


Georges Perec

LES CHOSES  
a story of the sixties

Translated by Helen R. Lane

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(This is the central section of a short novel by Georges Perec. The novel concerns the goals and ambitions of a young French couple, their frustration with life in Paris, and their attempt to make sense of their lives by accepting teaching posts in Tunisia. They are disconcerted when they are placed in Sfax, and unable to find a place in the community. Their reactions to Sfax say more about themselves than about the city.)



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To Denis Buffard

*Incalculable are the benefits civilization has brought us,  
incommensurable the productive power of all classes of riches  
originated by the inventions and discoveries of science.  
Inconceivable the marvelous creations of the human sex in order  
to make men more happy, more free., and more perfect. Without  
parallel the crystalline and fecund fountains of the new life  
which still remains closed to the thirsty lips of the people who  
follow in their griping and bestial tasks.*

—MALCOLM LOWRY

**T**HEY TRIED TO ESCAPE.

One cannot live very long amid frenzy. The tension was too great in this world that promised so much and gave nothing. They were at the end of their patience. They seemed suddenly to realize one day that they needed a refuge.

They were marking time in Paris. They were no longer getting ahead. And they sometimes imagined themselves (each trying to outdo the other with that superabundance of false details that marked each of their dreams) as *petits bourgeois* forty years old. Jerome would be a director of a door-to-door selling network (Family Protection, Soap for the Blind, Needy Students); Sylvie would be a good housewife, with their tidy apartment, their little car, the little family *pension* where they would spend all their vacations, their television set. Or else they would see themselves as just the opposite, and this was still worse: overage bohemians, in turtlenecks and velvet pants, at the same sidewalk cafe in Saint-Germain or Montparnasse each night, eking out an existence through rare strokes of luck, shabby to the very ends of their black fingernails.

They would dream of living in the country, safe from all temptation. Their life would be frugal and clear as crystal. They would have a white stone house at the entrance of a village, warm corduroy pants, heavy shoes, a ski jacket, a steel-tipped cane, a hat, and they would take long walks in the forest every day. Then they would come back home; they would prepare tea and toast, as the English do; they would put huge logs in the fireplace; they would put a quartet they never tired of hearing on the phonograph; they would read the great novels they had never had time to read; they would receive their friends.

These imaginary flights to the country were frequent, but they rarely got to the stage of real planning. Two or three times, it is true, they idly wondered what sort of jobs they could get in the country. There weren't any. The thought of being schoolteachers came to them one day, but they immediately loathed the idea, thinking of the overcrowded classes, the hectic days. They talked vaguely of becoming traveling librarians, or of going to make pottery in an abandoned country house in Provence. Then they conceived the happy notion of living in Paris only three days a week, earning enough money there to live comfortably in the Yonne or the Loiret the rest of the time. But these embryonic departures never developed into much of anything. They never envisaged the real possibilities—or rather, real impossibilities—of them.

They dreamed of giving up their work, of letting everything go, of starting out with no set plans. They dreamed of starting over from scratch, of beginning all over on a different footing. They dreamed of sharp breaks and goodbyes.

The idea, however, made its inroads, and slowly came to stick in their minds. In mid-September of 1962, when they got back from a mediocre vacation spoiled by rain and their lack of money, they seemed to have made up their minds. An ad appeared in *Le Monde* during the first days of October, offering teaching jobs in Tunisia. They hesitated. It was not the ideal chance—they had dreamed of the Indies, the United States, Mexico. It was only a run-of-the-mill, ordinary offer, which promised neither lots of money nor adventure. They did not feel tempted. But they had friends in Tunis,

former high school and university classmates, and then there was the warm climate, the blue Mediterranean, the promise of another life, a real departure, different work. They agreed they would apply. They were given the jobs.

Real departures are planned long in advance. This one was a fiasco. It resembled a hasty escape. For two weeks they ran from office to office, for medical examinations, for passports, for visas, for tickets, for baggage. Then four days before they were to leave they learned that Sylvie, who had two advanced teaching certificates, had been appointed to the Technical High School in Sfax, two hundred and seventy kilometers from Tunis, and Jerome, who had had only one year of preparation for teaching, was appointed to teach grade school in Mahares, thirty-five kilometers farther away.

