

The Cleopatra Club

by

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#1405

1501 Broadway

NYC 10036

212.3919010

CHARACTERS

THOMAS, in his sixties

MARK, in his sixties

COL. ZIADEH, forty

HUSSEIN AL-BAN, sixty

ISMET, twenty-five

ACT ONE

Scene One

Evening.

A luxury hotel bar in Cairo. Empty tables and a piano.

Mark, at the bar, reads a packet of printed materials while the Bartender washes glasses. He jots down notes on a small pad.

Thomas and Ismet enter.

Thomas: As I live and breathe.

Mark: *(folds pad, tucks it away)* I was looking for you.

Thomas: This is Ismet. She's my translator. Actually, our translator.

Mark: Enchante. *(they greet)*

Thomas: Would you like anything?

Ismet: *(to Bartender)* Tea.

Mark: Ah yes, no drinking.

Thomas: Actually, she's Christian. Copt.

Ismet: Tea.

Thomas: Not all Christians drink.

Ismet: I'm working.

The Bartender waits for their order.

Mark: Vodka Gimlet. Without ice. *(to Thomas)* You can't be too careful.

Thomas: Johnny Walker. Black. *(to Mark)* I saw you on the plane. You passed me. You were fiddling with something.

Mark: How was it up there?

Thomas: Where?

Mark: First class.

Thomas: Where were you?

Mark: I cashed my ticket in for coach.

Thomas: You paid for the booze?

Mark: I brought my own. *(explains)* You save those miniatures and fill them up at home. You buy the first one, then you substitute ones you brought. Did I say glass bottles? They're plastic now. It's more convenient. No breakage.

Thomas: And they don't catch you?

Mark: You get some looks. That's true.

Thomas: You have your own funnel? To pour the booze in the little bottles.

Mark: Yes.

Thomas: At home?

Mark: Domesticity has its rewards.

Thomas: You always were a tidy one.

Mark: If cleanliness is next to Godliness, then tidying up is a little act of prayer.

Thomas: Did you just make that up or were you saving it?

Mark: I was saving it.

Bartender brings drinks.

Ismet: I'll wait in the lobby.

Thomas: We've been rude.

Mark: Please stay.

Thomas: You're safe with us.

Ismet: You have things to talk about. I have a book to read.

She exits. They watch her go.

Thomas: Ah, youth. *(to Mark)* The reason I was looking for you...

Mark hands the Bartender a slip of paper.

Thomas: What is that?

Mark: A chit. A chit for drinks. Good for one free drink. It came with the packet. Didn't they give you a packet?

Thomas: I'm the honoree.

Mark: You didn't get a packet?

Thomas: How many chits in the packet?

Mark: *(looks)* One.

Thomas: That seems a little parsimonious.

Mark: *(rechecks)* Only one.

Thomas: Cheers.

Mark: To old times.

They clink glasses, drink. Mark winces, turns to Bartender.

Mark: What is in this drink?

Bartender: Vodka and lime juice.

Mark: No, no, a Vodka Gimlet, a proper British Vodka Gimlet, is made with Rose's Lime juice. Not squeezed lime juice. *(to Thomas)* This was a British colony, you think they would know how to make a British drink.

Thomas: Before his time, no doubt.

Mark: "The Veiled Protectorate." That's what it was called.

Bartender: Would you like another drink?

Mark: If you please. A Vodka Gimlet without ice, without lime.

Bartender: Without lime?

Mark: Yes.

Bartender: Not a slice?

Mark: Not a slice, not a squeeze, not a dollop. Have any nuts?

Bartender: Olives.

The Bartender reaches for his glass. Mark knocks back the drink, hands him the empty glass.

Thomas: The reason I was looking for you, the reason is...did you get the petition I sent?

Mark: What petition?

Thomas: I left it at the front desk. Here's the story: Have you heard of a film "The Edge of Love"? (*Mark shakes head.*) Arabic language film, Egyptian film-maker, Idries Kalid. It's a love story of a Palestinian man and Jewish woman, set in London. They meet in a museum. Their strifes, strains, they break up, get back together. It's a metaphor. It was shown at the London Film Festival.

Mark: You saw it there?

Thomas: No, it was written up. The film-maker went on record, at a press conference, supporting the normalization of relations between Israel and Palestine. It was to be shown here but now it's been banned. They're circulating a petition—I'm surprised you didn't get it—protesting the ban. There's also an Arabic version. I asked Ismet to translate it. I'm planning to read the petition at my press conference, along with the names of the signers. Your name should be on the list.

Mark: But I haven't seen the film.

Thomas: It's not the film, it's the principle of the thing.

Mark: I don't know...

Thomas: You'll think about it?

Mark: You have a press conference?

Thomas: Tomorrow morning.

Mark: (*lifts glass*) Congratulations. On being honored.

Thomas: I'm at that stage. In life.

Mark: You came alone?

Thomas: All on my lonesome.

Mark: No Assistant? No publicist? No significant other?

Thomas: All on my lonesome.

Mark: (*receives drink*) Cheers to that. (*clink glasses*) They didn't offer you a second airfare?

Thomas: I declined.

Mark: Declined?

Thomas: Did you ever have a defining moment? "*Un moment decisive.*" A few seconds, a blink of the eye, where your life seems in the balance? A fulcrum. It can go this way, it can go that. You may not know it at the time, but then you look back and say, "Ah, Thomas, 'if only,' or 'thank God,' or 'I was such a fool,' or...Me, I was just thinking that. On the elevator coming down here. Don't know why. Haven't thought of it for years. It was in Acapulco. This was many years ago. Thirty, thirty-five years. I was there with my lady of the time, Camilia, God, what a piece of ass. We were at the pool at the Pierre Marques, right next to the Princess. You either stayed there or Las Brisas. The Marques was right on the ocean. We were lying at the pool. I'd just finished a film, having drinks, sun, the whole deal. We split a Quaalude, that tells you how long ago it was. Camilia, she was topless, lying face down. "You got such a great ass," that's what I'd tell her, "it's a pity you got to sit on it." I'd fallen asleep, passed out then I woke up, realized I was soaked in sweat, roasting, sweat in my eyes, my suit was wet. I heard the sound of the pool. What a great idea. Jump in, cool off. I popped up, bolted straight off the chaise and dove in. The shallow end. I dove in the shallow end of the pool. Three feet down, smack right onto the bottom of the pool. Gonk! The next thing I knew I was floating on the surface, all dizzy. I climbed somehow out of the pool, sat on the chaise. My head was cut, bleeding. I looked at my watch. I had a new gold Rolex. I bought it off someone on the film, the Art Director, a sweet man. He had AIDS and needed the money for treatments. The Rolex was broken, smashed. It had broken my fall, see? My wrist hit the bottom first, snapped back, smack! Right into my

forehead. Broken my fall. Three months later, Charlie Conner—was on that TV series—same thing happened. Jumped out of a boat, thought they were in deeper water: Gonk! Snapped his neck. That could have been me.

Mark: *(deadpan)* That's an interesting story.

Thomas eyes him.

Mark: What became of Camilia?

Thomas: We were all wrong for each other.

Mark: You thought of this in the elevator?

Thomas: It came back to me.

Mark: Your life in the balance.

Thomas: Exactly.

Mark: Of such we mortals are made.

Thomas: Where do you write now?

Mark: I'm retired. Ten years now. You haven't missed my byline?

Thomas: I don't read critics.

Mark: Forty years in the ink-stained trenches. Opining on subjects great and small. Reviews, sidebars, Q&A's, roundtables, think pieces, capsules, colloquiums, take-outs, personality profiles, interviews, on set reportage, radio talk shows, TV sound bites, best ten lists, best all-time comedies, all-time dramas, all-time villains, filmographies, obits, box office projections, box office updates, box office reports, box office evaluations, year-end box office wrap-ups. That's what got me down more than anything else, that and the movies, of course. Who could watch such movies? One-line gimmicks,

cartoon heroes, vulgar comedies, sentimental expressions of previously held beliefs, inspirational stories with the depth of a bumper sticker, special effects extravaganzas, tell 'em what they're gonna see, show it to 'em, tell them what they saw, can't anyone give the viewer credit for at least having some ideas, have some respect for the entertainment contract!

Thomas: So you retired.

Mark: Yes and no.

Thomas: Finally an honest answer. Two of them.

Mark: I'm in recovery.

Thomas: Hence your presence here.

Mark: My crowning achievement. Token Jew. The first Jew to head the jury at a festival at which no Israeli films are accepted.

Thomas: Mazol Tof. Why don't you have another drink?

Mark hesitates.

Thomas: On me.

Mark: You sure?

Thomas: The festival pays.

Mark: You are so kind. *(to Bartender)* Another round.

Thomas: I have great respect for criticism. The institution.

Mark: You should. You were one once.

Thomas: Not really. I wrote a couple articles, but I wasn't really a critic.

Mark: You could have been.

Thomas: I think about it now and then, what would have happened if—

Mark: You hadn't got fired.

Thomas: My first job. Twenty dollars an article. And they fired me. I was politically incorrect.

Mark: You had integrity even then.

Bartender brings drinks.

Thomas: Cheers.

Mark: Lechaim.

Thomas: To the survivors.

Mark: What time is it?

Thomas: 6:45.

Mark: What time is the reception?

Thomas: 7:30. We have a half hour.

Mark: Will they have food at the Embassy?

Thomas: The Ambassador's residence. I would think so.

Mark: It's a big wing-do. Notables, local celebrities. Tout Cairo. Decorated in the theme of the festival.

Thomas: What is the theme?

Mark: "Love, love, love." (*explains*) The history of love in the cinema.

Thomas: That's a large subject.

Mark: They'll show clips. An evening of clips. Selected clips from world cinema. Clips, like the evening in your honor.

Thomas: That reminds me...

Mark: I'm starved. My chits are only good at the hotel buffet—and they always have the same food. Mosakaa, tabouli, hummus. Mixed Grill. Mixed Grill and mosakaa, Mixed Grill and tabouli, Mixed Grill and hummus.

Thomas: They'll have something at the Ambassador's residence. I'm sure.

Mark: Should we go together? The two of us?

Thomas: Be honored. With full military escort.

Mark: Yes, that's really something. Police lead car, police follow car, lights flashing, zip right through crowded traffic, red lights, intersections. At last, my first taste of the celebrity life.

