

Jean-Louis McMillan



DESIRE & **PREJUDICE**

Desire & Prejudice

a novella by

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Edited by Michelle Josette

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Formatted by Michelle Josette.

To my wife

Acknowledgements

First I want to thank my editor, Michelle Josette, for so many dedicated hours of editing, revising and discussing the story with me. You edited perfectly, you took the time to understand my story from the very beginning, and you helped to make this book as I meant it to be. Thanks for being my editor and my friend.

There were many others who helped me on my journey. Thank you Steve, Rodney, Amanda, and Trisha. You have each contributed to this story a part of your soul, and it would not be what it is today without your helpful guidance and expertise. Thank you also to my new friends at CritiqueCircle.com for your selfless and insightful critiques of each chapter of my story. Your feedback has been invaluable.

Last but not least, thank you to every reader who has purchased a copy of this book. Thank you for reading – And heartfelt thanks to all who bothered to submit feedback and / or review, each one is so important to me.

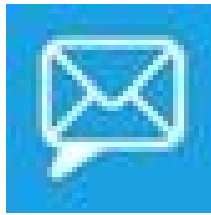


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“It is harder to crack a prejudice than an atom.”

Albert Einstein

Foreword

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or “PTSD”, is a common but extremely serious condition that affects millions of people around the world after they experience a trauma or a life-threatening event.

When a trauma occurs in a person’s life—as it did for both of the characters of this story, Adam and Jasmine—the mental and emotional effects can be minimal to severe, and they can differ from case to case. Some sufferers relive the moment of their trauma over and over again, like Adam did. Other victims may avoid situations that remind them of the trauma, keep up their emotions, or feel generally numb to the experience.

Adam and Jasmine both suffered from clear cases of PTSD. The trauma they experienced was very different, as it is clear from the story, so were their reactions to it.

PTSD is an especially common disorder for military veterans like Adam. It’s important to recognize the symptoms of PTSD, as well as anything that may trigger the disorder.

“If you have experienced severe trauma or a life-threatening event, you may develop symptoms of posttraumatic stress, commonly known as posttraumatic stress disorder, PTSD, shell shock, or combat stress. Maybe you felt like your life or the lives of others were in danger, or that you had no control over what was happening. You may have witnessed people being injured or dying, or you may have been physically harmed yourself” (maketheconnection.net).

I suffered from my own trauma, and the PTSD that followed was nothing short of debilitating. In fact, the most important reason for me to write this story was to overcome the trauma, to rehabilitate my “joie de vivre”—enjoyment of life—and to move forward. It has been a therapy for me.

By reading this story, you are embarking on a journey through my healing with me, and I can never thank you enough.

Sincerely,

Jean-Louis McMillan

Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs, being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes, being vexed, a sea nourished with lovers' tears. What is it else? A madness most discreet, a choking gall and a preserving sweet.

William Shakespeare

Beirut 1989: First Sight

Jasmine sits in the mailroom at the French embassy, sorting her mail. She wears a dark green dress and her thick mahogany hair is let down, cascading past her shoulders. She sits comfortably, with a cup of coffee beside her, her mind in a state of relaxed blankness, unsuspecting, but she looks the part of a goddess. Elegant in her unawareness.

It hasn't been long since she moved into her new home. During the three years following her divorce, Jasmine worked as head secretary at her mother's law firm while living in her parents' house, but when she was told that a job was available at the embassy, she submitted an application and was accepted without difficulty, being that she was a French citizen and the daughter of a respected, well-known family.

Immediately after her first decent check from the embassy, Jasmine found a little house to rent and moved there with her daughters, Nadia and Fuzia. It took no more than two months for her and her daughters to make the little house a home. She adorned each room with flowers, tended the lawn and painted the walls, delighting in her ownership of it.