It was bad news. They wanted to give up the whole thing. They had wanted to go, they had thought they were going to Tunis, where friends were waiting for them, where a place to live had been rented for them. But it was too late. They had sublet their apartment, bought their tickets, given their good-bye party. They had been ready to leave for a long time. And then Sfax, a place they hardly recognized the name of, was the end of the world, the desert. Yet it did not even displease them, what with their strong liking for extreme situations, to think that they were going to be cut off from everything, far away from everything, isolated as they had never been before. They agreed, however, that a post as a grade school teacher was, if not too much of a comedown, at least too hard a job.

Jerome managed to have his contract canceled: one salary would give them money to live on until he found some sort of work once he got there.

So they left. Friends went with them to the station, and on the morning of the twenty-third of October, with four trunks of books and a folding bed, they went aboard the "Commandant-Crubellier" at Marseille, bound for Tunis. The sea was rough and lunch was not good. They were ill, took tablets, slept soundly. The next day they sighted Tunis. The weather was fine. They smiled at each other. They saw an island that someone said was named L'Ile Plane, then stretches of long, narrow beach, and after la Goulette, flights of migratory birds on the lake.

They were happy they had left. It seemed to them that they were emerging from a hell of crowded subways, nights that were too short, toothaches, uncertainties. They couldn't see things clearly. Their life had been a sort of endless dance on a tightrope which led nowhere: empty hunger pangs, a naked desire, boundless and helpless. They felt exhausted. They were leaving to bury themselves, to forget, to find peace.

The sun was shining. The ship sailed slowly, silently, down the narrow channel. On the road right next to it people standing in open cars waved to them. There were motionless little white clouds in the sky. It was already hot. The plates of the topside were warm. On the deck below them, sailors were piling up the deck chairs, rolling up the long tarred canvases that protected the holds. Lines were forming at the gangplanks.

They arrived at Sfax two days later, about two o'clock in the afternoon after a seven-hour train trip. The heat was overwhelming. Opposite the station, a tiny pink and white building, was an endless avenue, gray with dust, planted with ugly palm trees, lined with new buildings. A few minutes after the train pulled in, after the few scattered cars and motorbikes had left, the city fell once again into total silence.

They left their valises at the baggage-checking desk. They started down the avenue, which was called the avenue Bourguiba, and came to a restaurant about three

hundred yards away. A huge adjustable ventilator on the wall hummed irregularly. A few dozen flies had congregated on the sticky tables covered with oilcloth, and a poorly shaved waiter chased them away with a nonchalant wave of a napkin. For two hundred francs they had a tuna salad and a veal cutlet milanese.

Then they looked for a hotel, got a room, and had their bags brought up. They washed their hands and faces, lay down for a minute, changed clothes, came downstairs again. Sylvie went to the Technical High School; Jerome waited for her outside on a bench. Around four o'clock, Sfax slowly began to wake up again. Hundreds of children appeared, then veiled women, policemen dressed in gray poplin, beggars, carts, donkeys, immaculate bourgeois.

Sylvie came out with her teaching schedule in her hand. They walked around again; they drank a stein of beer and ate olives and salted almonds. Newspaper vendors were selling the *Figaro* of two days before. They had arrived.

The next day Sylvie met some of her future colleagues. They helped them find an apartment. There were, to begin with, three enormous, completely empty rooms with high ceilings. A long corridor led to a little square room where five doors opened on the three bedrooms, a bath-room, and an immense kitchen. Two balconies overlooked a little fishing port, Basin A of the south channel, which somewhat resembled Saint-Tropez, and a lagoon that stank. They took their first walk in the Arab quarter, bought box springs and a hair mattress, two rattan chairs, four rope stools, two tables, a thick esparto-grass mat decorated with unusual red motifs.

Then Sylvie began teaching. Day by day they settled down. Their trunks, which had come as hold baggage, arrived. They unpacked the books, the records, the phonograph, the knickknacks. They made lampshades out of large sheets of red, gray, green blotting paper. They bought long, rough-hewn pieces of lumber and perforated bricks and covered half of two walls with shelves. They pasted up dozens of reproductions on all the walls, and photographs of all their friends on one section in plain sight.