Thomas: They have security concerns.

Mark: You could say that. (*looking around empty room*) Tourism seems to be down.

Thomas: You see those fellows in the lobby? Those dudes in bulging black leather jackets? Lonely men looking for love? I don't think so.

A Pianist enters with a sheath of music, sits at the piano. He begins to play, singing "Time Goes By" with an Arabic/French accent. Mark and Thomas look at each other incredulously.

Thomas: Love, love, love.

Mark: (*finishes drink*) I don't know if I can handle this.

Thomas: (*checks watch*) Come to my suite. We can wait there.

Mark: You have a suite?

Thomas: *(to Bartender)* The check, please.

The Bartender slides the bill over and Thomas signs.

Thomas: Shukran. *(to Mark)* Follow me.

Mark grabs a final olive as they exit. Stage goes dark. Their conversation continues off as they enter the elevator.

Off stage, Thomas hums "You must remember this, a kiss is just a kiss." The elevator bell rings. Sound of elevator doors closing. They speak off stage:

Mark: How long has it been?

Thomas: A long time.

Mark: Thirty, forty years?

Thomas: Longer. Forty-five since we ran the film club.

Mark: Free Cinema Club. But that wasn't the last time. We met here and there. There was the New York Film Society awards ceremony when you introduced...what's her name...in the Israel movie...?

Thomas: Lila Singer. Lost a lot of weight.

Mark: For the role.

Thomas: Cancer.

Mark: Then there was the memorial for Alan.

Thomas: Yes, that's right.

Sound of elevator doors opening and closing. Sound of key in door lock.

Scene Two

Golden light from a setting sun greets them as they enter Thomas' hotel suite. An open laptop sits on the desk.

Mark: This is some room.

Thomas: You can see the Pyramids.

Mark: My room faces the city.

Thomas: When the air is clear, that is. When there isn't all this Third World smog. Exhaust, factories, coal fires from the cemeteries. People live in the cemeteries.

Mark: The Pyramids are extraordinary.

Thomas: Did you go last night?

Mark: The Sound and Light?

Thomas: Yeah.

Mark: Jet lag.

Thomas: It's better during the day. You can stand right on the edge of the delta. You take one step and it's nothingness. Desert. It's frightening.

Mark: I was afraid I'd be disappointed.

Thomas: Survivors. The last of the seven wonders of the ancient world. No matter how many times you've seen them, every time you see them, every time is like the first time. Never grows old. Like the first time a girl takes her clothes off.

Mark: Or a boy.

Thomas: Or a boy.

Mark: (*heads for mini-bar*) May I?

Thomas: Be my guest.

Mark: (*selects a bottle*) Vodka. I love these little bottles. Like little penises.

Thomas: I'll take one.

Mark: There's plenty.

Thomas: That's what I'm afraid of. A whiskey.

Mark: Mind if I have some nuts? I'm starved.

Thomas: The festival pays for it.

Mark pours drinks.

Thomas: We could order room service? (*checks watch*) There's probably not time.

Mark: They'll have food at the embassy.

Thomas: The ambassador's residence.

Mark: (*hands Thomas glass*) This used to be such a beautiful town. Came here when I was in college, a cultural exchange thing. The boulevards, the lights, the intrigue. That was before Shari Fu'ad became Shari 26 July. And at night. People on the streets and everywhere, the clubs. The Ali Baba, Fantasia,

Kansas Jack's, The Cleopatra Club. Like London or Paris. Unique sort of machismo here then, probably still is. You get sexual release inside your buddy, you're not gay. God forbid. But he does it to you—your honor is gone forever.

Thomas: I appreciated what you said at Allan's Memorial. I was touched. Made me wish I had prepared better.

Mark: I was touched by your feelings about yourself.

Thomas: Trying to be hip, cas. You know, let's not morn, let's celebrate. What's to celebrate? The fucker was dead.

Mark: I was afraid I'd tear up, forget what I wanted to day. It's important to express yourself at times like that.

Thomas: I didn't realize you were that close.

Mark: We weren't, at that time. Earlier, we went to college together. He never mentioned that?

Thomas: No.

Mark: He was my first crush. In college. We dated.

Thomas: What does that mean? I read that everywhere. So-and-so is dating such-and-such. What's that's supposed to mean? They're going out to dinner, holding hands in the car, kissing at the doorstep? No, they're fucking, that's what it means. Here we are, seventy years old, talking about "dating."

Mark: Okay. We fucked.

Thomas: You're kidding.

Mark: No. One of those drunken beer bash things. Last night, singing songs. Remember when they used to sing songs at parties? Well, he must have known I had eyes for him. So he obliged. He never mentioned that? All those times you were in your office counting the money you made together?

Thomas: He never looked up and said, “Oh, by the way, when I was young, I once bonked Mark Saperstein, the film critic?” No, he never did.

Mark: This was in Portsmouth. Portsmouth College. We wore sports coats, if you can believe it, sports coats to class. Sometimes ties. I did. I had two ties. One striped, the other solid. I’d switch off, one one day, one the next. Had them dry cleaned each year. And the paths were straight. Across the quad. Straight lines from one building to the one opposite. *(pause)* I miss those days.

Thomas: You know what I miss?

Mark: No.

Thomas: I miss the days when there wasn’t so much fucking nostalgia!

Mark: *(raises glass)* Cheers.

Thomas: Salut. *(drinks)* He kept that side of his life away from me. He was very careful that way.

Mark: He had class. Did he suffer much?

Thomas: That was a long time ago. We kept in touch, doing business. Toward the end, mostly by phone. Everyday we spoke. At first I thought he was just sick, you know, either that or lazy. Or maybe drugs. We were doing quite well, there was no reason for him to come into the office every day. Things were running, projects in development, packaging, marketing strategies. No pressing need for him to be in the office. Hey, go to Canyon Ranch or Cabos or wherever, chill, enjoy life. That’s what we’ve worked for, right? I didn’t know he had “The Virus.” I was like the last to know. When he finally told me—we went out to a play, “Sunset Boulevard,” and had dinner after—when he finally told me, and he didn’t tell right out, sort of implied and implied, I discovered that he’d been sick for

months, all his other friends, friends from his other life, they knew, didn't tell me.

Mark: Maybe he was hoping.

Thomas: For a miracle.

Mark: And he could go back to work.

Thomas: Then, one night, he gets his friends, his other friends, together, plays some show tunes, swallows a bucket of pills, puts a plastic bag on his head and that was it. So, you ask, did he suffer? The answer is, I suppose: not much.

Mark: I spoke with him. By phone.

Thomas: When?

Mark: The night before.

Thomas: Did he mention me?

Mark: Your name came up.

Thomas: What did he say?

Mark: He said he had one regret.

Thomas: (waits) What?

Mark: That he never kissed you on the lips.

Thomas: You're a liar.

Mark: That's what he said.

Thomas: So you knew?

Mark: That he was going to take the pills? No, he didn't tell me that. I was as surprised as anyone. Alan had class. He had that.

Thomas: A dying breed. *(takes last of nuts from Mark's jar)*
How did you get through it, I mean, during the heyday?
Survive. When everybody was out, doing the disco, *(sings)* "In the Navy," *(resumes)* Parties, poppers, strangers in the night.
There's some research out now that says there's maybe a gene, a gene that makes you immune.

Mark: Hemorrhoids.

Thomas: Huh?

Mark: Hemorrhoids. I couldn't do it that way. I was a pitcher. I didn't catch.

Thomas: How nice for you.

Mark: Did he ever mention me?

Thomas: No.

Mark: Never?

Thomas: The only thing I remember is that when "Resolution 181" came out, he took your review and tacked it to the board. *(pause)* And threw darts at it.

Mark: Wasn't he dead at that time?

Thomas: No.

Mark: *(glancing at desk)* Here it is. Your packet! You had one all the while.

Mark removes Thomas' festival packet and a stack of bills from beneath the laptop. He sets the cash aside, leafs through the packet.

Mark: Everything is here. The program. A letter welcoming you, signed by Hussein al-Ban and President Mubarak. Invitations to parties. You'll need this one for tonight. (*hands it to Thomas*) And your chit. "Good for one drink."

Thomas: It's yours.

Mark: Thank you.

Thomas: (*notices folded paper*) And here's a copy of the petition. "The Edge of Love." (*hands it to Mark*) Read it.

Thomas exchanges the petition for the program. Mark reads as Thomas skims the festival program.

Mark: An impressive list of names. I don't know if I'm worthy.

Thomas: (*reading program*) Syria, Lebanon, Italy, China, Turkey, France, Morocco. "Firdaus, a Tribute to Palestinian Martyrs." Do I detect a bias?

Mark: (*reading*) The language of the petition seems a little strong. "Affront?"

Thomas: When you take a position, you take it. You don't weasel around with the language.

Mark: As Head of the Jury, I shouldn't take sides in a dispute.

Thomas: One must be engaged. What's the alternative? We are standing at a window here. The festival is a window to the West. And vice versa. Drop a stone in the water, you never know where the ripples will carry.

Mark: It would reflect on my objectivity. I mean as Head of the Jury it would be unseemly to immediately embroil myself in an Israeli/Palestinian controversy, it seems so like... "See, I

told you so. That's what happens when you select one of those people."

Thomas: You know what my motto is?

Mark: You have a motto?

Thomas: It's better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

Mark: I'll think about it.

Thomas: Don't equivocate, act.

Mark: I'll think about it.

Thomas: It has to be tomorrow.

Mark: What's the rush?

Thomas: It's the impression it will make. Reporters from around the world, they'll be there, they'll think it's just another press conference, then I read the statement, read all the famous names, ending with *your* name, the current Head of the Jury.

Mark: The impression you'll make, you mean.

Thomas: See, that's what critics do. Impugn your motives. You take a stand, they peck at your heels.

Mark steps to the mini-bar, helps himself to another drink.

Mark: Want anything?

Thomas: Any more nuts?

Mark: Chocolate. (*offers chocolate bar*) Want half?

Thomas: No thanks.

Mark: (*looking at desk*) That's a nice looking camera. New?

Thomas: Brand new. The latest. Minolta DiMAGE A1, 2/3 inch 5.2 megapixel, anti-shake, movie clips, the whole deal.

Mark: Let me take your picture. Stand by the window. The Great Man, the city behind him.