Adam has just returned from one of his longest professional trips around the Middle East. He arrives early, thinking he'll meet only the security staff so soon in the day, and his first stop is the mailroom, to check his mail. When he enters, Jasmine's presence more than takes him by surprise. He hasn't even noticed her beauty yet, but just the vision of a female figure, wrapped in green, sitting in the room as if she were at home—that's what does it. He imagines immediately that he's entered her living room, yearning for companionship again after going so long without, yearning for the love and touch of a woman. When he looks into the room, it is her delicate grace that he sees: her head tilted back against the sofa; her arms sprawled casually; her lips parted. The lights are low. In Adam's mind, it's as if she'd been there waiting for him.

And then Jasmine turns to him. Her brown eyes open wide and take him in, melting like chocolate in his sight. They freeze, hypnotized, but the messages they send do not. They pass their emotions and their silent dialogue between one another at lightning speed. Jasmine has not prepared for this meeting, nor has Adam. *Don't fall for me*, her eyes tell him. *I'm so damaged*. She wants to scream it at him; her lips shut tight.

Me too, his gaze responds. He can feel her broken soul, and she, his. But still they are silent.

It's as if, to each of them, silently, in this moment, they realize their hearts have been still, and now they've been jolted back to life.

For how long have I been waiting for you? It is said by neither of them, and both.

The moment passes as quickly as it had arrived. Filled with a sudden rush of anxiety, Jasmine stumbles up to a standing position. She wills herself to remember the motion, but she's too wobbly. The coffee tumbles from her hand, streaking the side of her dress with a dark brown stain. She doesn't even notice the heat from the coffee against her skin.

"Oh," she says, a mumble so soft it is hardly heard, and she covers her face in her hands. She can feel her cheeks burn as they fill with blood. Thick, nervous blood, and she had been fine just a moment ago. But though the anxiety is not confusing to her, it is unsettling. Who does this man think he is, to disturb her like this? Who is this man who claims the right to look at her, *into* her, the way that he is?

The warmth in her cheeks burns hotter, no longer from a feeling of shock or even anxiety, but anger. She clears away her expression, looking at him now with blank, beady eyes, without sympathy and she nods curtly, dictating the propriety. She rushes past him in one smooth, quick motion. Like paper caught in a gust of wind.

Jasmine is fuming, blowing through the halls of the embassy, but no one is the wiser. She hides her emotions with a mask of invincibility. *No one can hurt me again*, she thinks subconsciously, not even realizing the fullness of the pain that's still heavy within her. *No one can make me feel anything at all*.

Still, the image of Adam sits like a snapshot at the front of her mind. She turns it over and over again, analyzing its every detail, searching for some flaw to hold against him. *I have it*, she thinks smugly, a smile breaking out across her face. *I don't like the clothes he's wearing*.

Adam stands frozen for a moment longer in the mailroom. He had been gathering his thoughts, his words, to console her about the spilled coffee, but he was too slow. Jasmine had already disappeared like a storm through the corridors. Now his shoulders slump and his head falls down to his chest. He stares at his shirt and his pants, realizing the drabness of their color and texture, the sloppy way they fall over his body. Since Clara left him, and then the events of his own trauma that followed, his attitude has been the least of his concerns.

Jasmine

Jasmine stands still, the day before meeting Adam, facing her mirror and thinking of her damned life. At the same time, she smooths her hands over her shoulders with olive oil, then runs them through her thick mahogany-colored hair, which she has pulled back in a bun. She wears an old white dress which had delighted her when she found it in her mother's house.

She felt like a girl again, so happy that it still fit her. She hadn't brought it to her husband's house; she'd left her girlhood when she married him and bravely stepped into the role of *woman*. This thought makes her laugh now. She wears no bra, and the dark circles of her nipples stick straight out in the dress. *I'm still young*, she tells herself.

She takes a cup of half-drunk coffee and walks out into the garden. She is free. She takes a deep breath, her breasts brushing against the dungaree dress, which tickles her stomach. She feels her head throbbing between her legs. After a long period of numbness, this feeling makes her happy. She loves her own body; for so long she'd felt neglected next to a husband who, out of spite, did not want to touch her. Now she stands in the garden, sipping her coffee slowly, her breath steady inside her lungs.

