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Mohammedan Temptations

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Summer 1985: Tunis and Sousse

The edition of the Koran he had fallen for cost five Tunisian dinars. Back then, in the mid-1980s, that was twenty deutschmarks: a lot of money, for him. After buying the boat ticket for the crossing from La Goulette, the harbour of the Tunisian capital, to Genoa, he had sixty marks left. If he bought this Koran, he would have to get by on forty marks for the next five days, until the ferry set sail. On the ship there would be breakfast and dinner like in a hotel with half board, so he wouldn't need anything else from then on. From Genoa he could hitch home, he'd save some food on the ship, and with a bit of luck he'd meet someone on the ferry who would take him with them to West Germany, maybe even as far as Cologne.

Tunisia was no more expensive than Algeria or Morocco, where he'd spent the previous weeks. You could get a bed in a shared hotel room for as little as two or three marks. A single room, with toilet and cold shower in the hallway, cost five. If he bought the Koran, he'd have eight marks left for each day, two dinars. That wasn't much, admittedly, even by his standards; he'd reckoned with fifteen marks per day for everything, including transport costs. He considered: you could get a heavily sugared peppermint tea for the equivalent of twenty pfennigs, a kilo of oranges for fifty, a loaf of pitta bread for ten. His survival was therefore not in jeopardy; this was more or less what he'd been living on for six weeks now. At seventeen – an age which has this advantage over all those that follow – one can get by on very little. He could buy the Koran, but he would have to rely on his luck not deserting him, on his continuing to find people he could share a room with, and on succeeding in getting a lift to Sousse, where he wanted to spend his last few days in Tunisia. He had walked the length and breadth of Tunis for three whole days (even travelling to the archaeological excavations at Carthage), and he felt he'd seen enough. He wanted to go to the seaside, where all the tourists were, a kind of preparation for the gradual return to his homeland.

Since the money question had now been resolved, albeit with the aid of calculatedly optimistic expedients, he had no further arguments with which to resist the temptation of the Koran. For with this book he believed he would be purchasing the sum total of everything he had experienced in the previous six weeks. He had himself almost become a Muslim; maybe he already was one, though he didn't know for sure. As far as he could tell he had completed all the necessary rituals. He was sharing his hotel room with an Algerian whom he had met on the train from Constantine to Tunis. That was how it had often happened on this journey. He had blind faith in these encounters; in his youthful, yes, but mysteriously unerring instinct for human nature, and indeed he had never been disappointed, never been robbed or harassed. On the contrary, everyone felt responsible for him, a responsibility they took on and fulfilled. This Algerian, then, revealed himself to be an imam, a former imam who (as far as he could understand) had been supplanted by another, obviously more Islamic prayer leader, a story he didn't really comprehend. At any rate, this former imam now worked as a small-scale trader commuting between Annaba and Tunis, and the young German, who was of course unfamiliar with the finer points of becoming a Muslim, didn't know whether the rituals he had completed on the former imam's suggestion, basically just for practice or out of coquetry more than anything – the recitation of verses from the Koran, the ritual washing, the recitation of the creed – had made him a Muslim. The German's minimal knowledge of Arabic, limited to the letters of the alphabet and the basic rules of grammar, with which he never failed to impress people, had spurred the Algerian to make his attempt at conversion; and now, as the phrases for the profession of faith had already been pronounced, and having of course no desire to mar his speedy success with a lengthy discussion, the latter merely beamed: Excellent, there you are, now you're a Muslim already. And yet – of this the German was quite convinced – he had initially only wanted to demonstrate to him how easy it was to become a Muslim: do this, do that, copy me, yes, exactly, recite the sura, murmur the creed, it's like this, that's right, you've got it, and hey presto, before you know it, you're a Muslim. He was actually quite attracted to the idea – why not? – of becoming a Muslim, but he would have preferred to inform himself rather better in advance about the consequences of such a conversion; and he also felt he should be given a proper document, a certificate of his new faith. His roommate, however, just said

he could get one at any mosque; all he had to do was prove through the repetition of the rituals he had just learned that he had become a Muslim.