Thomas: The flash will reflect off the glass. Don't you know anything about photography? No, of course, you don't. I'll stand here, turn on this lamp.

Thomas turns on lamp, strikes a pose. Mark snaps the photo. Flash.

Thomas: Your turn. I'll put it in the computer.

Mark: All right.

Thomas: *(takes camera)* Ready?

Mark stands stiffly. Thomas clicks. Flash.

Thomas: We need one of us together. Together at last. The Free Cinema Club. I'll set it to wide angle.

Putting one arm around Mark, he extends the other, snaps a photo of the two of them, smiling: flash.

Thomas: One more.

Mark: Why is every conversation with you the Director's Cut?

Thomas: For protection. Loosen up. Show me some personality.

Mark, as a joke, strikes a nancy pose. Thomas clicks another photo: flash. They both laugh.

Thomas plugs the camera into the computer, downloads the images as Mark picks up Thomas' packet, goes to the window.

Mark: This is some view.

Thomas: Intimations of mortality?

Mark: Don't think I'll be this way again.

Thomas: Man fears time, time fears the Pyramids.

Photos appear sequentially on laptop screen.

Thomas: Look.

Mark: *(looks at pictures)* Wow. You'll have to send me one. For my wall.

Thomas: I'll email it.

Mark: How's your health?

Thomas: No complaints. Had a prostate scare a few years back, that seems to be better now.

Mark: I want to congratulate you on this honor. It's well-deserved. And overdue. Your career has been unique. Exemplary. Uneven, but exemplary. The greatest under-acknowledged American filmmaker. You are beacon to film students and young filmmakers. I'm sure you've heard this.

Thomas: I get letters, yes.

Mark: Who's coming? For the tribute? It says here, "guests."

Thomas: It's a long trip.

Mark: No one?

Thomas: People of our generation, the ones still alive, you know, it's difficult. I asked Jim Rosenberg, he said, "Tom, at my age, I don't like to be too far from my own bathroom."

Then there are the security concerns. I asked some of the younger actors, but you can't get to them, you do, but it's "of course," then the Manager calls. Or the Agent. Or the Business Manager. Hems...haws, hedges. I'm too old for that bullshit. If it were in LA or New York, it'd be different, there'd be media for the little pricks, they could do their photo-ops, pal with old buds, hit on pussy, but here...like I said, it's a long trip.

Mark: So you're on your lonesome.

Thomas: All on my lonesome.

Mark: Your wife?

Thomas: That didn't work out.

Mark: But I read about it. I thought...it was ...how long...

Thomas: Twelve years. Just as long as the Third Reich. Never marry an actress.

Mark: She was a good actress.

Thomas: I worship talent. That's my curse. I fall at the feet of talent.

Mark: Young talent.

Thomas: Young talent.

Mark: (*leafing through program*) Five films. Beside the tribute. Did you select them?

Thomas: I gave them some ideas.

Mark: "Resolution 181" is not on the schedule. It's really your best film.

Thomas: Subtitled prints are sometimes hard to find.

Mark: They didn't want it? Subject matter too uncomfortable?

Thomas: There was that.

Mark: Birth of the Jewish state. You could have put up a fight. You could have refused to come if they didn't show it.

Thomas: (*looking in mini-bar*) There's some chocolates in here. Would you like some?

Mark: Please. It should be revived. Perhaps one of those Special Edition DVDs. Before it's too late. It should have been more successful.

Thomas: Who knows?

Mark: Nobody knows anything.

Thomas: Ah yes, you're famous quote. "Nobody knows anything." Dear friend...mind if I call you "dear friend"?

Mark: Flattered.

Thomas: Dear friend, mind if I ask, since you are such an admirer of "Resolution 181," why you didn't say so when it was released? "A portrayal of Arab/Israeli conflict sufficient to make even a Jewish viewer cringe." I believe that was the phrase you used to conclude your review.

Mark: I thought you didn't read reviews?

Thomas: If you had a millijoule of critical perception—you know what a millijoule is?

Mark: No.

Thomas: It's the amount of energy expended when a dime drops from a height of two inches.

Mark: I saw it again recently—

Thomas: If you had a millijoule of perception—

Mark: Can you listen with your mouth shut? Can you keep your mouth shut for a moment?

Thomas backs off.

Mark: I saw it again recently. On television. I don't know what I was thinking at the time. I've written a capsule review for my website.

Thomas: I thought you had quit criticism?

Mark: I'm in recovery.

Thomas: If you're in recovery, I'm in Communist Russia!

Mark: I apologize.

Thomas: Thank you.

Mark: It wasn't personal.

Thomas: I had great hopes for you. You could have been a major critic.

Mark: I took the road less traveled.

Thomas: You think it's easy to sell out? You have no fucking idea! You and your condescending ilk who have never once tried, never once ventured beyond your keyboard in the arena. Gone out amongst them, into the malls, the u-fix-it emporiums, the county fairs and video game galleries, communed with the little people, who, by the way, aren't so little. Double-wide stretch pants and bulging stomachs strolling through the food court—kathump, kathump—surrounded by a flock of cabbage patch kids. That's what Alan and I did. Town to town, motel food and orange carpets, sat in the multi-plexes, taped the reactions, talked to them, the Harley Davidson dads, the Oprah

moms and their sullen teenagers, listened to their fantasies and ten-cent dreams. That was Allan's gift. He was a saint. People loved him. He had them laughing, confiding, swapping dirty jokes and confidences, believing he was one of them, a Good Old Boy with red dirt between his toes, not for a second imagining they were bearing their souls to a bleeding ponytail faggot with an architecture degree. Allan had the gay chameleon thing down, he could be whatever you wanted him to be. Every night in his motel room, copying out notes and ideas, bouncing them off the next bunch in the next town. Back in the office, him with his charts and analyses, I said to him, "Is that what you want, Allan, to make films for fourteen year-olds?" "Not any fourteen year-olds," he said, "dumb fourteen year-olds"—and that's what we did and, by God, we were successful. Three \$100 million dollar box office hits. Visionaries, we were. The Golden Boys. "Showmen of the Year." Recycle TV shows, add sex and special effects, make 'em think it's irreverent: the Killing Machine who prays every night, bikini girls under cover, the dancing Mafia queen—and then Allan died. No warning. No Plan B, he's gone. So it's my chance. A Thomas Bing Production. I'll show them. I'd heard the whispers. "Resolution 181." Revive the Old Hollywood important subject picture. Dive into the heart of controversy. Win some awards. Hire the best writers, European art film cameraman—straight into the crapper. Stinksville. Enough to make even a Jewish viewer cringe. Okay, so that didn't work, back to the old formula. Dig out Allan's notes, listen to his tapes, hire writers straight out of puberty. Flopsville again. You're moving along in life, cruising down the highway, doing quite well thank you, no care or worry, V8 superglide. You notice a spec in the rearview mirror. It's all right, it's a big road, give 'em space. Next thing, zoom, it passes you. Okay. Then another. You hear somebody's name, next thing they pass you. Zoom, zoom, zoom. All of sudden Bing has lost his touch, doesn't "have it." This is a rough business. One day you reach up to scratch your ear and your head is gone. The studio wants to renegotiate, smaller office, lower overhead, okay, I can accept that. Get a young hungry partner: movies need "fresh eyes." Flopsville. The fourteen year-olds got dumber. Exit partner. Next stop: cable TV. Hey, the best work is being done

on cable. Bullshit. Who runs cable? The same bean-counters that run everything else. Twenty year-old stoner with one sitcom to his credit keeps me waiting two hours, asks what I've been up to? The star? No, that was the executive. Ten years after Allan's death they take out a full page trade ad, ask me if I want to contribute. No fucking thanks!

Mark: *(waits to make sure Thomas has finished)* Don't you have an unuttered thought?

Thomas: The road you took—"the road less traveled." That's for fucking sure. Except by losers, wannabes and critics.

Mark: And you? A has-been!

Thomas: "Nobody knows anything." Your great contribution! Your legacy!

Mark: My diapers have more class than you.

Thomas: Once a cocksucker, always a cocksucker.

Mark: Pussy!

Thomas: Go to confession with a cock in your mouth.

Mark: Schlockmeister!

Thomas: Worthless piece-of-shit critic!

Mark: Putz!

Thomas: Pudenda!

Mark: Fuck you!

Thomas: Bugger you!

Silence. They step back, take a breath.

Mark: Feel better?

Thomas: Much.

Mark: It wasn't personal.

Thomas: I have been a good friend to Israel.

Mark: You have.

Thomas: She needs them.

Mark: Now more than ever.

Thomas teasingly holds up the petition with two fingers. Mark ignores this.

Thomas: Have you been to Tel Aviv lately? You can roll bowling balls in the airport.

Mark: You still travel there?

Thomas: I have a number of friends. I made a number of friends while researching, shooting. I keep in touch. This is just between us...

Mark: Entre nous.

Thomas: Entre nous. Some female friends from the old days.

Mark: You're quite the man.

Thomas: I've sowed more seed in Israel than all the Hadassah wives combined.

Mark: Mazel tov. *(takes a bite)* This chocolate is dreadful.

Thomas: Everything is local made now.

Mark: *(motions to mini-bar)* Mind if I...?

Thomas: Be my guest. I have to take a whiz.

Mark: *(looking in mini-bar)* There's only cognac.

Thomas, closing the bathroom door behind him, doesn't answer. Mark takes out his note pad, writes something, puts it away. He pours the cognac, stands beside the door.

Mark: I too had a decisive moment. *Un moment decisive.* At least one. I was a young man, seventeen or eighteen. We lived in the country. I was a country boy, did you know that? The Boundary Waters area in Minnesota. The only Jews in Cook, Minnesota. One day after school...this was before movies, before city life, before coming out, before even thinking of coming out. I was unformed. We had a carpool. It was twenty miles to high school. Every day a different kid would get the family car and drive. One day, a Friday, that was my day to drive, we were coming home. A '58 Chevy Bel Air, slate blue, gear shift on the column, remember those? *(noise from inside bathroom)* We were coming home on the gravel roads. There were some girls, girls from school, walking ahead on the side of the road. We were young, full of piss. I thought I'd scare the girls, swerve close, give them a scare. If flipped the wheel, coming up behind them, but the car lost traction in the gravel, started to fishtail. We scooted up right behind them, going thirty, forty miles an hour. I saw them turn, scream, their faces right there. I'd pulled the wheel hard, so of course I had no control of the car, we were sliding. Then suddenly we hit a patch of hard dirt and the car lurched back onto the road. One of the girls, her hand hit the rear view mirror, right next to me. *(walks to window, looks out)* I pulled back on the road, kept driving. In the mirror I could see the girls watching. Then a woman looked out the window. There, on a farmhouse porch, was a woman. She had seen the whole thing. She raised her hand to her mouth, open, going "oh." I can see her now as if it just happened. What she was wearing, the look on her face, the color of the house, everything. We drove home in silence. Nobody said anything. After I dropped them off, I went home into my bedroom and closed the door. I sat on my bed. Just sat.

