

'LA MIMOSA'

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A Story

by

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The engineer and I walked up the hill from the sea, slowly, to prevent ourselves sweating. We were dressed in silk shirts and shorts, with white handkerchiefs knotted at each corner on our heads. We walked up to the studded door of La Mimosa, in sunshine that was absolutely white and blinding against the stone wall.

The engineer was a smaller man than me, and plumper. He had a strong flushed face and pouting lips, and when he spoke he tended to snap his words out, with his chin thrust forward. His stride was hurried and rather ungainly, his feet pointing outwards and rising with each step as if he were treading things down in front of him. He seemed to say to himself, "I have more important things to think of in life than grace of movement."

He liked to talk a great deal, especially about politics, architecture, military strategy and engineering, and he was a warm talker. He paid little attention to his clothes, but he kept himself very clean. Every day he used to wash himself down outside his tent, and I would sit on the grass talking to him. He would tell me about his wife, what a fighter she was, and how she disliked weak habits in a man, -- heavy smoking, for instance. She had not yet come out to join him at the camp.

His manners were robust, deliberately so: he found any

kind of effete behaviour distasteful; he was himself the son of a quite wealthy manufacturer in the north of England, who had sent him into the mills as a child, to work among the poor, as a kind of hard grooming for the world. Thus, the engineer took up rather a defiant and brusque attitude, finding weaknesses in other people too easily, as if he wished to prove above all that there was nothing soft in him, and that his feet were very firmly on the earth. I used to sit on the grass watching him as he shivered and rubbed himself all over, talking and laughing. I remember the thin black hair over his chest and shoulders, and on the back of his hands. In his presence I felt, not a child, but a kind of youthful talkative buck, a son even, but a son very much in his father's confidence. For I knew he did not look on me as soft. I was barely twenty-two at this time, and he must have been well over thirty, so that between us there was a crucial gap of experience.

The door opened in the dark recess and we walked into the shadows, where at first we could see nothing. One of the waiters clad in white closed the door behind us, and one of the girls on the other side of the room jumped up from her chair and came across to us. Her name was Badia. The great thick mauve curtains were drawn right across the windows, and the lights were on. There were three or four girls sitting in the armchairs at the other end, where the cubicles were. Everything was still in this room, and every noise seemed smothered, because of the thick Persian carpet, the soft armchairs and settees, and the curtain. Badia shook us both by the hand, smiling, and we sat down before one of the little coffee-tables. We knew her far better than we knew the others, since we found it easier to talk to her. We stretched out our legs, getting as much as possible of the breeze from the whirring fans above us, while the sweat poured down from our brows, our

arm-pits and from between our legs. This breeze from the fan was cool and hot by turns, but it was an extraordinary relief after our long walk through the streets at the edge of the sea.

Badia was of French-Arab extraction, a Christian, while most of the other girls were from Moslem families. Above all, she enjoyed talking to the engineer. The moment they sat down they began talking quietly to each other, while the rest of us hardly moved in our chairs. They talked about the politics of the country, about the latest coup d'etat and the imprisonment of the former prime minister and his favourite, a mere lackey with a fine face, and Badia nodded slowly as the engineer told her his point of view; everything he said she seemed to reflect over, very seriously. There was an air of the queen about her, a special pallor and stillness, as if she were a great distance from us, in breeding and even body, so that her gaze could sometimes be most disturbing, so full of knowledge, so cool and utterly calm. Her eyes were rather large for her face, and their depth was emphasised by her pallor. She was not really pretty, much less beautiful, but there was some kind of strange twist in her features, perhaps about the mouth, which made one want to watch her in silence and to be with her. The other girls were especially polite to her, in deference to her slow aloofness.

The previous evening I had chosen her from among five girls. There was a mute thoughtfulness in her face, as if she had suffered too much, and as if she knew too much about the world. It seemed an insult to touch her. The previous evening she and I had been away from our armchairs for hardly more than five or ten minutes, and then I had left the cubicle feeling that I had done nothing more significant than alter the position of my legs, and that I had never in fact been close to her. When she was in her armchair again,

dressed, her hair combed and a little scent sprayed on the nape of her neck and behind her ears, she was once more erect, withdrawn, alone and proud, as she had been before. In the cubicle I had more or less obeyed her will, and she had simulated warmth, half convincing me and half not, but always in command, watching and biding her time, then deciding for me.