It was a cold and dreary place. What with the walls that were too high, covered in a sort of ocher-yellow limewash that was peeling off in great chunks, the floors uniformly tiled in large colorless squares, the useless space, everything was too large, too bare, for them to feel at home there. There should have been five or six of them, good friends, eating, drinking, talking. But they were alone, lost. The living room still gave off a certain warmth, what with its folding bed covered with a little mattress and a multicolored bedspread, with the thick mat with a few cushions thrown on it, with, above all, their books—the row of Pleiade editions, the sets of magazines, the four Tisnes—and with the knickknacks, the records, the big nautical chart, the “Festival of the Carrousel” everything that not so long ago had been the decor of their other life, everything that in this universe of sand and stone took them back toward the rue de Quartrefages, toward the tree that stayed green so long, toward the little gardens. Lying on their bellies on the mat, with a tiny cup of Turkish coffee next to them, they would listen to the Kreutzer sonata, the Archduke trio, *Death and the Maiden*, and it was as if the music, which took on an astonishing resonance in this huge, barely furnished room, almost a public hall, began to live in it and suddenly transformed it. It was a guest, a very dear friend, who had dropped out of sight and been found again by chance, who shared their meals, who spoke to them of Paris, who on this cool November evening in this foreign town where nothing belonged to them, where they did not feel comfortable,

led them back, allowed them to experience once again an almost forgotten feeling of complicity, of life shared. It was as if in a narrow perimeter—the surface of the mat, the two rows of shelves, the record player, the circle of light shed by the cylindrical lampshade—a protected zone, which neither time nor distance could penetrate, had managed to take root and survive. But all around them was exile, the unknown: the long corridor where steps resounded too loudly; the immense, ice-cold, hostile bedroom with its one piece of furniture, a wide bed that was too hard and smelled of straw, its wobbly lamp set on an old crate that served as a night table, its wicker trunk full of linen, its stool with clothes piled up on it; and the third room, unused, that they never went into. Then the stone stairway, the huge entry hall perpetually menaced by sand; the street—three two-story buildings, a shed where sponges were dried, a vacant lot; the city around them,

They doubtless spent the oddest months of their whole lives in Sfax.

Sfax, whose port and European quarter had been destroyed during the war, was made up of about thirty streets cutting across each other at right angles. The two main streets were the avenue Bourguiba, which went from the railroad station to the central market, near which they lived, and the avenue Hedi-Chaker, which went from the port to the Arab quarter. Their intersection formed the center of the city: located there were the city hall, whose two downstairs halls contained a few old pieces of pottery and a half-dozen mosaics; the statue and the tomb of Hedi-Chaker, assassinated by the Red Hand shortly before independence; the Cafe de Tunis, frequented by Arabs, and the Cafe de la Regence, frequented by Europeans; a little flower bed, a newspaper kiosk, a tobacco store.

One could circle the European quarter in just a little more than a quarter of an hour. The Technical High School was three minutes away from the building they lived in, the market two minutes, the restaurant where they ate all their meals five, the Cafe de la Regence six, as were the bank, the municipal library, and six of the seven movie theaters in town. The post office and the railroad station, and the place to rent cars for Tunis or Gabes, were less than ten minutes away, and constituted the extreme limits of what it sufficed to be acquainted with to live in Sfax.

The beautiful old fortified Arab town offered grayish-brown walls, and doors which were considered admirable, and rightly so. They often went inside the Arab town and made it almost the only destination of all their walks, but since they were really only strollers they always remained outsiders. They did not understand even its simplest mechanisms; they saw in it only a labyrinth of streets. They would look up and admire a forged iron balcony, a painted beam, the pure pointed arch of a window, a subtle play of light and shadow, an extremely narrow stairway, but their walks were aimless; they went round and round, feared at every instant that they would get lost, and tired quickly. Nothing, in the end, seemed attractive to them in this succession of miserable shops, almost identical stores, and native bazaars crowded together, in this incomprehensible alternation of swarming streets and empty streets, in this crowd that as far as they could see was going nowhere.

This sensation of being outsiders was accentuated, became almost oppressive, when with long empty afternoons before them, or dispiriting Sundays, they went all through the Arab part of the city and, beyond Bab Djebli, reached the endless suburbs

of Sfax. For whole kilometers there were tiny gardens, hedges of prickly pear, mud huts, sheet-iron and cardboard shacks, then immense, deserted, putrid lagoons, and at the very end of them, the first fields of olives. They loitered about for hours; they passed by garrisons, and walked across vacant lots and muddy sections of town.