Jasmine was born in France, where her parents had been a part of the diplomatic corps from the Lebanese embassy in Paris. Her parents were a notable Shiite family, and they managed to obtain her French nationality before their term in France came to an end. That was just after she had completed her elementary school in the country. They all left France together, but Jasmine returned six years later for her degree at Sorbonne University in Paris, where she graduated with honors.

Her father was a moderate Shiite Muslim and followed the Muslim tradition of praying five times a day. He carefully respected the customs of the Ramadan fast, but he appreciated a good whisky and quality wine, and would never refuse a thick slice of ham.

Her mother was and remained a Christian Arab; at this time, more than 40% of the Arab Lebanese were Christian. She was a famous lawyer in Beirut, with a good education from France and Switzerland. She had a big influence on Jasmine and she shaped her character and her ambition.

But like many educated Arabs, despite the father's moderation and the broad education of the mother, both insisted on a traditional education and even a rigorous one for their children, especially with Jasmine; less so with her younger brother.

By the time she was twenty-seven, Jasmine was already a divorced woman with two young daughters. She'd had a very traumatic relationship with her ex-husband, who became an extremist Shiite and one of the leaders of the Hezbollah movement. She had been renounced three years before she met Adam, which was just after the birth of her second daughter, Fuzia.

When Jasmine met her husband, Jamal, he was a university professor, greatly appreciated as a well-known psychiatrist at the hospital where he directed the Psychiatry Department. He loved the good life: jazz music, pubs, and parties. He was far from religious; he didn't keep up with any religious practices and even called himself, more than once, an atheist.

But after three years of marriage, Jamal began to frequent an Islamist group and became more and more religious and, finally, a fanatic Shiite. He joined the Shiite terrorist organization, Hezbollah, but he didn't leave his profession; he used his knowledge of psychology and psychiatry in favor of the terrorist organization; he helped in formulating methods of recruitment, training, and indoctrination of recruits. He became a dominant figure and one of the leaders of the movement.

Simultaneously, an inverted process took place, where he distanced himself from his wife, Jasmine, who slowly became a stranger to him.

Then one morning Jamal came home after a few weeks of absence, while Jasmine was asleep in bed. She was lying down naked on her stomach and only heard noises when he was beside her, looking down at her from above. Without a word, Jamal took off the covers and, in a few seconds, he was on top of her.

His hands closed around her wrists and his legs pressed hard against hers, pinning her to the bed. Hot, acidic panic rose within her, and she tasted bile in her mouth. She was trapped; she didn't want to wake the girls. She tried to free herself, but without success. Jamal was heavy and strong. She reluctantly decided to yield. With his legs, he pushed her legs apart, and without any introduction, he shoved himself straight into her ass. She felt a sharp pain and an even sharper humiliation, and she knew that he intended both.

It was not the first time he had sodomized her. But when he did it in the past, in the "good" times of their marriage, he tried very hard to be gentle; he always asked her nicely and did it tenderly. He prepared her with gentle caresses and plenty of lubrication. When Jasmine was in a good mood, she even took a taste of it sometimes. But she'd always allowed it for the enjoyment of the man she loved and not for herself.

This time was different though. After carrying out his plan, Jamal got up, dressed quickly, and went into the closet. He took a small bag, put a few items in it, and before leaving the house, he said, "Jasmine, I am divorcing you. As of right now you are not my wife anymore."

He left without waiting for Jasmine's reaction and slammed the door behind him.

Jasmine was shocked, to say the least. She took her daughters, Nadia and Fuzia, gathered some clothes, and moved to her parents' house. She couldn't bare to stay one minute longer in her husband's house.

In the first days, she could not get out of bed, did not know how to handle her two daughters alone. Jasmine was unable to tell her mother what had happened and just asked her to take care of the girls because she was sick and unable to do so. So she spent more than ten days moving from the bed to the bathroom where she would throw up, even when she had nothing left in her stomach.