A thin white shaft of sunlight came on to the carpet from a space between the curtains, so that our eyes, staring drowsily down, shone with the reflection in the hot half-darkness. The long, softly carpeted room seemed altogether without desire, but full of a wistful, quiet dreaming, where there were no bodies, only thoughts. We talked, the five of us, as if we had all been children together, and our words flowed out easily from the most private imaginable memories.

After some time a young Frenchman who worked as an official at the port came in, hardly disturbing the hot half-sleep into which the five of us seemed to have fallen, a sleep with words and calm smiles. Badia turned in her chair and nodded to him as he stood silently by the door. He bowed to her, a slim, pale young man, very shy-looking, but he did not glance at the rest of us. Badia called out, "Samia!" in the direction of the kitchen, while he continued to wait, standing. I had seen him once before, on the previous evening, and he had sat at the other end of the room, quite apart from everyone else, with the youngest and quietest of the girls on his knees. They seemed hardly to talk to each other, but simply gazed into each other's eyes, stroking each other lightly with the tips of their fingers, and kissing each other on the brow, seldom on the lips. Now, when Samia came from the kitchen, she went straight across to him at the door, altogether disregarding the rest of us, and hand-in-hand they walked to the same armchair as they had used

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the night before. The girls who were talking to the engineer and myself did not smile, but seemed quite accustomed to this behaviour. One of them saw me watching the couple.

"They are in love," she told me. "He wants to marry her."

I leaned forward and asked her why they never went into one of the cubicles.

"Because he can't do it," she said. "But he is in love with her. I have never seen two people more in love."

And when I looked across at him again I did see a certain passive delicacy in him, making his face seem unduly tender, and unduly hurttable. I did not like to feel that he feared us all, especially the engineer and myself, both of whom he had seen go into the cubicles on the previous evening. Yet he was so cheerful with the girl on his knee, so lovingly absorbed in her, that he must have been able to shut that fear out. I saw him run the tips of his fingers down her nose, slowly, with a look that was full of pride, pride in her existence, celebrating her awful nearness to him.

I turned away, not wanting to embarrass him, and clapped my hands for one of the waiters in the kitchen. After a few moments he came, and I ordered coffee for the engineer and myself. I noticed that one of the girls, sitting next to Badia, was staring at me as I did so. She it was I had watched on the previous evening.

The waiter bent down and asked me, "Will you have milk?"

I thought for a moment, then said, "Yes, bring me white coffee."

The girl smiled across at me when I said this. She leaned her head back against the armchair and smiled drowsily, gazing at me, her eyes narrow, almost closed. Then she asked me, "Do you want milk?" She put her hand under her breast and lifted it slightly, then said, "I have milk."

She had pure, delicate Arab features, a slim face and black hair down to her shoulders; especially her eyes were fine.

I smiled at her and pointed towards one of the cubicles: "After the coffee."

The previous evening we had hardly spoken to each other, and I only remember that a French policeman from the port had come in and ordered her into one of the cubicles straight away. I was heavy and drowsy with the heat, but I wanted to go with her now because I could not forget the expression in her eyes. It seemed to me that we needed the privacy of one of the cubicles in order to stare more closely into each other's faces, much as the silent couple were doing at this moment. I could never have believed that this girl only wanted money, because of the tenderness of her smile, which had happened so suddenly, the moment the waiter had mentioned milk. During that moment our eyes met and we understood each other, in a smile that was altogether unsalacious. She leaned her head back again, watching me, her slim body stretched out in her chair.

Badia got up and said, "I must help with the coffee."

None of the other girls visited the kitchen, except Samia, who helped with the cooking. Only Badia seemed to want to take full responsibility for the guests. If she liked their company, as she liked the engineer's, she would see that the waiters looked after them and did not bring them dirty cups or weak coffee. In all this she behaved with wonderful grace, very formal and withdrawn.

