shooting, and all of a sudden, all at once, really, the bus burst into flames. It went up in flames with all the people inside, the elderly, the children, the women, everyone! A woman was trying to get out through the window, but the soldiers shot her, and she stayed like that, straddling the window, her child in her arms in the middle of the fire, and her skin melted, and the skin of her child melted, and everything melted and everyone burned! There's no more time, Sawda. There's no more time. Time is a chicken with its head cut off. Time runs around from left to right like a maniac, and from its decapitated neck, blood gushes out and drowns us.

SIMON (*on the phone*). Jeanne! Jeanne, you're all I have left. Jeanne, I'm all you have left. We have no choice but to forget! Call me back, Jeanne, call me back!

## 20. The Heart of the Polygon

*Simon gets dressed for his fight.  
Jeanne wears a backpack. Phone in hand.*

JEANNE. Simon. It's Jeanne. I'm at the airport. Simon, I'm calling to tell you that I'm leaving to go to her country. I'm going to try to find this father, and if I do, if he's still alive, I'm going to give him the envelope. I'm not doing this for her, I'm doing this for me. For you. For what comes next. But to do that, it's mom that I have to find first, in her past life, the one she hid from us all these years. I'm going to hang up, Simon. I'm going to hang up and fall headfirst, far away, so far from this precise geometry that has structured my life. I learned to write and count, to read and speak. None of that matters anymore. The abyss I'm going to fall in, the one I'm already slipping into, is her silence. Simon, are you crying? Are you crying?

*Simon's fight. Simon is knocked out.*

Where are you taking me, mom, where are you taking me?

NAWAL. To the very heart of the polygon, Jeanne, the very heart of the polygon.

*Jeanne puts on her headphones, inserts a new tape, and continues listening to her mother's silence.*

## THE FIRE OF JANNAANE

### 21. The Hundred Years' War

*Nawal (40) and Sawda. Area filled with destruction. Two bodies lie on the ground.*

SAWDA. Nawal!

NAWAL. They went to Abdelhammas' house, too. They killed Zan, Mira, and Abiel. At Madelwaad's house, they searched everywhere but they couldn't find him, so they slaughtered his whole family- They burned his eldest daughter alive.

SAWDA. I just came from Halam's house. They went there too. They couldn't find him. They took his daughter and his wife. But nobody knows where.

NAWAL. They killed everyone who gives money to the newspaper, Sawda. Everyone who works there. They burned down the printing presses. Burned the paper, threw out the ink. And here. You see? They killed Ekal and Faride. It's us that they're looking for, Sawda, they're looking for us and if we stay here for one more hour, they will find us and kill us. So let's go to the camps.

SAWDA. We should go to my cousins' house. It will be a bit safer there.

NAWAL. Safer...

SAWDA. They burned down the houses of anyone who read the newspaper, too.

NAWAL. Then this is not over. I swear to you. I've been thinking. This is the beginning of the hundred years' war. The beginning of the last war in the world. I'm telling you, Sawda, our generation is an "interesting" one, if you know what I mean. Watching from above, it must be very educational, seeing us struggle to decide what's barbaric and what's not. Yes. "Interesting". A generation brought up with shame, I'm telling you. Really. At a crossroads. If this war ends, then so will time. The world doesn't know it, but if we don't find a solution right away to these massacres, then we never will.

SAWDA. But where is the war? What war?

NAWAL. You know. Brother against brother, sister against sister. Angry civilians.

SAWDA. And how long will it last?

NAWAL. I don't know.



SAWDA. The books don't say?

NAWAL. Books are good, but they are always either too far ahead or too behind. There's something comical about all this. They destroyed the newspaper, so we'll make another one. It was called "The Daylight"; we'll call it "The Song of the Levant". We are not without resources. The words are horrific. We must remain lucid. See clearly. Do as our ancestors did: Try to see in the flight of birds the omens of time. Try to guess.

SAWDA. Guess? Guess what? Ekal is dead. Only his camera remains. Broken images. A life destroyed. What kind of world is this where objects carry more hope than any of us?

*Pause. Sawda sings in prayer.*

22. Abdessamad

*Jeanne is in the village from Nawal's childhood.  
Abdessamad stands in front of her.*

JEANNE. Are you Abdessamad Darazia? I was told to come and see you because you know all the stories of the village.

ABDESSAMAD. The true ones and the false ones, yes.

JEANNE. Do you remember Nawal? (*showing him the photograph*) Her. She was born and raised in this village.

ABDESSAMAD. Well, there's Nawal who left with Sawda. But that's just a legend.

JEANNE. Who is Sawda?

ABDESSAMAD. A legend. She was known as the girl who sings. A sweet and deep voice, she had. She always sang at just the right moment. A legend.

JEANNE. And Nawal? Nawal Marwan?

ABDESSAMAD. Nawal and Sawda. A legend.

JEANNE. What does the legend say?

ABDESSAMAD. It says that one night, Nawal and Wahab were separated.

JEANNE. Who is Wahab?

ABDESSAMAD. A legend! They say that if you spend enough time in the woods, near the rock by the white trees, you can hear them laughing.

*Wahab and Nawal (14) at the rock by the white trees. Nawal unwraps a gift.*

WAHAB. I brought you a present, Nawal.

NAWAL. A clown nose!

WAHAB. The same one that we saw when the traveling theatre came to town. You laughed so hard! You kept saying, "His nose! His nose! Look at his nose!" And I loved hearing you laugh so much. I went to their camp- I almost got eaten by the lion and trampled by the elephant, I had to negotiate with the tigers, I swallowed three snakes, and I went into the clown's tent. The clown was sleeping and the nose was on the table, so I took it and ran!

ABDESSAMAD. In the cemetery, you can still find the gravestone where, according to the legend, Nawal engraved the name of her grandmother. Letter by letter. The first epitaph in the cemetery. She learned to write. Then she left with Sawda and the war came. It's never a good sign when the younger generation flees.

JEANNE. And where is Kfar Rayat?

ABDESSAMAD. In hell.

JEANNE. More specifically.

ABDESSAMAD. In the South. Not far from Nabatieh. Follow the road.

*Abdessamad exits. Jeanne makes a call.*

JEANNE. Hey, Simon, it's Jeanne. I'm calling from mom's hometown. Listen. Listen to the sounds of the village.

*Jeanne exits while holding out her phone.*

### 23. Life is Wrapped Around a Knife

*Sawda and Nawal (40) leave the village. Morning. A soldier arrives.*

SOLDIER. Who are you? Where did you come from? These roads are closed to travelers.

NAWAL. We come from Nabatieh and we're going to Kfar Rayat.

SOLDIER. You might be the two women that we've been looking for for two days. The whole militia is looking for them, and so are the soldiers from the South. They write and they put ideas in people's heads.