Only a few weeks later, Jasmine looked at her face in the mirror—the one she bought in Paris, in an Indian shop when she was still a girl. The mirror had a wooden carved frame. She looked critically at her face, searching for the signs of aging that had appeared now, just since her husband had raped her.

She always felt younger than her chronological age, but not anymore.

No, marriage hadn't succeeded like she wanted, and for the moment it was like a shadow on her confidence and self-worth. She lost her mischievous spirit, nonchalance, and enthusiasm in exchange for wisdom and prudence. She no longer laughed truly as she had before.

Now, here she is, she lives temporarily, so she hopes, with her parents along with her two daughters in the two rooms that have been assigned to them, trying to revive them with the spirit of carefree living, and love.

From the other side of the door, in her parents' part of the house, dwells the spirit of perpetual care and complaint, without any initiative to change. She is very unhappy with her parents because she has a kind of ambiguous relationship with them. It's not that they don't love her, but they had never really tried to understand her or support her when she had any important problems in her life, not even during her adolescence, and not when she complained about the behavior of her husband. Not even now.

As is common in Arab/Muslim families, the sons attract the attention of the parents; Jasmine's brother was sickly and sensitive, and she grew up in the shadow of their care for him. She was eager for her parents' love and attention. She had only their guiding principle; what to do and what was forbidden to do, where to go and where she couldn't approach. The most important thing for them was her name and her reputation—NO! *Their* reputation.

A deficit of their love shaped her emotional world. That might have been the reason why she was uncertain and why she poured an ocean of pure love on her daughters that anyone could see; they had become self-confident. She enjoyed being available and correcting the mistakes of her parents with her daughters.

Jasmine always loved to refine the space for living and to dream about her own house or apartment where she would live with Nadia and Fuzia, with a large terrace with ivy and stone floors, like in the houses on the sea. When she arrived at her parents' house she was devastated but she tried to be positive and she arranged the garden with love; she planted wild roses, Mediterranean shrubs, and flowers that reminded her of her childhood in her grandmother's house. She bought a large swing and made a stone path.

In her husband's house she couldn't plant any flowers and she couldn't make any modifications inside or outside of the house; her mother-in-law, who had lived in a separate wing in the same house as them, was the one who decided everything for them. Jasmine felt like a guest in her own house throughout her time there, and she noticed she felt the same way now, in her parents' house.

She is certainly saddened by what happened, but she is even more offended now. Her sadness was slowly replaced by anger. Her husband had always used the tactic of humiliation when she contradicted him. She had enough self-confidence to overcome his verbal abuse, but this final insult knocked her flat; it was too much. Rape and abandonment without any reason, without any justification!

In the Muslim world, when a woman is divorced, she is always treated as guilty, even by her parents; everyone around her assumes that the husband must have had some good reason for divorcing

Why? Anyway, since her husband got closer to the religion she felt him not belonging to her anymore. She had simply been thrown out of the ring without a fight.

Still, she doesn't understand it. She is a beautiful woman, a cultured woman with a love for life. A woman who combines the best of the eastern passion and the European urban chic. She was always a virtuous Muslim Lebanese woman, now out of her husband's house, but with no inhibitions as a French woman would have with her husband; she realized all of his desires, even the weirdest ones without hesitation. In her veins flows a blood full of life and passion. Her skin is still soft and tanned, her round breasts still young and firm.

But we had two beautiful girls. Is it a woman whom one leaves?

The confusion makes her sick and brings her back to her trauma which she relives over and over again with precision at the moments of semi-consciousness. To escape from it, she restricts herself inward, as a shell. The fear of reliving the trauma paralyzes her. Fears are like chains that lock you right in the place where you are most vulnerable.

Despite her strong desire of reliving normally and fully, and the confidence that she has with herself, still, ebbing and flowing, she crushes her desires and her wishes, for fear of falling into a relationship that will decline her as a human being as did the one with her husband. She equips herself with an arsenal of masks; masks of lightness, nonchalance, seduction, and joy. She is untouchable, and she uses the masks as needed.