And when they came back to the European quarter, when they passed the Hillaal movie theater or the Nour, when they sat down at the Regence, clapped their hands to call the waiter, ordered a Coca-Cola or a stein of beer, bought the latest *Le Monde*, whistled for the vendor, always dressed in a long dirty white smock and a canvas skullcap on his head, to buy a few cones of peanuts, toasted almonds, pistachio nuts and pine nuts from him—then they had the dreary feeling that this was home.

They would walk alongside palm trees gray with dust; they would walk along the neo-Moorish facades of the buildings along the avenue Bourguiba; they would glance vaguely at the hideous shop windows: frail furniture, ironwork candelabra, electric blankets, notebooks for schoolboys, street dresses, ladies' shoes, bottles of butane gas—it was their only world, their real world. They would trudge back home. Jerome would make coffee in coffeemakers imported from Czechoslovakia; Sylvie would correct a pile of exercises.

Jerome had tried at first to find work. They had gone to Tunis several times, and thanks to letters of introduction he had gotten in France, and with the aid of his Tunisian friends, he had met employees in offices of the Information Service, Radio, Tourist Bureau, and National Education. It was wasted effort. Motivation studies did not exist in Tunis, nor did part-time work, and people held on to the rare soft jobs. He had no qualifications; he was neither an engineer nor an accountant nor an industrial designer nor a doctor. He was again offered jobs as a grade school teacher or assistant teacher in a high school; he didn't want them. He soon abandoned all hope. Sylvie's salary allowed them to live, frugally: this was the most usual way of living in Sfax.

Following the program for the year, Sylvie wore herself out trying to explain the hidden beauties of Malherbe and Racine to pupils taller than she was who didn't know how to write. Jerome wasted his time. He started on different projects that he could never carry out: preparing to pass an examination in sociology, trying to put his ideas about movies into shape. He loitered in the streets in his Weston shoes, strode up and down the port, wandered through the market. He went to the museum, exchanged a few words with the guard, looked for a while at an old amphora, a tombstone inscription, a mosaic: Daniel in the lions' den, Araphitrite riding a dolphin. He went to watch a tennis match on the courts set up at the foot of the ramparts, he crossed the Arab quarter, he loitered in the native bazaars, hefting fabrics, brass pieces, saddles. He bought all the newspapers, did the crossword puzzles, borrowed books from the library, wrote his friends rather sad letters that often were not answered.

Sylvie's schedule established the rhythm of their life. Their week was made up of lucky days—Mondays, because the morning was free and because the bill changed at the movie, Wednesdays, because the afternoon was free, Fridays, because the whole day was free and the movie programs changed again—and unlucky days: the rest of the week. Sunday was a neutral day, agreeable in the morning because they stayed in bed and the weeklies from Paris came, dragging in the afternoon, sinister in the evening, unless a movie by chance appealed to them, but it was rare for two worth-while or even tolerable films to be shown in the same half-week. And so the weeks went by. They

succeeded each other with mechanical regularity: four weeks made a month, more or less, and the months were all alike. The days, after having grown shorter and shorter, became longer and longer. Winter was damp, cold almost. Their life flowed by.

## THEY WERE ALL ALONE.

Sfax was an opaque town. On certain days it seemed to them that no one could ever enter into it. Its doors would never open. There were people on the streets in the evening, dense crowds coming and going, an almost continuous wave beneath the arcades of the avenue Hedi-Chaker, in front of the Hotel Mabrouk, in front of the Centre de Propagande of the Destour, in front of the Hillal theater, in front of the Delices pastry shop. There were public places that were almost full: cafes, restaurants, movie houses; and faces which might for a moment seem familiar. But all around them, along the port, along the ramparts, as soon as one got a little way away, there was only emptiness, death: the immense sandy esplanade in front of the hideous cathedral, surrounded with dwarf palms, the boulevard de Picville, bordered with vacant lots, two-story houses; the rue Mangolte, the rue Fezzani, the rue Abd-el-Kader Zghal, naked and deserted, dark and rectilinear, swept with sand. The wind shook the rickety palms: trunks swollen with woody scales, from which there barely emerged a few palm leaves in a fan. Multitudes of cats crept into garbage cans. A dog with yellow hair passed by from time to time, sticking close to the walls, its tail between its legs.