But now that it had happened, or now that it might have happened, and the situation was presumably as he thought, namely if he now decided to have wanted this (but does one decide, he asked himself, to *have wanted?* Doesn't one just *want?*), then he would indeed have become a Muslim; if not, the conversion didn't count. It followed that he would at some point have to decide what actual significance he wanted to attribute in retrospect to his potential conversion. In addition to this question, which made the acquisition of the Koran appear highly advisable, he had not been unimpressed by the enthusiasm, indeed the passion, which all those he had met and who had been so kind to him exhibited with regard to their religion. A religion which was, moreover, unlike any religion in his homeland, everywhere tangible and vivid, which fascinated him all the more the less he understood of it. Buying the Koran was the route to the source of this fascination. And in the presentiment of a receptivity which he should never again feel with such intensity he prepared himself to be enthralled, even overwhelmed. Up to now he had read only a little, and he now envisaged this work as a kind of ultimate poetry, a complete linguistic and ethical artwork transported outside of time which would invariably edify and inspire its readers and support them through anything and everything. Back then, of course, he would not have been able to put this concept into words. He saw it more diffusely, like a wide open hand, ready at last to hand over everything that had always been missing, and only in so doing conveying to him what exactly it was that he had missed.

In the moment when he stumbled across the bilingual Koran in the French language bookshop, as if it had been put on display there especially for him, his fate was sealed. How could he not have bought it, however expensive it had been? How? He had barely entered the bookshop to see whether there were any French translations of the Koran when he spotted this edition, a fully-fledged French-Arabic Koran, and even though at the time he knew only a few words of Arabic, he could read the script, could decipher the words and read them aloud. Furthermore, this Koran – he had a feeling that this too would be useful – had copious notes which you couldn't overlook even on a first browse through. In short: he returned to the hotel, counted his money and decided that he had to buy this book. The fact that it cost more than his budget allowed and the purchase

represented a genuine sacrifice only added to the charm of his decision. And because the book was too bulky to fit in his small rucksack, he positioned himself the following morning on the highway to Sousse with a plastic bag under one arm and stretched out the other before the passing cars.

The first few days his luck held. He was soon plucked from the side of the road, and had barely stepped out of the car in Sousse when he met three young Englishmen who let him share their hotel room. Together they went sightseeing around town, and they even paid for him to get into the museum and the catacombs. Here, if what the guide told them was true, they beheld the scattered bones of the first African Christians who were buried in these underground passageways in the second and third centuries A.D. That they didn't crumble to dust in the musty air after all those centuries was hard to believe. It was as if they, of all people, had for some incomprehensible reason been barred from entering Paradise, with the result that their bones now had to moulder away down here until the end of time, whereas the bones of the ones who'd got in had long since disintegrated and been patched together again on the other side to new and wondrous life. After three days the Englishmen travelled on towards Kairouan, and as he couldn't pay for the hotel, basic though it was and geared to backpackers like himself, he had to find an even cheaper place to stay for his last night in Sousse before taking the train back to Tunis the next day, to catch the ferry from La Goulette to Genoa the day after that. He wandered down the beach promenade in the already scorching, almost midday heat, past the tourist hotels to the youth hostel at the other end of town. It wasn't a proper hostel but a group of bungalows. The manager, who wasn't a proper hostel warden either, was curt with him; he wasn't even interested in seeing his youth hostel ID. A bed in one of the bungalows, for which a key was required, was almost as expensive as a room in a hotel. The boy knew that several of the bungalows were unoccupied; it was the middle of summer, not exactly high season in this part of the world, so he prepared to bargain. The man wouldn't budge. But he didn't want to give in that easily, not least because he felt the man was being blatantly rude. And as it was now definitively too hot to wander aimlessly around town with his baggage, he sat down at one of the tables scattered haphazardly about the apparently completely deserted hostel complex and ordered a tea. He would stay until the afternoon and see what happened. Maybe the man would get friendlier towards evening.

Nonetheless, the fact that he was at his mercy as far as the coming night was concerned was beginning to fill him with subliminal panic.

In these circumstances, first sitting at the table, then seeking out the scanty shade beneath one of the dusty, sparsely-leaved eucalyptus trees, he opened his Koran for the first time, with the intention of reading it more thoroughly, of reading it properly. Only now, when he was condemned to wait, did he find the time to do more than just admire the beauty of the Arabic calligraphy. Up till now he had carried the book around with him more like a talisman. And as he began to read he said to himself: so this is the Koran, so this is the Book, this the religion that all the friendly Arabs I've met have talked about so enthusiastically.