"Are you taking her?" the engineer asked me, pointing to the girl who had just smiled at me. I nodded, and he added: "She is very beautiful. But I'm not interested in beauty."

I told him that he liked Badia, and he said, "Yes. I can talk to her. I can imagine being with her for whole hours together. I can imagine her looking after me. What does beauty mean,

*compared with that?"*

I had forgotten which of the girls he had taken on the previous evening. But the experience did not please him. He came back to his seat looking stern. He wanted to get away as soon as possible. He was peremptory with the waiters when they came, barking out his orders and stamping his feet. People were usually in great awe of him when he was like this, and they tended to bustle round him, especially if they were servants. He had small, fierce eyes under bushy eyebrows, and one did not begrudge such eyes a feeling of awe, because there was warmth and mercy in them as well, never steeliness. He had a patriarchal, hot fury. He told me no more than that his experience in the cubicle had amounted to "nothing or as good as nothing."

But this afternoon there was no fury in him. He was leaning back in his chair talking remniscently and waiting for Badia to return from the kitchen with our coffee.

When she had sat down again and the coffee was before us on the little tables, he asked her why she had ever come here, to La Mimosa. She did not answer at once. Her gaze continued to be distant, altogether devoid of any private message to other people. Even though she looked you in the eyes, you did not feel that you were being looked at so much as watched, even judged, or simply stared through as a carpet is stared through by thoughtful, adult eyes.

She told us that it was just work for her. That work had nothing to do with the body, much less with her desires, for she allowed herself no pleasure. I remembered how she had whispered urgently to me, to finish it, and I had instantly obeyed her.

The other girl who had smiled at me told her something in

a low voice, and Badia said to me, "She wants you to go with her. She has fallen in love with you."

"Let me finish my coffee," I answered. Then I turned to the engineer and asked him, "What will you do?" But he only shrugged. I finished my coffee and got up slowly. I walked across to the other girl and drew her by the hand to her feet, and together we went into one of the cubicles. Before we closed the door the Madame, a silent, middle-aged woman, came in and I payed her.

When we were alone again the girl turned away from me and began taking off her dress. She lay down naked on the bed and looked up at me with the same tender, rather wondering smile I had seen in the other room. She lay with her legs open and her arms held out on either side, offering herself up, as if her body were of no account whatsoever. I did not feel shame as I gazed at her, but a kind of smothered self-reproval, that no man should see another being in this way, desiring and yet not desiring, a stranger yet not a stranger, a lover and yet by no means a lover. Only in her face were there still the tender messages she had passed to me in smiles not long before. Her gaze was the same, her mouth the same: but her body was without any meaning for me.

I lay down over her, and she drew my head towards hers, gripping me at the back of the neck. From that moment, until we left the room, she became only touch for me. She became anyone, and universal. Her face became great eyes, her hair a dark, hot expanse in my face, her lips quite nameless, merely wet and receiving, belonging to anyone. From the moment we touched each other we became strangers. When I grew excited, she pushed back my head with the palm of her hand against my brow and said to me with a smile, "What is the matter? You are like a snake." I asked her, "Why a

snake?" and she replied, "You are so long and writhing, like a snake with a white skin." We discovered each other's strangeness, no more. It is rare that two strangers are joined by a sudden, engulfing familiarity, issuing from the dark, speechless places beyond the world, like miracles. She watched me go through the ridiculous mimicries of passion, for there was little desire in me, and she watched me with the same cool gaze when I underwent my nameless secretion. We got up from the bed, and I wondered why it had been necessary for us to move from our chairs in the other room, where at least we had been able to smile at each other.

The engineer and Badia were still talking when we returned to the other room. There was the same heavy, reminiscent air, shorn of all desire, in this place. He was lolling back in his chair, smiling as he told her the end of a story about a job of his in Caucasia. They spoke very quietly. When we walked into the room it was like coming back into a temple, suddenly withdrawn from noise and people into a half-dark hallowed stillness, where no appetites could be quickened or even recognised. I took the girl's hand and helped her into a chair, then I walked across to my own. Badia did not look up at me, and the engineer only nodded briefly, still in the silent aftermath of his story. The girl I had been with now seemed tired. She looked up at the main door now and then, waiting for newcomers. Badia was leaning forward, looking down at the nails of her right hand, about to ask the engineer another question. But she did not speak.