*Silence.*

SOLDIER. You are those two women: one writes and the other sings. You see these shoes? We took them off the feet of corpses last night. We killed each of the men who wore them, looking them right in the eye. They said to us, “We’re from the same country, we share the same blood” and we smashed their skulls, then we took their shoes. At first, my hands were shaking. It’s just like anything else. The first time, you hesitate. You don’t know how hard a skull can be. So you don’t know how hard you have to strike it. You don’t know where to stick the knife. You don’t know. The most difficult part isn’t sticking the knife in, it’s pulling it out, because all of the muscles contract and grip the knife. The muscles know that’s where life is. Wrapped around the knife. So you just have to sharpen the blade and the problem goes away. The blade comes out just as it goes in. The first time is hard. Then it gets easier.

*The soldier grabs Nawal, frozen with fear, and puts his knife to her throat.*

SOLDIER. I’m going to kill you and then we’ll see if the one who can sing still has a beautiful voice and if the one who can think still has ideas...

*Without hesitation, Sawda pulls out a gun and shoots.  
The soldier falls.*

SAWDA. Nawal, I’m afraid that the soldier was right. You heard what he said: “The first time is hard, then it gets easier.”

NAWAL. You didn’t kill him- you kept us alive.

SAWDA. Those are just words, nothing but words!

*Sawda fires a second shot at the soldier’s body.*

#### 24. Kfar Rayat

*Jeanne in the Kfar Rayat prison. The tour guide, next to her. Jeanne is taking pictures.*

TOUR GUIDE. To boost the tourism industry, this prison became a museum in 2000. I was a tour guide up North before, in the roman ruins. My specialty. Now I do the Kfar Rayat prison.

JEANNE (*showing the picture of Nawal and Sawda*). Do you know who these women are?

TOUR GUIDE. No. Who are they?

JEANNE. They might have worked here.

TOUR GUIDE. Then they must’ve fled the country at the end of the war with the torturer, Abu Tarek. This here- this is the most famous cell in the Kfar Rayat prison. Cell number 7. People

make pilgrimages here. It was the cell of the woman who sings. Imprisoned for five years. When others were being tortured, she sang.

JEANNE. And the woman who sings, was her name Sawda?

TOUR GUIDE. No one knows her name. They all had numbers. The woman who sings was number 72. It's a famous number here.

JEANNE. 72?! Are you sure?

TOUR GUIDE. Yes, why?

JEANNE. Do you know anyone who worked here?

TOUR GUIDE. The school janitor. He used to be a guard here.

JEANNE. How long has the prison been here?

TOUR GUIDE. Since 1978. The same year there were the mass killings in the refugee camps in Kfar Riad and Kfar Matra. Not far from here. The soldiers surrounded the camps and brought in the militia. They killed everyone they could find. They were crazy. Their leader had been assassinated, so they didn't mess around. It remains a great wound in this part of the country.

*Jeanne exits.*

## 25. Friendship

*Nawal (40) and Sawda.*

SAWDA. They came to the refugee camp. Knives, grenades, machetes, axes, guns, chemicals. Their hands did not shake. They stabbed their weapons into our sleep and killed the dreams of children, women, and men who were resting in the world's great darkness!

NAWAL. What are you going to do?

SAWDA. Leave me alone!

NAWAL. What are you going to do? Where are you going to go?

SAWDA. I will go to every house!

NAWAL. And what, shoot everyone in the head?

SAWDA. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth- that's what they keep shouting!

NAWAL. Yes, but not like this!

SAWDA. No, it has to be this way! It's possible to be indifferent in the face of death, so it must be like this!

NAWAL. So, you too- you want to go in peoples' houses and kill children, women, and men!

SAWDA. They killed my parents, killed my cousins, killed my neighbors, killed friends of friends! So it's all the same!

NAWAL. Yes, it's the same, I know, Sawda, you're right, but think about this!

SAWDA. What's the point of thinking about it? I can't bring anyone back to life by thinking!

NAWAL. Think, Sawda! You are the victim, and if you go out and kill anyone and everyone in your way, then you will be the torturer, and then after that, in turn, you will be the victim! You can sing, Sawda, you can sing!

SAWDA. I don't want to! I don't want to be comforted, Nawal. I don't want your ideas, your pictures, your words, your eyes, your friendship, our whole lives side by side- I don't want them to console me after what I've seen and heard. They came into the camps like raging lunatics. The first few screams woke the others and before long, we heard the fury of the soldiers. They started by throwing the children against the wall, then they killed all the men they could find. The boys' throats were slit; the girls were burned alive. Everything was on fire, Nawal, everything was on fire, and everything burned to the ground! There were waves of blood flooding the streets. Screams rose from throats and faded away, and then one more life was gone. A soldier was getting ready to execute three brothers. He slammed them against the wall. I was at their feet, hiding in the sewer. I could see their legs trembling. Three brothers. The soldiers dragged their mother by the hair, planted her in front of her sons and one of them shouted at her: "Choose! Choose which one you want to save. Choose or I'll kill them all! All three of them! I'm going to count to three, and on three I'll shoot all three of them! Choose! Choose!" And the mother, unable to speak, unable to do anything at all, looked back and forth at each of her three sons! Nawal, listen to me, I'm not telling you a story. I'm telling you about the pain and suffering that has fallen at my feet. I saw her, between her sons' trembling legs. With her breasts too heavy and her body too old from carrying her three sons. And her whole body was screaming, "Then what was the point of carrying them if it was just to see them bloodied against a wall?!" And the soldier kept shouting, "Choose! Choose!" So, she looked at him and said, as a last resort, "How could you? Look at me. I could be your mother!" Then he struck her, shouting, "Don't insult my mother! Choose!" and she said a name, she said, "Nidal. Nidal!" And she fell down, and the soldier shot the two younger ones. He left the eldest alive, trembling! He let him go and he left. The two bodies fell to the ground. The mother got up and in the heart of the burning city which wept with fumes, she began to wail that it was her who killed her sons. With her heavy body, she said that she was the murderer of her own children!

NAWAL. I understand, Sawda, but in order to fight back we can't do just anything. Listen to me. Listen to what I'm telling you: blood is upon us, and in a situation like this, a mother's suffering is less significant than the terrible machine that is crushing us. The pain of this woman, your

pain, my pain, the pain of all those who died that night is no longer a mere scandal, but an addition, a monstrous addition that can't be measured. So you, Sawda, you who recited the alphabet with me long ago on the sunny path, when we traveled side by side to find my son born of a love story like the ones we no longer hear of, you- you cannot participate in this monstrous addition of pain. You can't.

SAWDA. Then what do we do? What do we do? Stand here with our arms crossed?! Wait? Understand? What do we understand? We tell ourselves that this is all just a story between fools and that it doesn't concern us! We stick to our books and our alphabet and finding it all *so* pretty, *so* beautiful, thinking it's *so* amazing and *so* fascinating! "Pretty". "Beautiful". "Fascinating." "Amazing". That's like spitting in the faces of the victims. Words! Tell me, what good are words if I don't know what I should do now? What do we do, Nawal?

NAWAL. I can't answer that, Sawda, because we have nothing left. No values to ground us, so the only thing left is to make them up. It's only what we know and what we feel. This is good, that is not good. But I must tell you: we don't like war, but we have to fight in this one. We don't like suffering, but we are deep in it. You want to retaliate, to burn houses down, to make others feel what you feel so they can understand, so they can change, so that the men who did this can become different people. You want to punish them so that they understand. But this game of fools feeds on the weakness and the pain that blinds you.