He had once read an account of modern Algerian history. But he knew nothing about Islam, other than that the prophet appertaining to it was called Mohammed. At the top of the first page, which caught his eye (despite the bilingualism you had to open the book in the Arabic way, where 'normal' books ended), stood: 'Avertissement' – advice, preface, warning? – 'This book is without doubt the word of God and therefore demands of every civilised person that it be treated with the greatest respect. No one should touch this book without having washed his entire body with the firm intention of achieving purity, in order to become worthy of receiving the word of God.' That caught him on the wrong foot straight off. What should he do? Not only did he have no washing facilities, it was also unlike him, indeed he would have found it ridiculous, to go looking for washing facilities in response to such an exhortation. Exceptions would surely be made for travellers who can't wash everywhere they go but who nonetheless want to read the Koran. Besides, such obedience to this 'Avertissement' would hardly have been compatible with his self-image, which had, after all, taken him deep into the Algerian Sahara, as far as Tamanrasset, against the explicit prohibition of his parents. Nonetheless, he felt as if he had been caught red-handed, sensed in response to this admonition the foul breath of a bad conscience; and in this there was something that moved to block his receptivity right from the start, a feeling that too much was being asked of him, of being unprepared.

Then he read in the 'Avertissement' the following introduction: 'In his infinite mercy God has addressed us with a completely clear and comprehensible Arabic.' So much the better, he thought. With a growing, conflicting mixture of curiosity and scepticism he followed the words of the translator: 'It is one of the wonders of

this book, dictated by an illiterate man according to the whisperings of the Archangel Gabriel and never subjected to any later corrections, that despite the importance of the topics it deals with one finds in it a uniform harmony and no contradictions whatsoever. Our astonishment is still further increased by the fact that it is in entire agreement with the truths uncovered by the most modern scientific discoveries.’ There followed several pages about the compilation and the various different ways of reading the Koran, which he skipped, and about the history of Koranic translations. Before he finally encountered the first sura he returned once again to the ‘Avertissement’ to reread a sentence which had left an indelible taste in his mouth, its apocalyptic sentiments readily connecting with his own, admittedly far more trivial, apprehensions regarding the coming night, for which it didn’t look as if he would have a roof over his head: ‘We want to make this humanity, which waves its arms like a drowning man, panic-stricken and lost, seeking to grasp a rope he can hold on to, aware of the hand which God extends to all his creatures, before the inexorable hour approaches in which the unrighteous are prepared to give away everything in order to avoid their harsh but just punishment; but it is useless for them to want then to believe, after they have been unbelievers all their lives.’

Thus it was written. But what it was that was so crucial for him to believe he still didn’t know. The midday heat had reached its peak. He could have fallen asleep were it not for his nagging curiosity. The first sura, which he now read, he knew. He could read it in Arabic, although he didn’t understand every word, because he had practised it with the Algerian in his hotel room in Tunis. It sounded beautiful. Actually, though, it didn’t say anything special. ‘Lead us onto the right path’; he liked that, probably because it seemed familiar to him and could just as well have been from a Christian prayer. Then came a sentence that confused him, because it was actually superfluous. It read: ‘The path of those to whom You show mercy, with whom You are not angry, who do not take the wrong path.’ That the right path was determined only by the fact that those who take it do not take the wrong path seemed to him, at this important juncture near the end of the first sura, which was repeated in every prayer, a surprisingly banal, tautologous definition. Didn’t he understand this passage, or was it really as banal as it appeared at first glance? The detailed commentary – this took by far the longest time to read – composed by the same Dr. Saladin Kechrid as the

introduction, insisted ('all exegetes agree') that those who take the wrong path (but wasn't it talking about those who *didn't* take the wrong path?) referred to Christians and Jews. This tip wasn't a great deal of help, but that didn't matter because the second sura had already begun, the sura with the strangely prosaic title 'The Cow'. Try as he might, it was impossible for him not to find this heading ugly and inappropriate. The Cow. How could you title a sacred, deeply revered text 'The Cow'? He pictured cows. Very useful, very peaceful animals, to be sure. You couldn't really object to cows. But were there any more tedious, less poetic forms of life? When he thought of a cow, the only thing that occurred to him was a meadow with a cow in it, and that was even the prettified version compared to the mass-scale farming more characteristic for the cows of today. Even a pig, he thought, considering the Muslim aversion to pigs, had more significance than a cow. A pig could at least be used as a swearword. 'Cow' wasn't even any good for that. It would have to be a stupid cow, and even that was one of the feeblest and most uninteresting curses in German, which could in any case only be used for girls. In addition there was the ridiculous detail that in French this sura was called 'La vache', and throughout his trip he had for the most part lived on a cheese called 'La vache qui rit' – 'The Laughing Cow' – and the eponymous little red cow, which was awfully sweet, more of a calf really, had laughed up at him almost every day from the cheese packet. So once again he found himself confronted by two alternatives, both of which were less than useful for a novice in the religion: either to regard the whole cow business as a terrible gaffe, or to admit his total lack of understanding and also, at least considering the modest means at his disposal, the virtual impossibility of his attaining any greater insight in the near future. Regardless of which was the case, by this stage one thing was already perfectly clear: from a purely didactic point of view, the Koran, at least for the unprepared high school student from Germany, and in this edition, albeit lovingly and conscientiously prepared, was not a very successful work.