After a long silence he bent towards her and whispered something. She nodded, and he took a wallet from his pocket. She took several notes from him and went into the kitchen, not calling out for the Madame as the girls usually did. He watched her as she walked away with a half-stern, half-smiling expression.

When she returned he got up, and together they left the room and went along the corridor to one of the furthest cubicles. The girl opposite me had closed her eyes, and I too stretched in my chair, wanting to sleep. The young Frenchman was still whispering to his girl in the corner, and the silence continued for more than half-an-hour, as if each of us were paralysed within it, transfixed into the motionless furniture of the world, mere things which happened to breathe.

Suddenly there was a noise behind us, the door of the distant cubicle burst open, and the girl opposite me started. We could hear the engineer's quick, loud step down the corridor, and his cough. I turned round to watch him enter the room. He was very awake now. He looked straight into my eyes, and his gaze seemed to tell me, "I have just had a triumph." He walked quickly to his seat again, then clapped his hands and shouted, "Boy! Boy!" At once the waiter came hurrying from the kitchen, and the engineer gave him his order with fierce relish, "Bring me black coffee, the blackest coffee you have ever made!"

He no longer leaned back in his chair, but tapped his feet nervously on the floor, bent forward with his elbows on his knees. He turned to me quickly.

"I made her enjoy it," he said. "She struggled a bit, she cried, but I made her enjoy it. I broke her down in the end."

The other girl was watching him strangely, her mouth a little open. The young Frenchman had risen and was saying good-bye to his lover. There was a noise from the kitchen, as the boys hurried to and fro. Everything now seemed bustle and noise. All the stillness had gone, all the drowsiness had left our eyes. It was as if his sudden entrance had brought the whole world tumbling back into our tomb-like room. He was twiddling his thumbs round

and round as he tapped his feet, whistling softly to himself.

When Badia came she was no longer a queen. She came back to the room like a child, shy and unwilling to enter the company of strangers. She looked about the room nervously from the doorway. She walked with her shoulders slightly bowed, her hair was still dishevelled, and it was easy to see that she had been weeping. No longer was she in command here, no longer the capable one who liked to take responsibility for her guests, no longer the sensible talker, watching coolly from a distance. She glanced down at me quickly, then went across to the kitchen. Even her body seemed to have changed. For while previously it had been slow and graceful and erect, all its movements measured, so that not a gesture seemed by chance or whim, now it was the body of a wife, easy and loose, quite free now, given up without any resistance of will to pleasure. In the kitchen she began calling out to the boys to hurry with the coffee, then a few moments later she brought in the tray herself. She set it down in front of the engineer and looked him full in the eyes, and the gaze they shared cancelled out all the rest of the room and pronounced a moment only they of all the people in the world had known.

She sat down again and glanced about her quickly, looking for something to do. She asked me whether I was comfortable, but without any aloofness in her expression: she looked at me with her eyebrows raised, very young now, her eyes absolutely genuine and open. She touched the engineer's arm and asked him for a cigarette. He took the case from his pocket, chose one carefully, then put it to her lips. The moment he had finished his coffee she clapped her hands and told the boy to take away the cups. She did not trouble to comb her hair or straighten her dress; she no longer seemed to pay any attention to herself, but behaved with a warm,

rather carefree naturalness, flushed and keen-eyed.

We all talked more loudly now, our words rushing in upon each other, and we laughed constantly. The young Frenchman left, and his girl came to join us, telling Badia in French all he had said to her. Badia was lively and talkative as I had never seen her before. All the room followed her mood: the place was no longer full of statues, and it seemed to me that in the last few moments, since the engineer had burst from the cubicle at the end of the corridor, true blood had come back into our veins. Where we sat was no longer a temple, in hallowed stillness, with everyone a watcher, erect and withdrawn, but a room at last with men and women, close together and endlessly talking, full of desires.

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