SAWDA. So what, we do nothing?

NAWAL. Who are you trying to win over? Don't you see that there are men who can't be convinced anymore? Men who can no longer be persuaded of anything? How do you explain to the man who shouted into that woman's ears "Choose!" to force her to pick which children of hers were to be killed, that he was wrong? What do you think? That he's going to say "Ah, Miss Sawda, your reasoning is quite interesting, I'm going to go change my mind, my heart, my blood, change the world, the universe, and the planet, and I'm going to apologize right away"? What are you thinking? That if you're the one who spills the blood of his wife and son, you will teach him something? You think he's going to say from one day to the next, with the bodies of those he loves at his feet, "Well, that really made me think, and it's true that refugees have the right to a place to live. I'll give them mine and we'll all live in peace and harmony together!" Sawda, when my son was torn from my womb, then from my arms, then from my life, I understood that I had to choose: either I destroy the world or I do everything I can to find him. And every day I think of him. He is twenty-five years old now, old enough to kill and old enough to die, old enough to love and old enough to suffer; so what do you think I have in mind when I tell you all this? I'm thinking about his inevitable death, about my foolish search, about the fact that I will forever be incomplete because he is gone from my life, and I will never get to see his body. Don't think that I don't feel the pain of that woman. It is in me like a poison. And I swear to you, Sawda, that I would be the first to take grenades, dynamite, bombs- everything that could do the most possible harm, and I would wrap them around me, I would swallow them, and I would go right into the middle of all the foolish men and blow myself up with such joy that you could not even begin to imagine. I would do it, I swear to you, because I have nothing left to lose, and my hatred is great, so great towards those men! Every day I inhabit the faces of those who are destroying our lives. I live in each of their wrinkles, and this is all I'd have to do to strip

them down to the cores of their souls, you hear me? But I made a promise, a promise to an old woman to learn to read, write, and speak, to escape the poverty, escape the hate. And I'm going to keep that promise. Whatever it takes. Never hating anyone, always keeping my head in the stars. A promise to an old woman, who wasn't beautiful, rich, or anything at all, but who helped me, took care of me, and saved me.

SAWDA. So what do we do?

NAWAL. I'll tell you what we should do. But you're going to hear me out. You're going to promise me right now that you won't argue.

SAWDA. What are you thinking?

NAWAL. Promise!

SAWDA. I don't know.

NAWAL. Don't you remember when you came to me and said, "Teach me to read and write." I said yes and I kept my promise. Now it's your turn to promise. Promise me.

SAWDA. I promise.

NAWAL. We're going to strike. But we're going to strike in one place. Just one. And we will bring them pain. We will not touch a single child, woman, or man, except one. Only one. We will hurt him. Maybe we'll kill him or maybe we won't, it doesn't matter, but we will hurt him.

SAWDA. Who were you thinking?

NAWAL. I'm thinking Chad.

SAWDA. He's the leader of the entire militia. We won't find him.

NAWAL. The girl who teaches his children used to be my student. She's going to help me. I'm going to take her place for a week.

SAWDA. Why are you saying "I"?

NAWAL. Because I'm going there alone.

SAWDA. And what will you do?

NAWAL. The first few days, nothing. I will teach his daughters.

SAWDA. And then?

NAWAL. On the last day, before I leave, I will shoot him twice. Once for you, once for me. Once for the refugees, once for the people of my country. Once for his foolishness, once for the army that is invading us. Two twin bullets. Not one, not three. Two.

SAWDA. And then? How are you going to get out of there?

*Silence.*

SAWDA. No, I won't let you do that. It's not your place.

NAWAL. No? Then whose is it? Yours?

SAWDA. Why not?

NAWAL. Why are we doing all this? For revenge? No. Because we want to love with great passion again. And in a situation like this, some people will die, and some people will not. So those who have already loved with passion must die before those who have not yet loved. This is what I believe, Sawda. The love that I had to feel, I felt it. The child I had to have, I had. All I had to learn, I learned. So all that is left is my death, and I have chosen it, and it will be complete. You will go hide with Chamseddine.

SAWDA. Chamseddine is just as violent as the others.

NAWAL. You don't have a choice. Do not fail me, Sawda; live for me, and keep singing for me.

SAWDA. How will I live without you?

NAWAL. And how will I live without *you*? Remember the poem we learned long ago, when we were still young. When I was still thinking about finding my son. (*They recite the poem "Al-Atlal" ("The Ruins") in Arabic.*) Recite it whenever you miss me, and when you need courage, recite the alphabet. And when I need courage, I'll sing, Sawda, just like you taught me. And my voice will be your voice and your voice will be my voice. That way, we'll always be together. There is nothing more beautiful than being together.

## 26. The Green Army Jacket

*Jeanne and the school janitor.*

JANITOR. I'm a school janitor.

JEANNE. Yes, but before... when the prison was still a prison.

JANITOR. You've been here too long.

*Jeanne takes out the green army jacket.*



JEANNE. And this jacket, does it mean anything to you? And there, on the back, the number 72.

*The man grabs the jacket.*

JANITOR. The woman who sings.

JEANNE (*handing him the photo*). Is that her?

JANITOR (*examining the photo and pointing at the other woman in it*) No. *That's her.*

JEANNE. What, no! *That's her!*

JANITOR. I watched that woman for over ten years. She was always in her cell. The woman who sings. I'm one of the few people who actually saw her face.

JEANNE. Listen to me carefully: You're positive that this woman with the long hair, the one that's smiling, is the woman who sings?

JANITOR. Yes, that's the same woman I knew from her cell.

JEANNE. And the other woman, who is she?

JANITOR. I don't know her.

JEANNE. Sawda. Her name is Sawda! That's her, the woman who sings. That's what everyone said.

JANITOR. Then they were lying to you. The woman who sings is the other one.

JEANNE. Nawal? Nawal Marwan?

JANITOR. No one spoke her name. She was the woman who sings. Number 72. Cell number 7. The one who assassinated the leader of the militia. Two bullets. The nation was turned upside down. They put her in Kfar Rayat. All of her friends were caught and killed. One of them went to the café where the militiamen had gathered and blew herself up. The woman who sings was the only one who stayed alive. Abu Tarek dealt with her. On the nights when Abu Tarek raped her, their voices became one.

JEANNE. And so she was raped!

JANITOR. That was a regular occurrence here. Eventually, she became pregnant.

JEANNE. What?!

JANITOR. That also happened regularly.

JEANNE. So, she got pregnant...!

JANITOR. The night she gave birth, the whole prison was silent. She gave birth all by herself, alone, crouched in the corner of her cell. We could hear her screaming, and her cries were like a curse on us all. When it was over, I went inside. It was completely dark. She had put the child in a bucket and covered him with a towel. I was the one who was supposed to throw the children into the river. It was winter. I took the bucket, but I didn't dare look inside, and I went outside. The night was beautiful and cold. Dark. No moon to be seen. The river had frozen over. I went to the ditch, and I left it there. But I heard the cries of the child, and I heard the songs of the woman who sings. So I stopped. My conscience was as cold and as black as the night. Their voices were like an avalanche in my soul. So, I went back, took the bucket, and walked for a very long time. I passed a farmer who was on his way up back to his village with his herd, near Kisserman. He saw me, he saw my pain, gave me a drink and I gave him the bucket. I said, "Here, this is the child of the woman who sings." And then I left. Later, they found out what I had done. Then I was forgiven. They left me alone. Today I'm in this school. It's all good.