Jasmine insists on showing the outside world that she lives a normal and even intense life; she is always smiling, always the first to jump on a dance floor when the opportunity arises, or even to grab a microphone and sing in Arabic, English, or French. The traumatic situation that she lived internally does not prevent her from being attractive and almost provocative when she's had a couple of drinks.

However, all of this extroverted behavior is nothing more than a show. She plays the happy, liberated, provocative woman, but all of this is a game. She doesn't let any man approach her intimately, and of course, so many of them are attracted to her beauty. But she doesn't trust them. She doesn't want a man to control her life and her feelings anymore. She prefers solitude to the humiliating presence of a man beside her.

But at night, brooding in her bed alone, everything emerges to the surface—sometimes sadness, sometimes a longing of her young body for closeness and the desire she feels deep within her. It pains her, a physical and mental pain.

Sometimes she feels a huge desire for a man to take her, to break her ugly past into tiny pieces, to erase all of her dark emotions.

Some people in your life touch you so very deeply that you drown totally in that depth

Amit Abraham

Nightmares

But why am I in such a good mood? Jasmine asks herself not once, or twice, but throughout the remainder of the day. *I should still be angry at that man. I am angry.* And she feels that she is, yet she walks briskly, smiling, her arms relaxed and swinging by her sides. When she climbs the stairs, she finds herself singing a well-known song by the famous Feiruz. At the end of the day, she tightens her scarf that's wrapped around her dress to conceal the coffee stain, and hurries home.

Adam has a more difficult time adjusting to normal life since their encounter though. He feels abnormally sensitive, like all of his emotions have risen up in him and are boiling just beneath the surface. He can *feel* his emotions inside of him. The heaviness of them. The trembling. The sight of her eyes burns through him. He had been numb to his surroundings, even to women—to everything but his work—for more than five years. Without closeness or intimacy. Without the love of a wife. Without the tenderness of children. Jasmine's arrival was jarring, to say the least. Her presence was a sudden jolt in his life, like the sound of his alarm each morning which shakes him out of his mindless dreams, and into wakefulness.

Adam has gone so long without feeling anything, and now his heart is about to explode.

It isn't only his feelings that arise suddenly, but an insatiable hunger for bodily touch, an uncontrollable desire for closeness and contact with this stranger. He dreams of her all day, his body and heart longing for her. He thinks about her tenderly, lovingly, and carnally. He imagines himself making love to her, kissing her deeply, tasting her and inhaling her most intimate perfumes. Yes, he who generally avoids kissing of all kinds throughout casual sex, now it's the act which haunts his imagination the most. The mixture of lips and tongues, an act more intimate, more precious, than the most bestial forms of sexual contact.

Adam is awake from emotional slumber.

But a love between them will be difficult, if not impossible, to realize. Between Adam's position at the embassy and Jasmine's social rank and her status as a divorced Muslim woman, being caught together could cost him his job, and Jasmine could lose custody of her daughters—not to mention, she could lose the respect of almost anyone who knows her. A Muslim man can marry four wives, and there is nothing and no one to say that his wives should be Muslim or not. However, a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim man and certainly cannot be in an extra-marital relationship with him—she would be risking her reputation, and her life.

The evening unwinds, and Adam turns off the light in his bedroom and pulls down the covers. He crawls beneath them, his body burning with desire for a woman, for Jasmine, for the first time since he can remember. He shakes with longing, afraid he might not sleep tonight, okay with the fact that he probably won't. He reaches his hand between his legs and feels himself, strong and hard, and his heart races in his chest. With every stroke of his fist, he thinks of Jasmine.

And then he sleeps, his nightmares overtaking his dreams, the events of that traumatic day playing again and again in his subconscious.

5:38 am

Adam groaned as he picked up the phone, annoyed by the shrill sound of its ringing. He recognized Walid's voice on the other end of the line, even though the man sounded choked and tense.