Not a soul around: behind the doors that were always closed, nothing but bare corridors, stone stairways, blind courtyards. Street after street going off at right angles, iron curtains, palings, a world of false plazas, false streets, phantom avenues. They would walk silently along, disoriented, and sometimes they had the impression that Sfax did not exist, did not breathe. They looked about them for signs of secret sympathy. There was no answer. It was an almost painful sensation of isolation. They were dispossessed of this world, they did not feel at home in it; it did not belong to them and never would belong to them. It was as if a very ancient order had been given, once and for all, a strict rule that excluded them: they would be allowed to go where they pleased, they would not be bothered, no one would say a word to them. They would remain unknown, strangers. The Italians, the Maltese, the Greeks of the port would silently watch them go by; the great olive-growers, all dressed in white, with their glasses with gold frames, walking slowly down the rue du Bey followed by their bodyguards, would pass them by without seeing them.

They had only passing, and often distant, relations with Sylvie's colleagues. The French teachers who had tenure didn't seem very impressed with those who had come under contract. Even those not bothered by this distinction found it more difficult to forgive Sylvie for not being what they would have liked her to be: the wife of a professor and herself a professor, a good provincial petite bourgeoisie, dignified, reserved, cultured. They represented France. Yet somehow there were still two Frances— that of beginning professors who wanted to acquire a little house in Angouleme, Beziers, or Tarbes as soon as they could, and that of the refractory or rebellious who did not get the extra one-third of their salary for colonial service but could allow themselves to scorn the others—but this latter was a species on the way to becoming extinct, for most of them had been pardoned and others were leaving for jobs in Algeria, in Guinea. But neither of the two sorts seemed ready to admit that one might sit in the first row in movie houses alongside the raft of native kids, or loiter in the streets like a good-for-nothing, in old shoes, unshaven, disheveled. There were a few exchanges of books, of

records, a few rare discussions at the Regence, and that was all. No warm invitation, no lively friendship—that was something that didn't thrive in Sfax. People curled up inside themselves, in their houses that were too big for them.

With the others, with the French employees of the Compagnie Sfax-Gafsa or Petroles, with the Moslems, the Jews, the French born in Tunisia, it was still worse: contact was impossible. Sometimes they didn't speak to a soul for a whole week.

It soon came to seem as if life had stopped. Time passed, motionless. They no longer had any link with the world, except for newspapers that were always too old and for all they knew might even be nothing but pious lies, memories of a former life, reflections of another world. They had always lived in Sfax and would always live there. They had no more plans, were no longer impatient. They looked forward to nothing, not even to vacations that were always too far away, not even to returning to France.

They experienced neither joy nor sadness, nor even boredom, but they sometimes asked themselves whether they were still alive, whether they were really alive. They got no particular satisfaction from this misleading question, except for one elusive thing: it sometimes seemed to them, dimly, obscurely, that this life was adequate, what it should be, and, paradoxically, necessary. They were at the heart of a void, they were settled down in a no man's land of straight streets, yellow sand, lagoons, gray palm trees, in a world they didn't understand, that they didn't try to understand. For never in their past life had they been prepared to have to adapt themselves someday, transform themselves, model themselves on a landscape, a climate, a way of life. Sylvie did not for an instant resemble the professor she was supposed to be, and Jerome could give the impression, as he loitered in the streets, that he had brought his country, or rather his neighborhood, his ghetto, his section of town along with him beneath the soles of his English shoes. But the rue Larbi-Zarouk, where they had chosen to live, did not even have the mosque that is the glory of the rue de Quatrefages, and as for the rest, no matter how hard they sometimes tried to imagine them, there was no boulevard Mac-Mahon, no Harry's Bar, no Balzar, no Contrescarpe, no Salle Pleyel, no banks of the Seine on a June night. But in this void, precisely because of this void, because of this absence of everything, this fundamental emptiness, this neutral zone, this clean slate, it seemed to them that they were becoming purified, that they were rediscovering a greater simplicity, a true modesty. And, certainly, in the general poverty of Tunisia, their own misery, their mild discomfort as civilized individuals used to showers, cars, iced drinks, no longer had much sense.