*Long pause.*

JEANNE. Yes, right, that's good. So she was raped by Abu Tarek.

JANITOR. Yes.

JEANNE. She got pregnant and then she had a child in prison.

JANITOR. Yes.

JEANNE. You took this child, and you didn't want to kill him like all the others, so you gave him to a farmer. Is that it?

JANITOR. Yes, that's right.

JEANNE. And where is Kisserman?

JANITOR. Just a little further west. Facing the sea. A white village. Ask for the man who raised the child of the woman who sings. They will know who he is. My name is Fahim. I have thrown many children into the river. But not this one. His cries touched my soul. If you find this child, tell him my name, Fahim.

*Jeanne puts on the jacket.*

JEANNE. Why didn't you tell us? We would've loved you so much. We would've been so proud of you. Defended you. Why didn't you tell us? Why haven't I ever heard you sing, Mom?

27. Phones

*Jeanne is in a phone booth.*

*Simon is at the gym.*

*Jeanne and Simon are talking over each other.*

JEANNE. Simon, listen. I don't care! I don't care about your boxing match! Shut up!... Simon! She was in prison! She was tortured! She was raped! You hear me? Raped! Are you even listening to what I'm saying? And our brother, she had him in prison. No! Fuck, Simon, I'm calling you from the middle of bumfuck nowhere- there's a sea and two oceans between us, so just shut your mouth and listen to me! No, I don't need you to call me back, I need you to go see the notary, ask him for the red notebook and then look and see what's in it. That's it.

SIMON. No... No way, I'm not doing that! My boxing match is what matters right now, and that's it! Yeah, that's it! I don't want to know! No, I'm not even remotely interested in knowing about her life! It's not important! I know who I am today and that's enough! Now, you listen to me! You're going to leave and come back here! You're leaving, fuck, you're leaving! You're going to leave now, Jeanne! ... Hello?! Hello?!.... Fuck!... Is there no number on your goddamn payphone where I can call you?

*She hangs up.*

## 28. The True Names

*Jeanne is at the farmer's house. She takes a picture of him.*

JEANNE. A shepherd sent me here. He said, "Go up to the pink house. You will find an old man. His name is Abdelmalak, but you can call him Malak. He will welcome you into his home." So I came.

MALAK. And who sent you to the shepherd?

JEANNE. Fahim, the school janitor in Kfar Rayat.

MALAK. And who told you about Fahim?

JEANNE. The tour guide at the Kfar Rayat prison.

MALAK. Mansour. That's his name. And why did you go to see Mansour?

JEANNE. Abdessamad, a refugee who lives in a village up north, told me how to get to the prison.

MALAK. And Abdessamad, who made you go and see him?

JEANNE. At this rate, we'll go back to the day I was born.

MALAK. Who knows? Then we might find a beautiful love story. You see that tree there? That's a hazelnut tree. It was planted the day I was born. It's a hundred years old. Time is an odd fellow. So?

JEANNE. Abdessamad lives in the village where my mother was born.

MALAK. And what is your mother's name?

JEANNE. Nawal Marwan.

MALAK. And what is your name?

JEANNE. Jeanne Marwan.

MALAK. So, Jeanne Marwan, what do you need? To whom, in turn, can I lead you?

JEANNE. To a child that Fahim had once entrusted to you on behalf of my mother.

MALAK. I don't know your mother, though.

JEANNE. You don't know Nawal Marwan?

MALAK. It doesn't ring a bell.

JEANNE. And the woman who sings?

MALAK. Why do you ask? What have you heard about the woman who sings? Do you know her? Has she come back?

JEANNE. The woman who sings died. Nawal Marwan is the woman who sings. Nawal Marwan is her name. And she is my mother.

*The old man embraces Jeanne.*

MALAK. You're Jannaane!

JEANNE. No! My name is Jeanne...

*Nawal (45) is there with Malak. Malak stands in front of her with two babies in his arms.*

MALAK. Word has spread throughout the country that you've been released.

NAWAL. What do you want from me?

MALAK. To give you back your children. I took care of them as if they were my own.

NAWAL. Then keep them!

MALAK. No! They are yours. Take them. You can't even imagine what they will mean to you. It took many miracles for them to be in my arms today and even more miracles for you to be alive. All three of you, survivors. Three miracles looking right at each other. You don't see that every day. I gave them names. The boy's name is Sarwane and the girl's name is Jannaane. Sarwane and Jannaane. Take them and keep me in your memory.

*Malak gives the children to Nawal.*

JEANNE. No! No! That's not right! That's not us! My name is Jeanne and my brother is Simon.

MALAK. Jannaane and Sarwane...

JEANNE. No, no! We were born at the hospital. We have our birth certificates! And we were born in the summer, not winter, and the child born in Kfar Rayat was born in the winter since the river was frozen- Fahim told me- since he couldn't throw the bucket deep into the water!

MALAK. Fahim was mistaken.

JEANNE. No! Fahim was not mistaken! He saw her every day! He took the child, he took the bucket, the child was in the bucket, and there was only one child, not two. Not two!

MALAK. Fahim didn't look. He didn't check.

JEANNE. My father is dead. He gave his life for your country, and he's not a torturer, and he loved my mother, and my mother loved him with all of her heart!

MALAK. Is that what she told you? Well, you must always tell children stories to help them go to sleep. I warned you, in this game of questions and answers we often find ourselves at the birth of things, and now here we have come to the secret of your own birth. Now, listen to me: Fahim handed me the bucket and ran off. I lifted the cloth that was covering the child, and there I see two babies, two, newborns, red with anger, clinging to each other, pressed against each other, with all the fervor of the beginning of their existence. I took you and left, then I fed you and named you: Jannaane and Sarwane. And now here you are. You came back after the death of your mother, and I see from the tears in your eyes that I was not mistaken. The fruits of the woman who sings were born of rape and horror. They will know how to break the rhythm of the lost cries of the children thrown into the river.