“You almost threw your life away,” I thought. “But for God, your life would be changed forever, ruined, and the lives of those girls.” I became a cautious man. Some people have a different image of me, a homosexual, in the arts, but no, I’m a cautious man.

Thomas emerges from the bathroom, zipping his fly.

Thomas: What were you saying?

Mark: It is a gorgeous view. “The sweet smell of jasmine.” That’s Lawrence Durrell. It isn’t jasmine anymore.

Thomas: It must have been a beautiful city.

Mark: Herodotus described it as one of the great ancient wonders. That’s what Allan said. That’s what I was talking about when you were in the bathroom. I was talking about the old Ramses Hotel. The InterCon today. Why would anyone name a condom after Ramses? The man had 200 children. That’s where I first met Allan. He was reading Herodotus. Well, not met, but...

Thomas: “Bonked”?

Mark: He was bolder than I. He always got right to the point. I mean, I suppose I sensed it, glances and touches and whatnot, but that night at the Ramses Bar, I...came out.

Thomas: How touching.

Mark: My stomach hurts.

Thomas: Want some olives?

Mark: *(groans)* I’m going to die here, I’m going to die in this fucking stinking backwater no-count Jew-hater country!

Thomas: You’re a poet.

Thomas turns to the mini-bar, pours himself a drink. Mark shoots him a raised fist gesture.

Thomas: A toast. To the survivors.

Mark: *(They clink glasses.)* To the survivors.

Thomas: I'm sure there were better life forms than us, us homo sapiens. Better, stronger, faster, more decent. But they died out. We survived.

Mark: How's your health?

Thomas: I spent my entire life seeking the approval of people I didn't even respect.

Mark: Times change.

Thomas: I didn't change. The audience changed. They fell asleep.

Mark: I'm having trouble remembering.

Thomas: It's the jet lag.

Mark: I'm having trouble remembering. Little things. Stupid things. My phone number. How can you forget your phone number? I've had it twenty years.

Thomas: Yeah, well...

Mark: I keep notes. To be on the safe side. If I'm going to talk about something, I write it all down. I was talking about Preston Sturges. I couldn't remember a film he had made. Not a one.

Thomas: Preston Sturges.

Mark: "Mild cognitive impairment." It's not dementia, it's not Alzheimer's, it's the curtain raiser. The first act hasn't started.

Thomas: What do they say? You seen a doctor?

Mark: “Ineluctable.” That’s the word he used. He’s very literary.

Thomas: Nothing you can take?

Mark: Vitamin E, lots of it. Something called seligmine. I’ve still got good years ahead of me.

Thomas: Jesus. I always envied you that. I mean, you had that. That fucking encyclopedic iron claw memory. Name a film, you could rattle off the credits, the supporting players, even the tech credits. I wondered how you did it, if there was some special gene you had.

Mark: Could be.

Thomas: Know what the two good things about Alzheimer’s are? (*Mark shrugs*) One, you’re old friends become new friends, two, you can hide your own Easter eggs.

They laugh.

Thomas: Rick turns to Elsa and says, “We’ll always have Paris” and she says...?

Mark: “Paris?”

They laugh.

Thomas: You’ve got to laugh. What else can you do?

Mark: Old friend...mind if I call you “old friend”? (*Thomas gestures approval*) I want to ask you a favor.

Thomas: Anything.

Mark: I’d like to write a book about you.

Thomas: There is a book.

Mark: I mean a real book. The other book was an interview book. Your production company put it out. This would cut to the core, no holds barred, the true story, life as seen from the trenches, name names, settle old scores, go out with the taste of blood in your mouth: “Thomas Bing: The Bitter Truth.” What do you think?

Thomas: It’s too late for the truth. Nobody remembers, nobody cares. Besides, I’m not one to dwell on the past. What happened, happened. Put it behind you. Don’t wallow in reminiscence, no second guessing. That’s been my credo.

Mark: I’ve already spoke to a publisher. When I knew you were going to be here. They’ll guarantee an advance.

Thomas: I don’t even remember. I don’t keep memorabilia, correspondence, that sort of thing. Not my bag.

Mark: I could use the money.

Thomas: People tell me stories about myself, remember when we were at so-and-so’s and you did this or said that? (*shrugs*) I don’t remember. Sounds like something I would have done, so I suppose it happened, but I don’t remember.

Mark: (*gets on his knees*) I ask you. Here, I’ll kiss your ring. (*takes Thomas’ hand*) Is this the same Rolex, the Rolex that saved Thomas Bing’s life?

Thomas: Stop that.

Mark: (*kisses Rolex*) The watch that, in a decisive moment, life in the balance, saved Thomas Bing.

Thomas: Stand up, you old fruit.

Mark: (*stands*) You agree to it then?

Thomas: How much is the advance?

Mark: Ten thousand for me, five thousand for you.

Thomas: You need the money that bad?

Mark: Yes.

Thomas: Ten thousand's not that much.

Mark: It's not much of a career.

Thomas: Can I control cover art?

Mark: I'll make it a condition.

Thomas: You'll sign the petition?

Mark: For you.

Thomas withdraws a pen from his jacket, picks up the petition, hands it to Mark.

Thomas: You won't regret this.

Mark: I can always say I didn't remember.

Thomas watches Mark sign.

Thomas: A who-I-fucked-when book?

Mark: A serious study. The two of us together, like the old days: the Free Cinema Club. Your life as a microcosm. And some fucking.

Thomas: Alan will be in the book?

Mark: I don't see how he can't be. He's the key.

Thomas: I like you.

Mark: You're a serious artist.

Thomas: I have tried.

Mark: You have.

Pause.

Mark: I'm so frightened.

Thomas: It may not be as bad as you think. They're making medical advances all the time.

Mark: I wake up in fear. Abject fear.

Thomas: Don't lose faith.

Mark: Hold me.

Thomas steps over, embraces Mark. Mark holds the embrace.

Mark: That feels good. Does it feel good?

Thomas: Yes.

Mark: May I ask you another favor?

Thomas: What?

Mark: To kiss you on the lips.

Thomas: *(pause)* Why not?

Mark: Sit down.

They do.

Mark: Who goes first?

Thomas: You're the one that asked.

Mark: All right. Ready.

They kiss.

Mark: How does it feel?

Thomas: Like kissing a grapefruit.

Mark: You could put some more into it. Kissing a man is like riding a Japanese motorcycle. It feels good, you're just worried about anyone seeing you.

Thomas: How's this?

Thomas takes Mark's head in his hands, forcefully kisses him on the lips.

A knock on the door. Hussein al-Ban pokes his head inside, opens the door. Ismet stands behind. Thomas and Mark, caught, bolt upright.

Thomas: Hassan?

Hussein: Hussein al-Ban.

Thomas: Mark, it's Hussein. Head of the festival.

Hussein: Insha'Allah. *(introduces himself)* Hussein al-Ban.

Mark: My pleasure.

Hussein: I'm glad I got both of you. I'm not interrupting anything?

Thomas: Want a drink?

Hussein: We've got to go to the Embassy.

*The open laptop displays digital photos of Thomas and Mark.
Thomas steps over, closes it.*

Thomas: The Ambassador's house. We were waiting for room service.

Hussein: (to Mark) Have you met Ismet?

Mark: Yes. (to Ismet) How was your book?

Hussein: There'll be food at the consulate.

Mark: My stomach is killing me.

Thomas: (to Mark) Do you need to take a whiz?

Hussein: The other jurors are waiting.

Mark: I'm all right.

Thomas: They're in the lobby?

Mark: What time is it?

Hussein: They're in the bus.

Thomas: Let's go.

They exit. Thomas flips off the lights, closes the door behind them.

Blackout.

Scene Three

*Sounds of cocktail party: Arabic, French, English. Laughter.
Goodbyes.*

Several hours later. Thomas, loosening his tie, enters the hotel suite, flips on the lights.

Removing his jacket, Thomas senses something amiss.

He looks around: his laptop and digital camera are missing. He goes to the desk: the cash is missing.

Thomas picks up the phone, dials.

Thomas: Operator? Connect me with hotel security. Please. (waits) Security? This is room 1405. One-four-oh-five. Mr. Bing. Mr. Thomas Bing. (pause) I've been robbed.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Scene one

Interrogation room. Thomas sits across from Colonel Ziadeh. Ziadeh, wearing suit and moustache, chain-smokes throughout. At opposite sides of the room stand two guards, also smoking. They wear black leather jackets and pistols.

The table, the chairs on which Thomas and Ziadeh rest on a slowly revolving lazy susan.

Ziadeh: What happened?

Thomas: I told you and before I told you I told the man outside and before I told Hotel security. It was copied out in triplicate. In long hand. In Arabic.

Ziadeh: Tell me again.

Thomas: I returned a little past ten. I returned from the reception—at the Ambassador's *residence*—a little after ten. I'd had a little too much to drink. I opened the door, the suite door, flipped on the lights, crossed into the bedroom. Again I flipped

on the lights. I sensed something was wrong. I went back to the sitting room. My laptop, my laptop computer, Sony Vaio, was missing from the desk. Also missing was a digital camera I'd just bought. Also missing was some cash, approximately two hundred dollars. I went into the bedroom, checked my briefcase. My return plane ticket was also missing. That's where I found the ring.

Ziadeh: (*holds up silver band*) This ring?

Thomas: That ring. I'd never seen it before. I wasn't mine. I assumed it came of the finger of the person who reached into my briefcase, removed the ticket. I called Hotel Security.

Ziadeh: Do you do that often?

Thomas: What?

Ziadeh: Drink too much.

Thomas: You know how receptions are. Particularly on an empty stomach. They didn't have any food.