Walid was one of the most trusted and reliable whisperers that the General Directorate for External Security ([DGSE*](#))—France's external intelligence agency—had; maybe the best the region had ever had. He lived in Damascus. His reports and information were always accurate. Most importantly though, he was related to the person directly responsible for the Syrian army and his protégé's operations outside Syria, essentially in Lebanon. Adam knew the matter was urgent when Walid didn't say so much as a "hello" to him.

Adam did not interrupt as he spoke.

Walid identified himself with the common code. "This morning," he explained, "maybe even this very moment, there will be a huge terrorist attack against the Multi National Forces in Beirut, carefully planned by Iran and Syria, who want the MNF out of Lebanon. I do not know exactly the target place, but it must be a crowded one."

Adam, listening intently, did not immediately respond because he was trying to figure out what to do and how to do it. The information was now a bomb ticking in his hands.

"Give me as many details as you can," Adam said. "When, exactly?"

"I don't know," was the answer, "but I know they are on their way, perhaps from the Beqaa; that's about 90 kilometers from Beirut and could take two hours by truck. I don't know anything else...uh...yeah," he hesitated. "Hezbollah is at the head of this." Then, without warning, Walid hung up.

Adam dressed and called the supervisor of security at the embassy. He updated him as briefly as possible and asked him to inform the commander of French forces in Lebanon immediately. Then he called his correspondent at the CIA to brief him and asked him to meet in an hour at the Marine headquarters, near the airport.

"But first," Adam said, "I need to stop by the French paratrooper's lodges."

5:52 am

Adam slammed the door and began to drive as fast as the car would take him, his foot pressing the gas pedal against the floor. There were only a few other cars on the road at this hour, and they all pulled over to the side of the road to get out of his way, honking in protest as he passed.

I'll never get there in time, he thought. He was headed to Ramlet al-Baida, home of the French paratroopers' headquarters. His arrival was a matter of life or death.

6:18 am

By the time he arrived, his engine had almost overheated and the smell of burning rubber filled the air as he hit the brakes. His car squealed to a stop near the entrance of an old, depressing building called 'Drakkar'. It had served many purposes over the years and was now being used to house the French paratroopers, members of the Multinational Force in Lebanon.

Adam didn't wait for the guards to open the gate. He jumped out of his car, not even bothering to turn off the engine. The guards recognized him and nodded him in.

"The officer in charge," Adam said sharply. "Is he awake?" He didn't wait for an answer before continuing, "Where can I find him?"

But the ground began to shake before the officer had a chance to reply.

6:20 am

"Hit the alarm!" Adam yelled to the watch commander, but it was futile. Most of the French soldiers were already leaving their rooms to see what was going on. Adam looked up and saw some paratroopers standing on the balcony above him. They were pointing to a column of smoke rising from another barracks a few miles away.

"The Marines! The American Marines!" one of them yelled. "Their building was hit!" Adam's head nearly stopped as he thought about the meeting he had planned with his CIA contact. Remembering the information he was given earlier that morning, he sprang into action.

"Take cover!" His shout was deep and throaty. Urgent. He repeated himself in French, Arabic, and English, the words tumbling out of him in hurried succession.

As he was running toward the door to help at the Marine barracks, he heard another loud explosion; the blast so powerful it knocked him to the ground. The building he had just been standing in had suddenly collapsed like Jenga pieces. Debris fell from the sky, dropping like cannonballs. But glass and stone weren't the only things mixed in with falling debris; hands, feet, and other body parts landed all around him. He wasn't sure if the blood dripping from his face was his or that of one of the soldiers who had, just a few seconds ago, been standing on the balcony above him.

His hearing was already nearly gone and he had lost conscious control of his body. Even though he couldn't feel anything, though, he knew he was wounded. He closed his eyes. *Breathe*, he told himself. *You just need to breathe.*

After a few shallow breaths, he lifted his head from the sidewalk and opened his eyes, immediately wishing he hadn't. Directly in front of him sat the decapitated head of a young soldier. Had he wanted or been able to shut his eyes, it would have been impossible. It was as if the soldier's body was buried in the concrete and only his head had emerged from the ground. The eyes were open and stared lifelessly into Adam's.