29. Nawal's Words

*Simon opens the red notebook.*

*Nawal (60) testifies before the jury.*

NAWAL. Madam President, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. I will give my testimony standing up, with my eyes open, because I was often forced to keep them closed. I will give my testimony

facing my torturer. Abu Tarek. This is the last time in my life that I will utter your name. I'm saying it so you know that I remember you, that you can have no doubt about it. Many of the dead, if they woke up from their painful rest, would also remember you and your terrifying smile. Many of your men feared you, and they themselves were nightmares. How can a nightmare fear a nightmare? Perhaps the good and just men who will come after us will be able to solve the equation. I remember you, but you might not remember me, though I'm fairly certain that you do, since your duties as a torturer required you to have a perfect memory of names, dates, places, and events. But I'm going to remind you of me, of my face, since my face was what mattered to you the least. You remember much more clearly my skin, my smell, even the most intimate part of my body, which was just a territory for you to decimate little by little. Listen to the ghosts that talk to you through me. Remember. My name may not mean anything to you, because to you, all women were whores. You used to say "whore 45", "whore 63". This word gave you style, confidence, seriousness, and authority. You ignited fear and hatred in the women one by one. My name might not mean anything to you, and neither will my whore number, but there is one thing that, despite your best efforts to keep it from suffocating your heart, will be able to break the dam of your forgotten memories. The woman who sings. Do you remember now? You know the truth of your anger towards me, like when you hung me up by my feet, like the water mixed with electricity, like the spikes under my fingernails, like the gun loaded with blanks that you pointed at me. The gunfire and the dead bodies that became a part of the torture, and the urine on my body, on yours, in my mouth, on my genitals, and your genitals being inside mine, once, twice, three times, so many times that time itself was shattered. My womb that swelled with you, your foul torture in my womb, and alone, you wanted me to be alone, all alone when I gave birth. Two children, twins. It was because of you that I couldn't love the children, that I struggled, that I raised them in sorrow and silence. How could I tell them about you, tell them about their father, tell them the truth which, in this case, was only a green fruit that would never ripen? Bitter is the spoken truth that swallowed me whole. Time will pass, but you will not escape the justice that eludes us all: these children that we have brought into the world, you and I, are alive. They are beautiful, intelligent, sensitive, carry victories and defeats, and are already trying to find meaning in their lives, their existence. I promise you that one day they will come and stand before you, in your cell, and you will be alone with them just as I was alone with them and, like me, the feeling of your existence in the world will be long gone. A rock would feel more alive than you. I speak from experience. I promise you that when they stand before you, they will know who you are. We belong to the same land, the same language, the same history, and each land, each language, each history is responsible for its people, and each people is responsible for its traitors and its heroes, its torturers and its victims, its victories and its defeats. In this sense, I am responsible for you, and you are responsible for me. We didn't want war and violence, but we fought in one and did so violently. Now all that is left is our dignity. We have failed at everything else, but perhaps we could still save that: dignity. Speaking to you as I am now is a testament to a promise I made to a woman who once helped me understand the importance of pulling oneself out of poverty: "Learn to read, to speak, to write, to count. Learn to think."

SIMON (reading from the notebook). My testimony is the fruit of this endeavor. Staying silent would make me an accomplice to your crimes.

*Simon closes the notebook.*

30. The Red Wolves

*Simon and Hermile Lebel.*

HERMILE LEBEL. What are you going to do?

SIMON. Nothing. A brother. Why should it matter?

HERMILE LEBEL. To know...

SIMON. I don't want to know.

HERMILE LEBEL. Do it for Jeanne, then. She won't be able to live if she doesn't know.

SIMON. I wouldn't know how to look for him, to find him!

HERMILE LEBEL. But of course you would! You're a boxer!

SIMON. Amateur. I'm an amateur boxer. I've never been in a pro fight.

HERMILE LEBEL. I'll help you. We'll go get our passports together. I'll go with you, you won't be alone. We'll find your brother! I'm sure of it. And maybe it will help you live, and fight, and win, and become a pro. I believe it! It's written in the cosmos, these things are! You just need to have faith.

SIMON. Do you have the envelope for the brother?

HERMILE LEBEL. Of course I do! You can count on me, I assure you, you can count on me! We're just beginning to see the light of the train at the end of the tunnel!

*Hermile exits. Nawal (65) is with Simon.*

NAWAL. Why are you crying, Simon?

SIMON. It's like a wolf that's creeping up on me. It's red. There's blood dripping from its jaws.

NAWAL. Come with me.

SIMON. Where are you taking me, mom?

NAWAL. I need your fists to break the silence. Sarwane is your real name. Jannaane is your sister's real name. Nawal is your mother's real name. Abu Tarek is the name of your father. Now you must find the real name of your brother.

SIMON. My brother!

NAWAL. Your blood brother.

*Simon is left alone.*

SARWANE'S FIRE

31. The Man Who Plays

*A young man at the top of a building. Alone. A 1980 Walkman in his ears.  
With his sniper rifle as a guitar, he plays the beginning of "The Logical Song" by Supertramp  
with passion.*

NIHAD (*miming the guitar, then singing at the top of his lungs*).

*Bah dah bah bah, doo-doo*

*Bah dah bah bah, doo-doo*

*Bah dah bah bah, doo-doo*

*Bah dah bah bah, doo-doo*

*When the vocals come in, his gun changes from a guitar to a microphone.*

*He sings the first verse in broken English.*

*Suddenly, his attention is drawn to something in the distance.*

*He quickly raises his gun and aims while he continues to sing.*

*He fires one shot and quickly reloads.*

*He shoots again while changing positions. He shoots again, reloads, stands still and shoots  
again.*

*Very quickly, Nihad grabs a camera. He points it in the same direction, focuses it, and takes a  
photo.*

*He continues singing again, then stops suddenly. He lies flat on the ground. He holds his gun  
close and aims it.*

*He abruptly gets up and shoots. He runs to the spot that he shot at, leaving his Walkman which  
continues to play.*

*Nihad returns, dragging a wounded man by the hair. He throws him to the ground.*

MAN. No! No, I don't want to die!

NIHAD (*speaks in broken English with a French accent*). "I don't want die!" "I don't want die!"  
That is the sentence most stupid I've ever heard!

MAN. Please, I'm begging you, let me go! I'm not from here. I'm a photographer.

NIHAD. You are *photographe*?

MAN. Yes, a war... a war photographer.

NIHAD. And you took picture of me?



MAN. Yes... I wanted to get one of a sniper... I saw you shooting so I came over here. But I can give you the film...

NIHAD. I am *photographe*, too. My name is Nihad. I'm war *photographe*. Look. I took these.

*Nihad shows him photo after photo.*

MAN. They're beautiful...

NIHAD. No! Not beautiful. You think those are people sleeping, but is not true. They are dead. I killed them! I swear.

MAN. I believe you.

*Rummaging through the photographer's bag, Nihad pulls out a camera with automatic advancing and a shutter release cable. Nihad looks through the viewfinder and snaps several photos of the man. He pulls out a large roll of industrial tape from his bag and attaches the camera to the end of the barrel of his gun.*

What are you doing...

*The camera is firmly attached. Nihad connects the shutter release cable to the trigger of his rifle. He looks through the eyepiece of his rifle and aims it at the man.*

MAN. What are you doing?! Don't kill me! I could be your father, I'm as old as your mother...

*Nihad shoots. The camera goes off at the same time. The photo of the man when he is struck by the bullet appears. He talks to the dead man.*

NIHAD. Kirk, I am very happy to be here at "Star T.V. Show"...

Thank you to you, Nihad. So Nihad, what is your next song?

My next song will be a love song.

A love song!

Yes, a love song, Kirk.

It is new on you *carrière*, Nihad.

You know, well, I wrote this song when it was war. War on my country. Yes, one day a woman that I loved died. Yes.