Ziadeh: They didn't have any food at the Embassy?

Thomas: No.

Ziadeh: And then you went to bed?

Thomas: I laid down. I was tired. The drinking and the jet lag.

Ziadeh: You fell asleep?

Thomas: Security woke me up. Your man was there. I gave them a report.

Ziadeh: And then you went to bed.

Thomas: And then you woke me up and brought me here.

Ziadeh: Would you like some tea, Thomas? Mind if I call you Thomas?

Thomas: I've had tea.

Ziadeh: Have you had guests in your room?

Thomas: I've only been here a day. Just Mark. Mark Saperstein. He head of the jury.

Ziadeh: The Jewish person.

Thomas: He's Jewish, yes.

Ziadeh: This was from 7 to 7:30.

Thomas: Approximately.

Ziadeh: What did you do with Mr. Saperstein?

Thomas: We spoke. We talked about the festival. The films in competition. About my tribute. We spoke about old friends. I knew him years ago.

Ziadeh: You went to the reception together?

Thomas: Yes.

Ziadeh: But you let him return alone?

Thomas: I didn't even know he had left. Apparently he didn't feel well.

Ziadeh: He was sick. He vomited on the dress on the wife of the Minister of the Interior. Then he vomited again. A member of the security detail, one of my men, was holding him and he vomited again.

Thomas: I heard.

Ziadeh: They cleaned him up and brought him to the hotel. The wife of the Minister, she was very upset. Women like that, well bred, educated women, they may not show it, but they get very upset. Are you married?

Thomas: No.

Ziadeh: You were in your room the whole time? (*clarifies*) With Mr. Saperstein?

Thomas: The sitting area. The sitting room of the suite.

Ziadeh: 1405?

Thomas: Yes.

Ziadeh: Very nice room. Nice view. The Pyramids. Do you think there's anything beneath them? (*checks notes*) You consumed at this time nine drinks: four scotches, two vodkas, three cognac. The staff checked the —

Thomas: Have you checked them out?

Ziadeh: I don't think that's a possibility.

Thomas: Why not?

Ziadeh: The people of our country, we don't steal.

Thomas: The hotel staff?

Ziadeh: They've been cleared.

Thomas: What is your name?

Ziadeh: Ziadeh: Colonel Salah Ziadeh.

Thomas: And the man before?

Ziadeh: He works with me.

Thomas: (*checks watch*) Colonel, it's nearly one a.m., I've been in this room three hours and I'm exhausted. I have a press conference in eight hours.

Ziadeh: Nice watch. I have one just the same. (*displays watch*)

Thomas: I'd like to get back to my room and rest.

Ziadeh: Don't you want to see the criminal apprehended?

Thomas: Let's forget the whole thing.

Ziadeh: You report, in total, almost three thousand dollars in cash and goods missing and you just want to forget it?

Thomas: I want to go back to my room.

Ziadeh: That's not possible. We are conducting a criminal investigation.

Thomas: I have nothing more to add.

Ziadeh: This is a very serious matter. You are a guest of our government. You are a famous person. We take thefts against visitors very seriously. Tourism is important to our economy. One theft against a visiting celebrity—like yourself—could cost millions of dollars. Cigarette?

Thomas: I'll never tell a soul.

Ziadeh: Not only have you been robbed, you have suggested the crime was perpetrated by a citizen of this country, a member of the tourist establishment.

Thomas: I take that back.

Ziadeh: When you returned to your room, did you unlock the door?

Thomas: Of course. That's how I got in.

Ziadeh: Perhaps it was unlocked. Perhaps you just thought you used your key. Perhaps you pushed it open. I spoke with Mr. Hussein Al-Ban, head of the festival. He said when he came to your room, when he discovered you and Mr. Saperstein, the door was not locked. It was closed, but not locked.

Thomas: I used the key.

Ziadeh: We checked the lock. Sometimes it gets stuck. The door closes, but not the lock.

Thomas: Okay. I believe you.

Ziadeh: So perhaps someone could just push the door open.

Thomas: If you say so.

Ziadeh: Mr. Saperstein. What type of man is he?

Thomas: We met in the bar. He's a film critic, or was. Maybe he still is. I invited him to my room. We talked. We had some drinks. Perhaps too many. We left for the reception at the same time.

Ziadeh: How long have you known him?

Thomas: Well, I really don't know him.

Ziadeh: You invited a man to your room you didn't know?

Thomas: To see the view. The Pyramids. I had known him years ago. When we were young, we were starting out. We ran a film club together.

Ziadeh: (*makes a note*) He has reviewed your films?

Thomas: Yes.

Ziadeh: These reviews, were they good reviews?

Thomas: Some were good. Some not so good.

Ziadeh: You take your work seriously?

Thomas: I don't know how it is in your country, but in my country, Mark and my country, people are free to see whatever movies they want, think whatever they want about them, write whatever they want about them.

Ziadeh: We have customs in our country also, Middle Eastern customs. Mr. Saperstein, he's a bachelor?

Thomas: What is this about?

Ziadeh: You are involved in a crime.

Thomas: I was robbed!

Ziadeh: If you were not robbed, you would not be involved. Anyone having knowledge of a crime is involved in a crime.

Thomas: Nothing personal, Colonel, but I'm going to leave. I'm going to get up and leave. *(stands)* I'm going out, getting a cab and going to my room. Have your people talk to my people.

The guards eye Thomas as he goes to the door, turns the handle. The door's locked.

Thomas: Open the door.

Ziadeh: We're not finished. Cigarette?

Thomas: I don't smoke. Open the door.

Ziadeh: Oh yes, Americans.

Thomas: You can't treat people like this, maybe your people, but not Americans, not dignitaries, not guests of your country!

I have a press conference in the morning. I'm sure the international media will be very interested in the treatment I've received.

Ziadeh: The press conference has been postponed.

Thomas: Open the door.

Ziadeh: Sit down. Just a few more questions. Are you sure you don't want some tea?

Thomas, resigned, looks around, returns to his seat.

Ziadeh: *(to a guard)* Akmet, get Mr. Bing some tea.

Thomas watches as the guard unlocks the door, exits. The second guard bars the exit.

Ziadeh: Are you familiar with Egyptian cinema?

Thomas: A little. A great tradition. The epicenter of Arab-language film-making.

Ziadeh: Directors, who do you admire?

Thomas: Yusef Chahine.

Ziadeh: You've met him?

Thomas: I was at reception for him at Cannes.

Ziadeh: Which of his films do you like?

Thomas: Well, I can't...

Ziadeh: Have you seen any of his films?

Thomas: No.

Ziadeh: Have you ever seen an Egyptian film?

Thomas: What's the point here?

Ziadeh: My grandfather was an actor in the movies, what you call a character actor. Kamal al-Salam. He played intellectuals, lawyers, teachers, that sort. He died last year. I was raised around the movies. Dinnertime talk was the subject of films, old films, new films, the names of the actors from Italy, France, America. I was always waiting impatiently for Thursday because it was the day I was permitted to go to the theater and watch the new films. I would look forward to it, starting on Friday morning, counting the days and the hours. Egypt is Arab cinema, the only cinema. The first all Arab film, fiction film, was made here in 1927. All Arabs look to us for the movies. That is why there is Cairo Film Festival. That is why you are here. It is to say we are part of the world of art and culture, that we are not ashamed. But that comes to an end. The faithful, the Islamists, want to put an end to it. The Moslem Brotherhood, that too began here, in 1928. Art is under attack. Teachers taken from their work, their books taken from the stores, movies from the theaters. They want to put Egypt under the veil. To put an end to secular culture, back to the Middle Ages. Even Chahine, the great Chahine, your friend, cannot speak freely. If he were not so old, so famous, who knows? So we are both dinosaurs, you and I. Relics from another time, when great creatures walked the earth. The Film Festival is not about films, it is about culture, culture is politics and politics is religion. Even in America. *(takes US passport from file, examines it)* Your travel to Israel, two times in the last, ah, four years, were these travels at the invitation of the Zionist government?

Thomas: Where did you get that?

Ziadeh: From the hotel.

Thomas: It is my property, US property. What about the ring?

Ziadeh: This ring? *(holds up ring)*

Thomas: You ask me about my travels, my drinking, Egyptian films, but the only piece of evidence, a ring left in my briefcase, no questions about that.

Ziadeh: It appears to be a woman's ring.

Thomas: I wouldn't know. All I know is that it's not mine.

Ziadeh: And your travels to Israel?

Thomas: I have nothing to hide.

Ziadeh removes a sheet of paper from the folder, opens it.

Ziadeh: *(reads)* "on September 10...Board of the Cairo Film Festival withdrew the invitation... 'The Edge of Love'...we the undersigned condemn...an affront to the integrity of Cairo Film Festival...we abhor...the people of Egypt...Federation Internationale..." A protest. Very strong language. You have seen this film?

Thomas: No.

Ziadeh: But you are a critic?

Thomas: The petition was sent to me. By people in London, people who have seen the film.

Ziadeh: You signed it?

Thomas: Yes.

Ziadeh: You "condemn," you "abhor," "you demand," abhor, demand, confront, condemn "the people of Egypt."

Thomas: Not the people of Egypt, the action of the Board. It's the principle. One must take a stand. Against censorship.

Ziadeh: Many names. Lots of Jewish names. *(displays second sheet)* Also this, a copy in Arabic. Where did you get this?

Thomas: It was sent to me.

Ziadeh: I have seen the film. An Arabic women, a Jewish man, unmarried, having an affair. They make love. He goes to prayer. She goes, has a drink. It's very offensive.

Thomas: Offensive to whom?

Ziadeh: The people of Egypt.

Thomas: How do you know?

Ziadeh: Ask your friend Chahine. Ask Saad Eddin Ibrrahim, fired from Cairo University, sentenced to seven years in jail, ask Mahfouz, who was knifed, ask poet Faraq Fouda who was shot outside his home in Giza. In Egypt critics don't write articles, they shoot people. This is a country on the edge. We stand at the precipice. Our traditional values, our sectarian identity is under attack. You want to protect us from censorship, we want to protect ourselves from chaos. Movies are banned so freedom can survive. What did you plan to do with this statement?

Thomas: Nothing.

Ziadeh: Mr. Saperstein signed it.

Thomas: Yes.

Ziadeh: Mr. Saperstein, he's a bachelor?