Sylvie taught her classes, asked her pupils questions, corrected their homework. Jerome went to the municipal library, read books at random: Borges, Troyat, Zeraffa. They ate their meals in a little restaurant, at the same table almost every day, the same meal almost every day: tuna salad, breaded cutlet or shish-kebab or fried sole, and fruit. They would go to the Regence to have an espresso and the glass of cold water that came with it. They read piles of newspapers, saw movies, loitered in the streets.

Their life was like a habit they had had too long, like an almost peaceful boredom: a life that had nothing.

FROM APRIL ON THEY TOOK A FEW TRIPS.

Sometimes when they had three or four days free and were not too short of money, they would rent a car and go south. Or else on Saturday at six in the evening a jitney taxi would take them to Sousse or Tunis till Monday at noon.

They tried to get away from Sfax, its dismal streets, its emptiness, and find in panoramic views, in horizons, in ruins something that would dazzle them, overwhelm them, warm splendors that would avenge them. The ruins of a palace, a temple, a theater, a green oasis discovered from the heights of a mountaintop, a long beach of fine sand stretching in a semicircle from one end of the horizon to the other sometimes rewarded them for having sought them out. But usually they left Sfax only to come across—a few dozen or a few hundred kilometers farther on—the same dismal streets, the same teeming and incomprehensible bazaars, the same lagoons, the same ugly palm trees, the same aridity.

They saw Gabes, Tozeur, Nefta, Gafsa and Metlaoui, the ruins of Sbeitla, Kasserine, Thelepte. They went through dead cities whose names had once seemed magic: Mahares, Moulares, Matmata, Medenine. They pushed on as far as the Libyan border.

For kilometer after kilometer it was a stony, gray, uninhabitable land. Nothing grew there except thin tufts of almost yellow grass with sharp-pointed blades. It seemed to them that they traveled for hours in a cloud of dust along a road marked only by old ruts, or the half-erased tracks of tires, with no other horizons than soft grayish hills, coming across nothing except, on occasion, the carcass of a donkey, an old rusty tin oil drum, a pile of stones half caved in that perhaps once had been a house.

Or else along a road that was well marked but cut up and here and there almost dangerous, they would cross immense salt deposits, and on each side, as far as the eye could see, there would be a white crust that shone in the sunlight, causing flickering shimmerings on the horizon that now and then almost resembled mirages, waves breaking, crenelated walls. They would stop the car and walk a few steps. Under the crust of salt, light brown stretches of dry cracked clay sometimes gave way, leaving darker zones of compact, rubbery mud that their feet might almost sink into.

Camels with their hair peeling off, their feet entangled in their tethers, biting off leaves of a curiously twisted tree with great movements of their heads, turning their stupid thick lips toward the highway, mangy, half-wild dogs running round and round, crumbling walls of dry stones, goats with long black hair, low tents made out of patched blankets announced villages and towns: a long succession of square, one-story houses, dirty-white facades, the square tower of a minaret, the dome of a little mosque. They passed a peasant trotting along beside his donkey, and stopped at the only hotel.

Three men squatting at the foot of a wall were eating bread that they moistened in a little oil. Children were running about. A woman, completely draped in a black or purple veil that covered even her eyes, sometimes glided from one house to another. The terraces of the two cafes overflowed into the street. A loud-speaker broadcasted Arab music: strident modulations, taken up over and over again, repeated in chorus, litanies of a piercing flute, the rasping sound of tambourines and zithers. Men sitting around in the shade were drinking little glasses of tea, playing dominoes.

They passed enormous cisterns, and reached the ruins by a difficult path: four columns seven yards high, which no longer held up anything, houses fallen to pieces though their ground plan was still intact, with the square trace of each room marked on the ground, uneven steps, cellars, paved streets, remains of sewers. And so-called guides offered them little silver fish, pieces with a patina, little statuettes in terra cotta.

Then, before they left, they entered the markets, the bazaars. They got lost in the labyrinth of galleries, blind alleys, passages. A barber was shaving customers in the open air, next to an enormous pile of porous bowls. A donkey was laden with two conical baskets of plaited rope, filled with powdered peppers. In the goldsmiths' market, in the fabric market, barefoot merchants sitting cross-legged on piles of blankets unrolled rugs of thick wool and clipped wool for them, offered them burnouses in red wool, veils in wool or silk, leather saddles decorated in silver, hammered copper plates, carved wood, firearms, musical instruments, little jewels, shawls embroidered in gold, parchments decorated with great arabesques.