Shouting by a sniper. I feel a big crash in my hart. My hart colaps. Yes. I *crie*. And I wrote this song.

It will be a *plaisir* to hear your love song, Nihad. No problème, Kurk.

*Nihad gets back up and uses his rifle as a microphone. He adjusts his headphones and turns on his Walkman. He mimes playing drums.*

NIHAD. One, two, one, two, three, four!

*He imitates the first 32 drumbeats of "Roxanne" The Police by singing "Na, na, na, na, na", then sings the song, confusing the lyrics.*

32. Desert

*Hermile Lebel and Simon in the middle of the desert.*

SIMON. There's nothing here!

HERMILE LEBEL. But the soldier told us to go this way!

SIMON. Or he could be fucking with us.

HERMILE LEBEL. Why would he do that?

SIMON. Why not?

HERMILE LEBEL. No, he has to be right. He told us to go and find a man named Chamseddine, the spiritual leader of the resistance in the South. He told us to go this way, so we're going this way.

SIMON. If someone told you to shoot yourself in the head...

HERMILE LEBEL. I don't see why anyone would ever ask me to do such a thing!

SIMON. Well, what do we do now?

HERMILE LEBEL. What do you want to do?

SIMON. I want to open the envelope that I'm supposed to give to my brother. Let's stop playing hide and seek.

HERMILE LEBEL. Absolutely not!

SIMON. What's stopping me?

HERMILE LEBEL. Listen here, my dear boy, because I will not keep repeating it all the way to Methuselah! This envelope does not belong to you! It belongs to your brother.

SIMON. So what?!

HERMILE LEBEL. Look me in the eye! Doing that... it's like rape!

SIMON. Well, that's just perfect because it runs in the family! My father is a rapist!

HERMILE LEBEL. I didn't mean it like that!

SIMON. Okay, fine! We won't open the goddamn envelope. But fuck, we aren't going to find him!

HERMILE LEBEL. Mr. Chamseddine?

SIMON. No, my brother!

HERMILE LEBEL. Why not?

SIMON. Because he's dead! I mean, *câlisse!* At the orphanage, they said that the militia kidnapped children just to blow them up in the refugee camps! So he's dead. Then we went and saw the camps, and they told us about the massacres of 1978. Again, he's dead. But just in case, went to see a militiaman who used to live in the same orphanage. He said he didn't remember much, except for a guy like him who had no mother, no father, and he just left one day and most likely died. So if I'm counting correctly, he died from being blown up like a bomb, he died from having his throat cut out, and then he died after going missing. That's a lot of deaths. So I think we can just forget about Sheikh Chamseddine.

HERMILE LEBEL. Yes, yes, I know, I get it! But to know for sure, the militiaman told us to go and see Mr. Chamseddine, who was the spiritual leader of the entire resistance during the war against the army that invaded the South. So he must have contacts. These people are the higher-ups. The political ones. They know the business. They know everything. I mean, why not? Your brother might be alive. We don't know! We discovered his name, so that's something. Nihad Harmanni!

SIMON. Nihad Harmanni.

HERMILE LEBEL. Harmanni, well, there are as many Harmannis as there are Tremblays in the phone book, but I mean, we're getting closer! Mr. Chamseddine will help us!

SIMON. And where can we find Mr. Chamseddine?

HERMILE LEBEL. I'm not sure... that way!

SIMON. That way is all desert!

HERMILE LEBEL. Yes, yes, exactly! It's a good hiding place! These kinds of people have to hide, you know! I mean, Mr. Chamseddine surely isn't a member at the local video store, and he doesn't call and order Hawaiian pizza delivery! No! He's in hiding! Maybe he's watching us, so we'll keep going, and then he'll come out and ask us what we're doing on his land!

SIMON. What movie did you fall out of?

HERMILE LEBEL. No, it's true, Simon! Sarwane! Come on, let's go! Let's go check and maybe we'll find your brother. You never know! Maybe he's a notary, like me! We could discuss official records and legal documents. Or maybe he sells vegetables, or owns a restaurant, we don't know. Take Trinh Xiao Feng, he was a general in the Vietnamese army, then he ended up selling burgers on Curé-Labelle Boulevard. And Hui Huo Xiao Feng got remarried to Réal Bouchard! I mean, you just never know! Maybe your brother is married to a rich American woman from San Diego and they have eight children, making you eight times an uncle. We don't know. Come on, let's keep going!

*They continue on their way.*

### 33. The Principles of a Sniper

*Nihad, holding his rifle with the camera attached at the end, shoots.*

*A photo of a man running appears.*

*Nihad moves a few feet, then shoots again.*

*A photo of the same man, shot and killed, appears.*

NIHAD (*in broken English with a French accent*). You know, Kirk, sniper job is fantastic job.

*Justement*, Nihad, can you talk about this?

Yeah! It is an artistic job.

Because a good sniper, don't shoot *n'importe comment*, no, no, non! I have lot of *principe*, Kirk!

First: When you shot, you have to kill, *immédiatement*, for not *faire souffrir* the *personne*. Sure!

*Seconde*: You shoot ail the *personne*! Is equitable with *tout le monde*!

But for me, Kirk, my gun is like my life.

You know, Kirk,

Every *balle* that I put in my gun,

Is like a *poème*.

And I shoot a *poème* to the people and it is the *précision* of my *poème* that kills *les personnes*...

and that is why my photos is *fantastique*.

And tell me, Nihad, you shoot everybody.

No, Kirk, not everybody...

I imagine that you not kill children.

Yes, yes, I kill children. No problème. Is like Pigeon, you know.

So?

No, I not shoot women like Elizabeth Taylor. Elizabeth Taylor is strong *actrice*. I like her very much and I no want to kill Elizabeth Taylor. So, when I see a women like her, I don't shoot her...

You no shoot Elizabeth Taylor.

No, Kirk, sure not!

Thank you, Nihad.

Welcome, Kirk.

*Nihad gets up, aims his rifle, and shoots again.*

### 34. Chamseddine

*Simon and Hermile Lebel stand in front of Chamseddine.  
Nawal (45).*

HERMILE LEBEL. Oh, how much we have searched! Go right, go left! Mr. Chamseddine is that way, Mr. Chamseddine is this way, no luck! You're in household fame, but you're not easy to find.

CHAMSEDDINE. Are you Sarwane?

SIMON. I am.

CHAMSEDDINE. When I heard that your sister was in the area, I said, "If Jannaane doesn't come to see me, then Sarwane will." When I heard that the son of the woman who sings was looking for me, I knew that she had died.

NAWAL. The next time you hear my name, I will be gone from this world.

SIMON. I'm looking for the son she had before me.

CHAMSEDDINE. Before she left the country, I asked her, "What about your son?"

NAWAL. He is alive but lost. Wahab is alive but lost. I am alive but lost.

SIMON. I was told you could help me.

CHAMSEDDINE. I cannot.

SIMON. They said you knew everyone.

CHAMSEDDINE. Not him.

SIMON. His name is Nihad Harmanni.

CHAMSEDDINE. What about Nihad Harmanni?