Thomas: I have gay friends. Bachelor friends. I am a friend of the homosexual. Is that a crime here?

Ziadeh: Of course not. This is a secular country. You like women?

Thomas: I've had three wives.

Ziadeh: I have only one. Your translator, Ismet, she is very attractive. Is she not?

Lights go down.

Scene Two

Lights come up. Colonel Ziadeh swivels in his chair to face Mark, pale, dressed as if in a hurry. His hands shake as he sips a final top of tea.

Thomas, also sipping tea, sits beside a guard in a dimly lit holding room to one side of the stage. Occasionally the guard asks him silent questions.

Ziadeh: Thomas Bing, How long have you known him?

Mark: Well, I've known of him—how long?—for many years. We started out as film critics at the same time. We ran a film society.

Ziadeh: And he became a director?

Mark: And producer.

Ziadeh: A director is better than a critic, right?

Mark: He's more famous. What time is it?

Ziadeh: You've lost your watch?

Mark: I left it in the room when your men...when I was asked to come here.

Ziadeh: How are you feeling?

Mark: My apologies. For the reception...and the...woman. Her dress. I don't know what happened.

Ziadeh: The wife of the Minister of the Interior.

Mark: God.

Ziadeh: My boss. The Minister of the Interior is my boss. The dress, the green dress of the wife. Would you like some more tea?

Mark: Please.

Ziadeh motions of a guard who refills Mark's cup.

Ziadeh: Want some nuts?

Mark shakes his head.

Ziadeh: Mr. Bing's films, you reviewed them?

Mark: Yes.

Ziadeh: Is it your practice, when you review a film, to see the film?

Mark: Of course.

Ziadeh: Have you seen the film, "The Edge of Love?"

Mark: No.

Ziadeh: Were these reviews, reviews of Mr. Bing's films, were they favorable?

Mark: Some. Not all.

Ziadeh: What was your relationship with him?

Mark: There was no relationship. We met a few times.

Ziadeh: When you were young?

Mark: When we were critics.

Ziadeh: When you had a mutual friend (*checks name*) Alan Berg. He was Mr. Bing's partner?

Mark: They produced movies together.

Ziadeh: You've been to Egypt before?

Mark: Many years ago.

Ziadeh: You must have been quite young. Quite handsome. (*Checks notes*) Alan Berg was also here at that time. You left the same day. The last months of British rule—an illegal rule. Were you interested in politics?

Mark: No.

Ziadeh: Probably not. Seeing the sights and all. I was young at that time, I don't remember it very well. I was just...one years old. It was a good time for young boys, boys who liked to make money off from foreign men. The British didn't mind that sort of thing.

Mark: What is your point?

Ziadeh: In my experience, crimes like this, crimes in tourist hotels, are rarely impersonal. They involve people known to the victim. Some years back, an older man, a Sheik from the Gulf States, called security in your hotel. He had a gash on his head. He had to be treated for the gash. He said he was attacked by two strangers—Westerners—I was worried. This man was royalty. My job was in danger. While he was in the hospital, I entered his room. It was a breach, but I did it. In his closet I found ten Mount Blanc pens, all in their original cases. In a drawer were five bottles of Chanel perfume. And a thousand

British pounds. Why does a man need identically wrapped pens and perfume? We examined his phone calls. In four days there had been eight calls to the same number, an apartment in Zamalek. It was a place where wealthy men, foreign men, could meet young women. One of my men visited the house and, after discussion, found a similarly wrapped bottle of perfume—and the young woman it was given to. She was questioned. She was brought here. It seems that while the woman was giving the Sheik sexual pleasure with her mouth, in his room, his chair toppled over (*knocks over chair*) and he hit his head on the dresser (*bangs table*). The girl, frightened, fled. I went to the hospital—this was a delicate situation, I took a risk—and confronted the Sheik with her statement. He admitted that that had been the case. No returned to his country. No charges were filed. The crime had been solved.

Mark: (*pause*) Yes?

Ziadeh: This crime will also be solved.

Mark: Then why are you questioning me?

Ziadeh: I want to go over your activities from the time you met Mr. Bing until he reported the robbery, all the details of that time, what you drank, what you said, what you did.

Mark: We've been over it. We met in the bar.

Ziadeh: He invited you to his room.

Mark: I was with him the entire time, in the hotel, on the bus, at the reception.

Ziadeh: He never left your sight?

Mark: He may have.

Ziadeh: (*writes*) Cigarette?

Mark: Thanks.

Ziadeh offers Mark a cigarette, nods to one of the guards who lights Mark's cigarette.

Ziadeh: Was this before or after you were intimate?

Mark: We were not intimate.

Ziadeh: According to the statement of Hussein al-Ban, head of the festival, you and Mr. Bing were found in, how shall I say it, an embrace?

Mark: There was nothing improper.

Ziadeh: That's what you do, don't you, you people.

Mark: What do you mean, 'you people'?

Ziadeh: Movie people. Are you willing to take a blood test?

Mark: Is that a request?

Ziadeh: Anyone staying in Egypt thirty days must have a blood test.

Mark: I don't plan to stay—

Ziadeh: We'll see.

Mark: Are you accusing me? What am I being accused of?

Ziadeh: My position, I am in charge of security for five-star hotels. I am a member of the Tourist Police. The Tourist Police is a Division of the Ministry of the Interior. We are not part of the municipal police, we are not answerable to them. We are an elite group. Two of our officers have been killed this year to protect your right to offend our sensibilities in dress and language. The people who work at the hotels, they are cleared by us. These hotels, these are the whorehouses of Arabia! *(stands over Mark)* When German prostitutes fall from

balconies and royal boys beat up bar girls, who comes to clean up? Colonel Salah Ziadeh! My brother is a corporal in the SSI. Their headquarters are not far from here. They monitor Muslim extremists, they interrogate. You are lucky you are not being questioned by him. His men do not shoot movies, they shoot people! Stand up!

Mark, frightened, attempts to stand. He trips over Ziadeh's foot. The guards hover around, not attempting to help Mark to his feet. The lazy susan stops.

Ziadeh reaches into the file, flourishes the petition.

Ziadeh: Who wrote this?

Mark: I don't know.

Ziadeh: Who translated it?

Mark: I don't know. I haven't slept. I have trouble remembering.

Ziadeh: You don't feel well, a little sick in the stomach from too much drink, too many olives, too many nuts, perhaps you want to throw up, well don't throw up here, this isn't an official reception, this isn't the Ambassador's residence, this isn't a woman's dress!

Mark: *(groans)* Ooh.

Ziadeh: Why did you sign it?

Mark: I...don't know.

Ziadeh: You "condemn" us?

Mark: I didn't want to. It was a favor.

Ziadeh: To Mr. Bing?

Mark: Yes.

Ziadeh: Why? So he would let you put his thing in your mouth? That's what you people do, isn't it?

Mark: No, no.

Ziadeh: You don't remember?

Mark: No, no.

Ziadeh: So you could steal from him, rob him, put his thing in your mouth and rob him!

Mark: No, no.

Ziadeh sits.

Ziadeh: Get up, Mr. Saperstein. Take a seat.

The guards back off as Mark pulls himself up, slides onto the chair facing Ziadeh. The lazy susan starts again.

Ziadeh: That's better. You are an honored guest of this country. You should behave as one. What did Mr. Bing plan to do with the petition?

Mark: To read it. At his press conference.

Ziadeh motions to one of his men who picks up Mark's fallen cigarette, puts it out in the ashtray.

Ziadeh: That's why it was translated into Arabic?

Mark: Yes.

Ziadeh: Your translator, Ismet, how old is she?

Mark: I only met her once.

Ziadeh: Twenty-three, twenty-four?

Mark: I suppose.

Ziadeh: You offered her a drink?

Mark: Thomas, Thomas offered her a drink.

Ziadeh: Let me see your hands.

Mark: What?

Ziadeh: Stretch them out.

Mark extends his hands. Ziadeh examines his little fingers for ring marks, releases them.

Ziadeh: She's quite attractive.

Mark: I suppose. Yes.

Ziadeh: Did Mr. Bing fancy her? When he offered her a drink?

Lights go down.

Scene Three

Lights come up. Colonel Ziadeh swivels in his chair to face Ismet.

Mark, face down, slumps on a chair in a holding room the opposite side of the stage from Thomas. A guard stands over him. Whenever either Thomas or Mark attempts to sleep, a guard awakens them.

Ziadeh: (*holds up petition*) Is this your handwriting?

Ismet: Yes.

Ziadeh: Why did you write this?

Ismet: Mr. Bing asked me. I am his translator.

Ziadeh: Were. You were his translator. Do you do everything he asks?

Ismet: I changed some of the language. I thought it would be better.

Ziadeh: I noticed. You changed some words. Not “condemn” but “disapprove.” You changed the language but you didn’t tell anyone he had asked you to translate this statement, you didn’t tell the authorities, you didn’t tell the head of the festival?

Ismet: Mr. Bing asked me not to.

Ziadeh: Did he?

Ismet: He wanted it to be a surprise. He wanted me to make copies.

Ziadeh: But you didn’t?

Ismet: No.

Ziadeh: Have you heard of me? Perhaps you heard of my brother?

Ismet: You approved me for this job.

Ziadeh: But you didn’t tell me?

Ismet: I was going to.

Ziadeh: Before you made copies? Or after? Let me see your hands.

She extends his hands. He examines her ring fingers.

Ziadeh: You were at the reception, at the reception with Mr. Bing and Mr. Saperstein?

Ismet: Yes.

Ziadeh: But you left early.

Ismet: I accompanied Mr. Saperstein back to the hotel.

Ziadeh: You left early.

Ismet: Yes. I took Mr. Saperstein to his room. Then I went home.

Ziadeh: He stayed in his room?

Ismet: I went home. My father was there.

Ziadeh: You didn't wait around, wait for Mr. Bing to return?

Ismet: Your men, the men in the lobby, they saw me leave.

Ziadeh: You could have come back.

Ismet: I went home.

Ziadeh: Mr. Bing, he is a little old for you, isn't he? Or do you like that? How much did he pay you?

Ismet: I am a good girl.

Ziadeh: A good Christian girl.

Ismet: I don't use Mont Blanc pens. I don't wear Chanel.

Icey silence

Ziadeh: Keep your hands on the table!!

She does.