They bought nothing, in part, doubtless, because they did not know how to buy and felt uneasy about having to bargain, but above all because they didn't feel attracted. None of these objects, however sumptuous they sometimes were, gave them an impression of richness. They passed by, amused or indifferent, but everything they saw remained foreign to them, belonged to another world, didn't concern them. And they brought back from these trips only images of emptiness, of dryness: desolate brush, steppes, lagoons, a mineral world where nothing could grow, the world of their own loneliness, their own aridity.

Yet it was in Tunis that they one day saw their dream house, the loveliest of places to live. It was at Hammamet, the home of an aging English couple who divided their time between Tunisia and Florence, for whom hospitality seemed to have become the only way not to die of the boredom of each other's company. There were a good dozen other guests besides Jerome and Sylvie. The things going on were pointless and even exasperating: little party games, bridge games, canasta games alternated with rather snobbish conversations in which fairly recent gossip straight from the capitals of the West led to knowing and often trenchant remarks ("I like the man very much and what he's doing is fine . . .").

But the house was heaven on earth. In the center of a great park that sloped gently toward a beach with fine sand, an old building in the local style, quite small, with no upper floors, had developed from year to year, had finally become the sun of a constellation of pavilions in all sizes and all styles, glories, little mosques, bungalows, surrounded by verandas, scattered all about the park and linked by galleries with skylights. There was an octagonal room, with no other openings but a little door and two narrow peepholes, with thick walls entirely lined with books, as dark and cool as a tomb. There were tiny rooms, whitewashed like monks' cells, with two Sahara armchairs and a low table as the only furniture, and other long, low, narrow rooms with thick mats, and still others furnished in the English style with window seats and monumental fireplaces flanked by two divans facing each other. In the garden, paths of white marble bordered by antique statuary and fragments of columns wound among the lemon trees, the orange trees, the almond trees. There were brooks and waterfalls, rock grottoes, basins covered with great white water lilies among which from time to time

there streaked the silvery trace of fish. Peacocks strutted about freely, as they did in their dreams. Arcades smothered in roses led to nests of greenery.

But it was, doubtless, too late. The three days they spent at Hammamet did not shake off their lethargy. It seemed to them that this luxury, this ease, this profusion of offerings, this immediate evidence of beauty no longer concerned them. They would once have damned themselves for the painted tiles of the bathrooms, for the fountains of the gardens, for the Scotch carpet in the great entry hall, for the oak paneling in the library, for the porcelains, for the vases, for the rugs. They hailed them as a memory; they had not become insensitive to them, but they no longer understood them; they lacked points of reference. It was doubtless in this Tunis, in this cosmopolitan Tunis with traces of prestige, a pleasant climate, a picturesque and highly colorful life, that they could most easily have settled down. It was, doubtless, this life that they had once dreamed of: but they had become nothing but inhabitants of Sfax, provincials, exiles.

A world without recollections, without memory. Time still went by, desert-like days and weeks which did not count. They no longer hankered after anything. An indifferent world. Trains came in, boats anchored in port, unloaded machine tools, medicine, ball bearings, took on phosphates, oil. Trucks loaded with straw crossed the city, went south where there was famine. Their life went on exactly the same as usual: hours teaching, espressos at the Regence, old films in the evening, newspapers, crossword puzzles. They were sleepwalkers. They no longer knew what they wanted. They were dispossessed persons.

It now seemed to them that before—and this "before" each day became farther back in time, as if their previous history was slipping into legend, into the unreal or the formless—before, they had at least had a furious desire to possess. This need had often taken the place of living. They had felt keyed up, impatient, devoured with desires.

And then what? What had they done? What had happened?

Something that resembled a very mild, very quiet tragedy had settled down at the heart of their slow-motion life. They were lost in the ruins of a very old dream, in formless debris.

Nothing was left. They were at the end of the road, at the end of this ambiguous trajectory that had been their life for six years, at the end of this vague quest that had led them nowhere, that had taught them nothing.