SIMON. One of the soldiers knew him as a child. They joined the militia together, then he lost track of him. He said, "Chamseddine must have kidnapped and killed him". He told us that you skinned every militiaman and foreign soldier that your men caught.

CHAMSEDDINE. Did he tell you that Nihad Harmanni was the son of the woman who sings, the one born from her relationship with Wahab whose face no one has ever seen?

SIMON. No, he didn't know anything about that. The woman who sings- never heard of her. He just told me that Nihad Harmanni had passed by here at some point.

CHAMSEDDINE. How do you know, then, that he is the son of the woman who sings?

HERMILE LEBEL. If I may. I can explain. Hermile Lebel, notary and executor of the will of the woman who sings. Mr. Chamseddine, I will tell you how it happened: all of the details add up.

CHAMSEDDINE. Go on!

HERMILE LEBEL. What a terrible puzzle it was! We first stopped by the village where Ms. Marwan was born. That led us to Kfar Rayat. There, we followed several leads based on the dates that some of the boys arrived at the orphanage. There was Toni Mubarak, but it wasn't him. He was reunited with his parents at the end of the war. A rather unpleasant character, he was, and not very friendly. Then there was Tawfik Hallabi, but it wasn't him either. He makes very good shish tawook up North by the Roman ruins, but he's not from this country, his parents are dead, and it was his sister who brought him to the orphanage in Kfar Rayat. We followed two other false leads before finally finding one that was more solid. This led us to the Harmanni family who had passed away. The owner of the corner store told us about their adopted child. He told us his name. So I went to see a colleague of mine, Notary Halabi, a very kind man, who attended to the Harmanni family's affairs. He noted that Roger and Souhayla Harmanni, who were not able to have children, had adopted a boy from Kfar Rayat, who they named Nihad. The child's age and the date of his arrival at the orphanage matched perfectly with what we know from Ms. Nawal. But most importantly, this boy was the only one of our candidates to have been brought to the orphanage by the woman who delivered all of the babies in Ms. Nawal's village. Someone by the name of Elham Abdullah. After that, you see, Mr. Chamseddine, we were rather confident in this lead.

CHAMSEDDINE. If the woman who sings has chosen to trust you, it means that you are a noble and dignified man. But now you must go so that I may be alone with Sarwane.

*Hermile Lebel exits.*

CHAMSEDDINE. Sarwane, stay with me. Now you must listen. Listen to me very carefully.

35. The Voice of Ancient Times

*Hermile Lebel and Jeanne.*

HERMILE LEBEL. He still hasn't said a word. He was with Chamseddine, and when he came out, Jeanne, the look on his face- he looked like just your mother. He didn't speak for the rest of the day, nor the day after, nor the day after that. He stayed at the hotel. I knew that you were in Kfar Rayat. I didn't want to pull you out of your solitude, but Simon's gone silent, Jeanne, and I am afraid. Perhaps we pushed too hard to find the truth.

*Jeanne and Simon sitting opposite each other.*

SIMON. Jeanne. Jeanne.

JEANNE. Simon!

SIMON. You always said that one plus one equals two. Is that true?

JEANNE. Yes, that's true...

SIMON. You weren't lying?

JEANNE. No! One plus one is two!

SIMON. It can never be one?

JEANNE. What did he say to you, Simon?

SIMON. One plus one – could it equal one?

JEANNE. Yes.

SIMON. How?!

JEANNE. Simon.

SIMON. Explain it to me!

JEANNE. Fuck, this isn't the time for math. Tell me what you found out!

SIMON. Explain to me how one plus one equals one. You always told me that I never really understood anything, so now it's time! Explain it to me!

JEANNE. Okay, all right! There is a very odd conjecture in mathematics. A conjecture that has never been proven. First, pick a number, any number. If it's even, you divide it by two. If it's odd, you multiply it by three and add one. Then you do the same thing again with the number you get. This conjecture states that no matter what number you start with, you always end up with one. Give me a number.

SIMON. Seven.

JEANNE. Okay. Seven is odd. If we multiply it by three and add one, we get...

SIMON. Twenty-two.

JEANNE. Twenty-two is even, so we divide it by two.

SIMON. Eleven.

JEANNE. Eleven is odd, so we multiply it by three and add one.

SIMON. Thirty-four.

JEANNE. Thirty-four is even. We divide it by two, that's seventeen. Seventeen is odd, so we multiply it by three and add one, that's fifty-two. Fifty-two is even, so we divide it by two, that's twenty-six. Twenty-six is even, we divide that by two, and that's thirteen. Thirteen is odd. Multiply it by three, add one, that's forty. Forty is even. So we divide it by two, that's twenty. Twenty is even, so we divide it by two, that's ten. Ten is even, we divide it by two, and that's five. Five is odd, so we multiply it by three and add one, that's sixteen. Sixteen is even, we divide that by two and get eight. Eight is even, we divide that by two and get four. Four is even, we divide that by two, that's two... Two is even, we divide that by two, and get one. No matter what number you start with, you always end up with... No!

SIMON. You're silent. Just as I was silent when I understood. I was in Chamseddine's tent, and in his tent, I watched the silence swallow us whole. Hermile Lebel stepped out. Chamseddine moved closer to me.

CHAMSEDDINE. Sarwane, it was no mere accident that led you to me. The spirit of your mother lives here, the spirit of Sawda. The bond of two women like a star in the sky. One day, a man came to see me. He was young and full of pride. Imagine it. Do you see him? That's your brother, Nihad. He was searching for meaning in his life. I asked him to fight for me. He said yes. He learned how to handle weapons. A truly great shooter, he was. Formidable. One day, he left. I asked him where was going.

NIHAD. I'm heading North!

CHAMSEDDINE. What about our cause here? The refugees? Your life's purpose?

NIHAD. There is no cause, no purpose!

CHAMSEDDINE. He left, but I tried to help him. I had someone watching over him. I realized that he was trying to find his mother. He'd been searching for her for years with no luck. So he started laughing for no reason at all. No cause, no purpose- he became a sniper. He collected photos. Nihad Harmanni. A real artist, he was. You could always hear him singing. And a killing machine. Then came the invasion by the foreign army. They went up North. One morning, they caught him. He had killed seven of their soldiers. Shot them in the eye, each with a bullet straight through their scopes. They didn't kill him. They kept him, they trained him, and they gave him a job.

SIMON. What job?

CHAMSEDDINE. In a prison they had just built, in the South, in Kfar Rayat. They were looking for someone to do the interrogating.

SIMON. So he worked with Abu Tarek, my father?



CHAMSEDDINE. No, your brother did not work with your father. Your brother is your father. He changed his name. He left Nihad behind and became Abu Tarek. He had searched for his mother and found her but did not recognize her. She had searched for her son and found him but did not recognize him. He did not kill her because she sang, and he loved her voice. The sky is collapsing, Sarwane. So, you understand: he tortured your mother, and your mother was tortured by her son, and the son raped his mother. Her son is the father of his brother, of his sister. Do you hear my voice, Sarwane? It may sound like the voice of ancient times. But no, Sarwane, it is the voice of today. And the stars inside me were silent for a second; they went silent when you first spoke the name Nihad Harmanni a moment ago. And I see that the stars inside you have gone silent, too. Inside you is silence, Sarwane, the silence of the stars and the silence of your mother.