Ziadeh: Your father, he works for the Department of Antiquities. At Cairo University. A prestigious job. What kind of daughter are you to do this to him?

Ismet: Do what?

Ziadeh: Risk his reputation. To risk his freedom.

A knock on the door. The guard receives a message, nods his head, steps over to Ziadeh, speaks to him.

Ziadeh: Good. Send him in. Miss Ismet, you will wait. Go with him.

The guard takes her out. Another ushers in Mr. Habbib, a middle-aged jeweler in a suit.

Ziadeh: Mr. Habbib, sorry to wake you up in the middle of the night.

Habib: My pleasure, Colonel.

Ziadeh takes out the ring, hands it to Habib.

Ziadeh: Examine this for me.

Habbib takes a loupe from his case, places in his eye, hold the ring up for inspection.

As he does Ismet passes Thomas, then Mark. Both look at her. Shielding her eyes, covering her face, she walks past them.

Habbib: This is interesting.

Lights go down.

Scene Four

Lights come up. Ziadeh, smoking, faces Thomas. Mark, cowering, sits in one holding area; Ismet in the other. Periodically one of the guards speaks to them in a threatening manner.

Ziadeh: Resolution 181.

Thomas doesn't respond. Pause.

Ziadeh: Resolution 181. *(reading)* "1982. Directed by Thomas Bing, produced by Alan Berg and Thomas Bing. Starring Joseph Dent, Lila Singer, Charles McCarther. An inspirational story of the founding of the state of Israel..."

Thomas: Colonel, it's late... *(looks at watch)* ...it's...four in the morning. I'm very tired. I'm not a young man. The jet leg, the drinks, the socializing, the events of last night. Has the Ambassador been notified? I was at his residence last evening.

Ziadeh: He's out of town. He's in Washington. *(reading)* "Thomas Bing, known for his audience pleasing fantasies of sexy spies and hipsters..." I got this from the internet. "...turns his gaze on the events of 1948. Charlie Brighton (Joseph Dent), a skeptical NY journalist posing as a Jew, joins the Haganah during the 'battle of the roads.' Dent, an Irishman playing an American playing as a Jew, seems as uncomfortable in this role as Bing seems directing it--

Thomas: I'd like to make a phone call.

Ziadeh: I didn't see the film.

Thomas: No one did.

Ziadeh: *(reading)* “Brighton meets Julia Rabinowitz (Lila Singer), a beautiful freedom fighter for the Irgun, a rival paramilitary organization. Singer, fetching in her unbuttoned khaki blouse, gives the best performance of her short career. Brighton, increasingly sympathetic to the Zionist cause, joins Julia in the Irgun, plotting and planning the fateful bombing of the King David hotel on June 29th. The film ends as David and Julia, now lovers, watch British warships depart Haifa harbor.” ‘The land without people,’ Brighton says, ‘has found the people without a land.’ A film curio, now largely forgotten, remembered primarily for the omnipresent posters of Miss Singer which adorned Jewish dorm rooms and fraternities throughout the Eighties.” *(pause)* The land without people! What land is this? What people is this? Are these the 750,000 refugees driven from Palestine by the Jews?

Thomas: It’s a quote, a quote from Hertzl—

Ziadeh: I know who said it!

Thomas: I’m not going to get dragged into a political conversation. I’m not going to listen to criticism from someone who hasn’t even seen the film!

Ziadeh: *(smiles)* I take your point. *(looks through papers)* I have a list of the films they are showing at your...tribute. “Resolution 181” is not listed.

Thomas: I didn’t make the selection.

Ziadeh: Egypt voted against Resolution 181. Not the film. The UN resolution. In 1947. *(lifts program)* There’s no mention of the film in this article, a rather nice article, written for the program. “Thomas Bing, The Artist as Entertainer.” What does that mean?

Thomas: You’d have to ask the writer.

Ziadeh: It doesn’t bother you?

Thomas: You know how it is in our business.

Ziadeh: No. How is it?

Thomas: Well, you know, something—a film—isn't successful, well, people just don't mention it. Like it didn't happen.

Ziadeh: The bombing of the King David Hotel, that is considered by many, people in my business that is, considered by many the birth of modern day terrorism.

Thomas: It was a military target. It housed British Headquarters. The British Headquarters, the British Criminal Division. Intelligence Headquarters.

Ziadeh: And civilians. Ninety-one people were killed in the blast, forty-five injured.

Thomas: Look, I've been thinking. I don't want to press charges. It doesn't matter about the theft, the computer, the camera, the money.

Ziadeh: You said that.

Thomas: The petition. The protest to the festival. About "The Edge of Love." Perhaps that was a mistake. A mistake to bring the petition here. This is not the proper place to make it...

Ziadeh: To make it public?

Thomas: Yes.

Ziadeh: But you signed it?

Thomas: Yes.

Ziadeh: You sent the signature. To London.

Thomas: Yes.

Ziadeh: Would you be willing to sign another paper, a paper supporting the decision of the film festival to ban the film “The Edge of Love?”

Thomas doesn't answer.

Ziadeh: Resolution 181. In the film the Palestinians—

Thomas: A film is not history. It is a story. A story with a point of view. Not an overview. A film entertains. That film took a Zionist point of view. Another film, an equally valid film, could take another point of view, a Palestinian point of view.

Ziadeh: A better film.

Thomas: A different film.

Ziadeh: Different.

Thomas: Different.

Ziadeh: Better.

Thomas: That would depend on how it was made. How good it was.

Ziadeh: How well it entertained.

Thomas: Yes.

Ziadeh: “Resolution 181,” was it entertaining?

Thomas: It meant to be.

Ziadeh: But no one saw it.

Ismet cries out. Mark hides his face.

Thomas: What was that?

Ziadeh: It was not well made?

Thomas: What was that?

Ziadeh: What?

Thomas: I heard a voice. A woman's voice.

Ziadeh: What is your relationship to Mr. Saperstein?

Thomas: What goes on here?

Ziadeh: This is my office. Torture, that's what you're thinking. That's how you people think.

Thomas: You people?

Ziadeh: Movie people. Arabs, they do such things. Dirty Arabs, they don't value human rights. Human life. Suicide bombers. You give us your Al Qaeda subjects, we interrogate them, we torture them. Let the dirty Arabs torture them. Keep your American hands clean.

Thomas: I didn't say...

Ziadeh: Torture sequence, there was a torture sequence in your film. I read that here. Palestinians torture a friend of...
((reading)) Mr. Brighton.

Thomas: I trimmed it.

Ziadeh: Such things happened. You believe that? You have proof?

Thomas: It was a long time ago.

Ziadeh: Not here. Not in the Middle East. It was yesterday.

Thomas: You must be aware of your reputation. The conditions in your prisons.

Ziadeh: You think this is a police state? Being a police state is not an indulgence. It is not a whim. Given an open government, our society would plunge into chaos. Muslim against Christian, rich against poor, man against woman, Muslim against Muslim. We are a veil over chaos. Your government pays us billions of dollars not to be secular, not democratic.

Thomas: I'm not an advocate of noncontextual democracy. I make movies.

Ziadeh: Do you have religious beliefs?

Thomas: Yes. In a way. In a Western non-binding sort of way. I believe in tolerance.

Ziadeh: Is that why you came? To expose our human rights?

Thomas: I came because I was invited.

Ziadeh: And it was free.

Thomas: Egypt is the most beautiful, most spiritual place I have ever been.

Ziadeh: And you can expose it.

Thomas: I did not rob myself.

Ziadeh: The time you spent in the room with Mr. Saperstein, room 1405, how did you spend it?

Thomas: We've been over and over this.

Ziadeh: What did you do?

Thomas: We talked. We discussed old times. The festival, the films in competition. The rules of competition.

Ziadeh: Old times with Alan Berg.

Thomas: Come again?

Ziadeh: The producer of “Resolution 181.” Mr. Saperstein’s friend.

Thomas: He’s dead.

Ziadeh: He was your partner.

Thomas: My business partner.

Ziadeh: He died how?

Thomas: Twenty, twenty-five years ago.

Ziadeh: How?

Mark cries out. Thomas freezes.

Thomas: He got sick.

Ziadeh: He is your friend.

Thomas: Was. Was my friend.

Ziadeh: Mr. Saperstein, he’s your friend.

Thomas: He’s not my friend.

Ziadeh: Why are lying to me? Do you have something to hide?

Thomas: About what?

Ziadeh: You and Mr. Saperstein were not discussing the rules of competition because you don’t know the rules of competition. You never opened the envelope literature about the festival.

Thomas: He opened it. Mark.

Ziadeh: Fingerprints, we dusted your suite for fingerprints. The sitting room, the bedroom, the mini-bar. It was a lot of work, but we did it. Mr. Saperstein's fingerprints were on the mini-bars. As you said. Did he go to the bathroom?

Thomas: He went to the bedroom to get a drink. He may have gone to the bathroom. I don't know.

Ziadeh: Would you lie for your friend?

Thomas: He's not my friend.

Ziadeh: Would he lie for you?

Thomas: No. I don't know.

Ziadeh: The torture, the torture in your film, describe it for me.

Thomas: I don't remember.

Ziadeh: What form did it take?

Thomas: I'm not an expert on torture.

Ziadeh: I'm interested. One professional to another.

Thomas: It was...a blowtorch.

Ziadeh: Good God.

Thomas: It was a movie.

Ziadeh: How did they do it?

Thomas: It wasn't real.

Zaideh: How did they do it?

Thomas: The man was on his knees. Hands tied behind his back.

Ziadeh: Show me!

Thomas: What?

Ziadeh: Show me. Here. Now.

The guard moves forward. Thomas hesitates, stands. The lazy susan stops. Thomas gets on his knees, places his hands behind his back. Ziadeh stands over him.

Thomas: They burnt his chest. They threatened his eyes. His genitals.

Ziadeh: *(pretends to hold blowtorch)* Like this?

Thomas: Yes.

Ziadeh: This was entertaining?

Thomas: Please. I'm tired. I want to sleep.

Another guard enters, whispers something to Ziadeh.

Ziadeh: *(to guard)* Good. Send him in.

Mark, disheveled, is ushered in. The guard hands a paper to Ziadeh. Thomas stands.

Thomas: Mark!