As though a flip had been switched, he suddenly recognized those eyes; they belonged to the watch commander with whom he had just been talking. The image and situation struck him hard, but he couldn't look away. Time froze, the two faces staring with a blankness that only horror can etch into

skin, a momentary state for one of them, but for the rest of time for the other.

6:30 am

When Adam could finally move again, he unearthed himself from the rubble that had fallen on him and scrambled to his feet. The silence gave way to a persistent ringing, a dull piercing sound which was hardly loud enough to cover the screams that filled the air. His heart was heavy. How he longed to help the injured soldiers who were crying, shouting, and begging for help, but he was in shock—physical, mental, debilitating shock—and his body refused to respond.

But, somehow, he found himself walking to his car, which had managed to remain in one piece, and then he was sitting next to his car on the sidewalk. His heart drummed furiously, and he was sure he was having a heart attack. His face collapsed into the filthy cradle of his hands, and he willed it to happen; he deserved to die alongside the soldiers he had failed to save on time.

6:38 am

A blurred faintness of flickering lights and soft but rushed voices swirled around him, and Adam felt himself being raised into an ambulance. Paramedics, he thought helplessly, wishing they had just left him to die. He wanted to tell them that he was fine, not hurt, but he couldn't make a sound, and then the ambulance was driving him to the hospital with four severely wounded soldiers, and Adam relented.

The sirens grew louder over the subsiding ringing in his ears. He closed his eyes and allowed the noise to nearly hypnotize him. In the tight stillness, images from his childhood flooded his memory. His mother, his father. The last days before his family left Algeria.

The ambulance arrived at the hospital, and Adam managed to slip away while the medical staff tended to the more serious injuries. He hailed a cab.

“Take me to the French embassy!” Adam demanded, ignoring the look of fear and disgust on the driver's face when he handed him the money smeared with blood and dirt, his hand shaking from the shock he was still experiencing. He gripped his trembling hand in a fist and shoved it into his pocket.

When he entered the embassy, ignoring the questions that were being hurled at him like stones, he walked straight to the nearest bathroom. No one was following, as far as he could tell, but he locked the door behind him just in case. He stood at the small sink and began cleaning away the blood, dirt, and sloughs of charred skin which had clung to every part of him. He stared down at the pink water as it swirled into the drain, and he tried to digest everything that had happened.

*The General Directorate for External Security (Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure or DGSE) is the France external intelligence agency. (Wikipedia)

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~~The enormity of the disaster didn't become clear until the following day.~~

There had been two terrorist attacks targeting the American and French troops in Beirut; separate Shiite (Hezbollah) car bombings had targeted both the U.S. Marines and the French paratroopers. Among several wounded individuals, 241 Americans and 58 French had died.

Years later, Adam wasn't able to shake the feeling that he hadn't done enough to prevent the terrible tragedy in Beirut. Guilt and the horrible things he had seen took over his life. They occupied his thoughts during the day and haunted his dreams at night.

Joe Ciokon was a former Navy journalist who was sleeping next door to the Marine barracks in Beirut the morning of the suicide attack and was ordered to record the scene with his camera. Speaking of post-trauma, he said, "You learn to live with it; it's never gotten easier."

The dead gaze of fear in the soldier's decapitated eyes continued to haunt Adam in his frequent nightmares. The eyes looked at him in the dark and accused him of his inaction. The head would sometimes talk to him—angry, incoherent words—and Adam would jump out of bed trying to escape. Each time, he would freeze, just as he froze then.

Adam became a hermit; he avoided, as much as possible, personal relationships with people outside of work. The friendships he'd had before the disaster faded into nonexistence, and he extracted himself from the vibrant social life of the diplomatic corps.

For five years he stayed single. He felt no emotional urges, so he didn't bother to enter into any serious relationships. Even the absence of his wife, Clara, and his children, did not bother him anymore, and his longing dimmed. Whenever he was around people, he felt disconnected and more alone than he felt when he was actually alone.