NIHAD. I won't deny anything that has been said at this trial over the years. The people who said I tortured them, I did torture them. And the people I've been accused of killing, I did kill them. But I want to thank them because they are what made it possible for me to take the most beautiful photos. The ones I slapped and the ones I raped always had a more powerful, more moving look after the slap or the rape than before it. But the main thing I wanted to say is that the trial you gave me was boring, tiresome, and dull. Not enough music. So I'll sing you a song. I'm saying this because we must salvage our dignity. But it wasn't me who said that, it was a woman- the one we called the woman who sings. Yesterday, she stood before me and spoke to me about dignity. Saving what little dignity we have left. I thought about it, and I realized that she was not entirely wrong, that this trial was a total bore! No rhythm, no kind of spectacle. The spectacle of it all, for me, is my dignity. Ever since the very beginning. It was found, it seems, in the bucket I was left in after I was born. The people who watched me grow up always told me that this object was a symbol of my past, and my dignity, in a way, since, as the story goes, it was given to me by my mother. A little red nose. A clown nose. What does it mean? My dignity is a funny face given to me by the woman who gave me life. That face has never left me. So allow me to wear it, then, and sing you a song of my own, to save the dignity of this bore of a trial.

*He puts on the clown nose. He sings.*

*Nawal (15) gives birth to Nihad.*

*Nawal (45) gives birth to Jeanne and Simon.*

*Nawal (60) recognizes her son.*

*Jeanne, Simon, and Nihad are all together in the same room.*

### 36. Letter to the Father

*Jeanne gives the envelope to Nihad. Nihad opens the envelope.*

*Nawal (65) reads.*

I am trembling as I write this letter.

I want these words to sink into your torturous heart.

I put this pen to paper as I write each and every letter,

Remembering the names of all who have died at your hands.

My letter will not surprise you.

It was only meant to tell you this:  
The children we had together are standing before you.  
What will you say to them? Will you sing them a song?  
They know who you are.  
Jannaane and Sarwane.  
The son and daughter of the torturer, born of horror.  
Look at them.  
This letter was given to you by your daughter.  
With this letter, I want you to know that you will live on through your children.  
Soon you will fall silent.  
I know it.  
Silence awaits all who face the truth.  
The woman who sings  
Whore #72  
Cell #7  
From the prison in Kfar Rayat.

*Nihad finishes reading the letter. He looks at Jeanne and Simon. He rips up the letter.*

### 37. Letter to the Son

*Simon gives his envelope to Nihad, who opens it.*

NAWAL. I searched for you everywhere.  
Here, there, and everywhere else.  
I searched for you in the rain,  
I searched for you in the sun  
In the depths of the woods  
Across valleys  
At the tops of mountains  
In the darkest cities  
Along the darkest streets.  
I searched for you in the south,  
In the north,  
In the east,  
In the west.  
I searched for you as I dug up the earth to bury the friends I had lost,  
I searched for you whenever I looked up at the sky,  
I searched for you among flocks of birds  
For you were a bird.  
And what is more beautiful than a bird,  
But a bird filled with rays of sunshine?  
What is more lonely than a bird,  
But a bird alone in a storm  
Carrying to the edge of the daylight its strange destiny?

A moment ago, you were horror.  
Now, you have become happiness.  
Horror and happiness.  
The silence in my throat.  
Do you believe me?  
Let me tell you.  
You got up  
And you took out that little clown nose  
And my world exploded.  
Do not tremble.  
Do not freeze.

These are ancient words that come from the depths of my memories,  
Words that I have whispered to you so many times.  
In my cell,  
I told you about your father.  
I told you about his face,  
I told you about the promise I made on the day you were born.  
No matter what happens, I will always love you,  
No matter what happens, I will always love you.  
Not knowing that in that same moment we had already met our defeat  
Since I hated you with every ounce of my soul.

But where there is love, there can be no hate.  
And to hold onto this love, I blindly chose to stay silent.  
A mother wolf always protects her young.  
You have before you Jeanne and Simon  
Your brother and sister  
And since you were born of love,  
They are the brother and sister of love.  
Listen  
I write this letter in the evening breeze.  
It will show you that the woman who sings was your mother.  
Maybe you too will fall silent.  
So be patient.  
I speak to the son. I do not speak to the torturer.  
Be patient.  
Beyond the silence,  
There is the happiness of being together.  
There is nothing more beautiful than being together  
Those were the last words of your father.  
Your mother.

*Nihad finishes reading the letter. He stands up.  
Jeanne and Simon stand up and face him.  
Jeanne rips out all of the pages of her notebook.*

38. Letter to the Twins

*Hermile Lebel opens the third envelope addressed to the twins.*

HERMILE LEBEL. It's getting cloudy out there. Yes, yes, it's going to rain, for sure. Don't you want to go back home? Well, I understand. If I were you, I wouldn't go home. A beautiful park, this is. In her will, your mother left a letter for me to give you if you carried out her wishes. And you've done so, very well. It's going to rain. In her country, it never rains. We'll stay here. It will cool us down. Here is the letter.

*Simon opens the envelope.*

NAWAL. Simon,  
Are you crying?  
If you are crying, do not dry your tears  
For I will not dry mine.  
Childhood is a knife stuck in the throat  
And you managed to pull it out.  
Now, you have to learn how to swallow again.  
It's a very brave thing to do sometimes,  
Swallowing.  
Now you must rebuild the story.  
The story is in pieces.  
Gently  
Console each piece  
Gently  
Heal each memory  
Gently  
Cradle each image.

Jeanne,  
Are you smiling?  
If you are smiling, do not stifle your laughter  
For I will not stifle mine.  
It is the laugh of anger  
Of women walking side by side

I would have named you Sawda  
But this name lives,  
In each of its letters,  
As a gaping wound in my heart.  
Smile, Jeanne, smile  
Our family,  
The women in our family, we are stuck in our anger.  
I was angry at my mother

Just like you are angry at me  
And just like my mother was angry at her mother.  
We must end the cycle.  
Jeanne, Simon,  
Where does your story begin?  
At your birth?  
Then it begins with horror.  
At the birth of your father?  
Then it is a great love story.  
But if we go back even further,  
Perhaps we will discover that this love story  
Is rooted in blood and in rape,  
And that in turn,  
The bloodthirsty and the rapist  
Originated in love.  
So,  
When someone asks you about your story,  
Say that your story, its very origin,  
Goes back to the day when a young girl  
Returned to the village where she was born  
To engrave the name of her grandmother, Nazira, on her gravestone.  
That is where the story begins.  
Jeanne, Simon,  
Why didn't I speak to you?  
There are truths that can only be revealed if they are discovered.  
You opened the envelope, you broke the silence.  
Engrave my name on the stone  
And place the stone on my grave.  
Your mother.

SIMON. Jeanne, let me hear her silence again.

*Jeanne and Simon listen to their mother's silence.  
Torrential rain.*