Ziadeh: Mr. Saperstein has made a confession. Full confession and voluntary. *(reads)* He was in your hotel room from 6:45 to approximately 7:30 pm yesterday. At that time, after a number of drinks and snacks, he entered into a homosexual act with you, witnessed by two individuals—

Thomas: Let me see that.

Ziadeh: It's in Arabic. At that time, at the time of this act, Mr. Saperstein became aware of a number of personal possessions in your suite. And cash. Later, at the Ambassador's residence, he became ill. After returning to the hotel, he entered your room, approached your possessions, stole them.

Mark: I'm sorry.

Ziadeh gestures for Mark to sit in his chair. Ismet is led off stage.

Thomas: How did he get in?

Ziadeh: The door was not fully closed. Unlocked.

Mark: I'm sorry. I was jealous. You have so much. I have so little. I just wanted something of yours.

Thomas: You find the camera, the computer?

Ziadeh: No.

Mark: I was ashamed. I went out, threw them in the river.

Ziadeh: The crime has been solved.

Thomas: Why?

Thomas sits across from Mark.

Ziadeh: Would you like some tea?

Ziadeh motions to the guard.

Mark: Forgive me.

Ziadeh: The crime for theft is six months.

Thomas: I won't press charges.

Ziadeh: This is a serious crime. In this country crimes against tourists are taken seriously. You are an invited guest. An honoree.

Thomas: Is this about money?

Ziadeh: The victim, Mr. Bing, if the victim signs a statement that the criminal is a good person of high morals who has made a mistake and deserves a chance and he forgives him, the judge, he will take this and the fact that Mr. Saperstein is a guest of our country into consideration. There will be no consequences.

Thomas: As if it never happened.

Ziadeh: Will you?

Mark: It would settle things.

Thomas: Yes.

Ziadeh: Good.

Ziadeh opens the file on his desk, removes a piece a paper, hands it to Thomas.

Thomas: It's in Arabic.

Ziadeh, with a flourish, produces a Mont Blanc pen. Thomas, about to protest, reconsiders, signs.

Thomas: *(returns pen)* It's settled then?

Ziadeh: One more. One more thing to sign. *(produces second document)* This in English.

Thomas reads the paper.

Ziadeh: It commends the film festival for its judgment, the decision to exclude the... film from London.

Thomas: *(reading)* "...adhering to the high standards of the IFPP, exercising equanimity and fairness, promoting international harmony and tolerance for all points of view."

*Ziadeh, with a flourish, reproduces the Mont Blanc pen.
Thomas grudging accepts it.*

Ziadeh: It's good writing, yes? Hussein al-Ban, the head of the festival, he wrote it.

Thomas: It didn't seem your style.

Ziadeh: I'm not a writer.

*Thomas signs the document, returns the Mont Blanc to Ziadeh.
The Colonel collects the signed documents, slips them in his pocket.*

Ziadeh: Good. Now you get to the real business, seeing movies, judging movies. You need to get some rest. And the press conference, of course. Television is waiting. The press conference, it's been rescheduled. Five o'clock this afternoon.

Thomas: It's not necessary.

Ziadeh: They are waiting. They want to see you. An important person, not often we in Egypt get to see such an important person. The matter of the theft may come up. We have told no one but control, you cannot control gossip, right? If it comes up you could mention that the crime has been solved. Rapidity which it has been solved. I would appreciate it if you would mention my name. It would be good for my career. There is no need to mention the criminal's name. Just to say he was a foreigner.

A guard enters with a tea tray, three cups.

Ziadeh: Here, finally.

Lights go down.

Scene Five

Lights come up.

Dawn. Thomas' hotel suite. The room shows signs of police search and subsequent cleanup. Orange lights streams through window.

Thomas and Mark, bedraggled, enter.

Mark: Look. (*steps to window*) It's beautiful.

Thomas: The pyramids.

Mark: Like the old days: staying up for the dawn. They think something may be under it. The Sphinx.

Thomas: Some sort of chamber.

Mark: What if they dig it up and nothing's there? It would be destroyed. (*goes to mini-bar*) What time couldn't do, science can. Look, they've restocked the mini-bar. Want a drink?

Thomas: Sure. To help me sleep.

Mark: Scotch.

Thomas: Scotch.

Mark pours two drinks.

Mark: Where is the press conference?

Thomas: The Sadat Conference Center. The press conference and cocktail receptions are held there. Sadat was assassinated across the street. The reviewing stand is there. You must have seen it on the way in.

Mark: I was on the bus.

Mark hands Thomas a drink.

Mark: I thought I might join you. At the press conference, if it's all right.

Thomas: Of course. We'll meet downstairs.

Mark: At the bar. 4:30.

Thomas: What did they do to you?

Mark: I've never been so scared in all my life.

Thomas: They didn't...?

Mark: No, I'm all right. You okay?

Thomas: That was brave. What you did today. That took courage.

Mark: I did it for the girl. Ismet. I saw her in the corridor when they were questioning her. She was crying. I wanted to stop it.

Thomas: You threw the camera and computer in the river? That was rich.

Mark: Ziadeh suggested that.

Thomas: I didn't believe you had done it.

Mark: I've never been so scared.

Thomas: Quite a night.

Mark: Why did he die?

Thomas: Who?

Mark: Sadat.

Thomas: I don't know. He irritated people I guess. Damn press conference. Same old questions, same answers. God, I hate popular culture. How'd I get involved in a business pleasing people I despise?

Mark: You're good at it.

Thomas: How do you do it? Write about crap week in, week out?

Mark: I don't. Not anymore. I ran out of adjectives.

Thomas: Alan *loved* popular culture. He loved trash, big tits, fart jokes, the whole deal. Every idea I had that was financially successful I discussed with him. Even the ones I did after he died. He was my muse.

Mark: What if he had lived?

Thomas: Sadat?

Mark: Alan.

Thomas: Oh, I would have turned on him I suppose. Something would have happened, I would have found some excuse and I would have turned on him. It's what I do.

Mark: I saw him, you know. Alan. Toward the end.

Thomas: You told me. "The lips."

Mark: No, not the phone call. I saw him in person.

Thomas: You said you didn't.

Mark: It's not a good story. I didn't want to bring it up.

Thomas: What happened?

Mark: It was at a club, a gay club, in Los Angeles. I don't go much anymore but I was with some friends and we went. Alan was there. I didn't recognize him at first. I was surprised when he recognized me. I could tell right away. It wasn't obvious, but when you've been around it, when you've seen it, you know. He was sick. He was talking in that way, in that way that implies we wouldn't be talking again. I didn't think much of it, since we hadn't seen each other in twenty years. We were talking then he opened his mouth and out of his mouth came the most ugly thing. He said, "I am so angry. I am so angry about what's happening to me, you know what I do? I go out and I pick up young boys and I fuck them." My jaw dropped. I said, "Alan, you are my friend, I love you, but that is the most vile, reprehensible thing I've ever heard."

Thomas: What did he say?

Mark: He just shrugged.

Thomas: Shrugged?

Mark: And walked off.

Thomas: Really?

Mark: Really.

Thomas: So he was a shit.

Mark: Yeah. Alan Berg: shit and muse.

Knock on the door. Thomas walks over, opens it. Hussein al-Ban, carrying Thomas' laptop and camera, enters.

Hussein: Ah, good, you're here. Both of you. (*glances at their drinks*) Quite a view.

Thomas: Hello.

Mark: Good morning.

Hussein: Good news. Colonel Ziadeh has recovered your computer and camera. (*sets them down*) And your cash! (*hands folded bills to Thomas*) Count it. See if it's all there.

Thomas glances at the money, pockets it.

Thomas: Where? Where did they find them?

Hussein: In another room. A room belonging to a young Italian. A football hooligan. He had come to Cairo with his father, a sort of father-son reconciliation trip. He was walking down the hall, checking if the doors were locked. Yours was open. He came in, saw your stuff—I guess the temptation was too great for him. It was the ring. The break came when Ziadeh had the ring you found analyzed. It was Italian silver, not Egyptian. Then it was a simple matter. They checked all the rooms registered to Italians. And found your things.

Mark: (*examines camera*) Such luck.

Hussein: Yes.

Thomas: Is there really an Italian?

Hussein: Of course. I saw him. And your computer and camera, now you have it back. You found the ring, didn't you? That was the breakthrough. You and the Colonel are mystery solvers.

Thomas: The Italian will be prosecuted?

Hussein: Oh yes, it's a serious crime. Did Colonel Ziadeh tell you about the press conference?

Thomas: At five. The Sadat Conference Center.

Hussein: Everyone's looking forward to it. We'll meet you downstairs. Ismet will translate.

Thomas: I was told see had...that she was unavailable.

Hussein: Nonsense. She's looking forward to it. All is forgiven.

Thomas: Like it never happened.

Mark: Except for the Italian.

Hussein: The Colonel spoke with me. He's sorry about anything he might have said last night, you know, in the heat of the investigation. He hopes you'll understand. He'd like to invite you, both of you, to his home, to have dinner with him and his wife. Quite an invitation. A rare opportunity.

Thomas: Is this a required appearance?

Hussein: No, no, nothing of the sort. Strictly voluntary. An honor, really. Perhaps he'll tell you some stories. Believe me, the Colonel has some stories to tell.

Thomas: *(looks at Mark)* Why not?

Mark: Why not?

Hussein: That's settled then. Good. I'll let you rest. See you downstairs at 4:45.

Mark: Goodbye.

Hussein: Insha'Allah.

Thomas: Insha'Allah.

Hussein exits.

Mark: Are you going to tell?

Thomas: Who?

Mark: The press. About the interrogation, the confession.

Thomas: No reason. Like the Colonel says, all is forgiven.

Mark: It'll make a good story. For the book.

Thomas: Quite a chapter.

Thomas removes his Rolex, hands it to Mark.

Thomas: I want you to have this.

Mark: I couldn't.

Thomas: I insist. As a token. A token of appreciation.

Mark: *(accepts watch)* We'll work together. The Free Cinema Club.

Thomas: I wouldn't want you to forget anything.

They laugh. Thomas holds his hand up. They clink a toast.

Thomas: You know, in entertainment, we make things simple. We take a simple story, put in simple character, come to a simple conclusion—and call it a mystery. One's own life—now there's a mystery.

Mark: Quite a story.

Thomas: How did we get here?

Mark: We were invited.

Music plays. "...a kiss is just a kiss...as time goes by..."

Blackout.

THE END