All signs showed that Adam suffered from severe PTSD but he refused to admit it and tried his best to hide it from his social and professional environments. He settled for casual sex on the rare occasions that he felt any sexual urges. Sex became more and more a mechanical vent for tension after which he would ask the girl on duty to leave. Sometimes he was so disgusted and disconnected with himself that he couldn't even walk them to the door. He refused to spend the night with anyone; he was afraid of someone seeing or hearing his nightmares, and besides, he was more comfortable just being alone.

Despite the growing detachment from his social life, Adam tried hard to convey, particularly in his work, that everything was business as usual. His worst fear was that one of his superiors would notice the change in his behavior and transfer him to a boring clerical job in Paris, the jobs that most of the employees in the DGSE (as well as in all the rest of the world's intelligence organizations) were doing.

Adam worked harder than ever, both to hide his growing handicap and to distract himself from having too much free time to think about that damned day.

Wherever there is danger, there lurks opportunity; wherever there is opportunity, there lurks danger. The two are inseparable.

Earl Nightingale

Virtual Lust

Adam's fortieth birthday arrives sooner than he'd have liked it to. His eyes peel open and he turns his head toward the window, at the piercing crack of light that tries to seep its way through the dusty blinds. The dust seems to scatter about the room, hanging in the still air of the sunlight, and suddenly everything looks too bright. He shuts his eyes tightly.

It's been three weeks since Adam saw Jasmine for the first time. He saw her again the next day, around the same time, in the same mailroom, everything the same. But still, it was different. He was not surprised to see her there, and he wasn't nervous—at least, he didn't show it. And Jasmine didn't look angry to see him again, but relaxed, even pleased. Or was that just Adam's wishful thinking? He hadn't been sure.

Adam had reached his hand toward hers, and to his surprise, she reached back. Their palms touched but not their fingers, and then he said, "I'm Adam."

"I know," she replied, and Adam simply smiled. He hadn't been sure how she knew his name, perhaps he'd been mentioned in a conversation since she'd started work at the embassy. He hadn't even been sure of *her* name yet, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered, really, except for the faint blush on her cheeks, her parted lips, the sheet of dark hair that spilled over her shoulders. Her warm hand in his. She didn't say anything else, and neither did he.

Adam slipped his hand from hers and reached for one of Jasmine's letters. He grabbed a pen from his shirt pocket and scribbled, lightly, his phone number. He noticed the blush in her cheeks as he darkened, but not another word was said. She nodded, tucking the letter into her purse.

He would find out her name, her number and her e-mail address, some other way.

They crossed paths only occasionally afterward, and without much acknowledgement. Each time they saw each other, though, that same electric energy—the energy that flowed so swimmingly between them during their first encounter—returned. And each time, the strength of its shock increased. Adam knew it within himself, he knew fully the effect she had on him, and he started to wonder if Jasmine knew it too, within herself. Did she feel it, the way that he did?

He's lonely this morning, thinking not of himself, not of his fortieth birthday—another birthday of the long line of birthdays spent alone in his bed—but of Jasmine. Where is she? What is she doing at this very moment?

Then the buzz of his cell phone snaps him fully awake. He expects a message from his mother, but the first message in his inbox is, instead, from Jasmine. His eyes glass over and his head feels foggy. *Am I dreaming?* He shakes his head quickly and pulls his eyebrows up, making sure he's seeing things right.

Hello, the subject reads. Adam traces the letters with his eyes, slowly, left to right, then he does it once again. *From: Jasmine*. He opens the message and it says, breezily: *Happy Birthday, Adam*. And then, beneath it, stretching the simple pleasantry into a request for further, actual conversation: *How are you?*

When he's finally realized it's reality, he throws the covers off of him and walks over to his computer. He feels a rush of energy building up in his stomach, an energy that spreads—no, *bursts*—from the pit of his core to his outer limbs. He feels the energy tickle his toes and sting along the edges

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