Still, in the second sura, he could tell, things really got going. 'In this book there is nothing to be questioned. He who fears God and believes in the supernatural will be well guided by it.' Thus it continued for several verses, and he sensed he wouldn't be able to persevere much longer. Maybe it was just his weariness, the ponderous French, and the sprawling commentary – he had good reasons to be disappointed, for he would have been only too happy to let the

verses guide him onto the right path. But this opportunity never seemed to present itself. On the contrary, this book only ever offered its services to those who were already on the right path. And those who were not, it condemned. It did not, however, divulge how you were supposed to get on there in the first place. Nor did it divulge what distinguished those who were on the right path, other than that they were on the right path – and were neither Jews nor Christians, though only the commentary stated this with such conviction, not the text itself, and this didn't help anyway if what you wanted to know was what distinguished a true believer. Between faith and lack of faith, it seemed, there was no third state, nothing that would have led him away from his current position. There was no sign of the outstretched hand of God promised by the 'Avertissement'. The right path had no slip road. You had to jump onto it out of the blue, without knowing where it was. No effort was made to convince you, the powers of persuasion were not applied, at least not to him; all there was was the threat: if you don't believe, you are damned. Where was 'the Compassionate, the Merciful One' people were always talking about? This Allah came across more like a show-off who demands obedience without giving you a reason, and on top of that claims to know what's what. These, at least, were his conclusions after the first six verses of the second sura.

Heat, tiredness, the prospect of spending the coming night in the open, and the inaccessibility of this Koran which, instead of comforting him, only increased his forlornness, plunged him into a gloomy frame of mind; it made him even more despondent than he had been in Tamanrasset when they told him his flight to Algiers had been cancelled and he would have to travel the 3000 kilometres north through the desert by bus. Now, about half past two in the afternoon, all was quiet around him. Even the road in front of the complex was devoid of traffic. He embarked on a final attempt to get to grips with the book, and re-read, thoroughly, the commentary on the few verses he had read up to now; and then, because the commentary was easier to read, he simply continued reading the commentary, only occasionally bothering at all with the verses. That wasn't actually necessary, he discovered. In order to understand the commentary, you didn't need to know the Koran. And the commentary did something that the strange Koranic verses themselves didn't want to do: it took him by the hand. Yet more than this, and

more importantly, it revealed where the journey was headed, and gave him the opportunity to make up his own mind, to say yes or no.

‘The Devil,’ declared the footnote on verse eleven of the second sura, ‘never does evil in the name of Evil, for then no one would follow him. Rather, he poses as a righteous reformer, although he leads those who follow him into eternal damnation.’ Here too it was unclear to whom this was referring, or how you distinguished the evil from the good. For now, though, that wasn’t important. It was enough that, in order to sanction the statement in the commentary, he would have had to accept that there were such things as a Devil and eternal damnation. However, although, like all seventeen-year-olds the world over, he believed he could distinguish between good and evil with astonishing clarity (later on this was no longer quite so clear), and was convinced, furthermore, that all good people could only think as he did and that no alternative was possible, all this talk about Devil and damnation seemed to him exaggerated. Besides, he wasn’t entirely sure whether it was only meant metaphorically, or rather literally and in earnest. As far as he was concerned, that would make it mere superstition. Then there was the fact that, according to his world view at the time, one which he had unquestioningly believed to be universal, a reformer – and this he said as one who was raised a Catholic! – was always a good guy, for ideas have to be developed and refined, whereas the commentary asserted the exact opposite: ‘In order to protect mankind from all charlatans, God has taught us that Mohammed is the last of his prophets and his legislation has final validity.’ He might possibly have been prepared to recognise Mohammed as the last prophet, but the equation of reformers with false prophets made no sense to him, because what reformer made himself out to be a prophet? But if Mohammed’s legislation was supposed to have final validity, it followed that no improvement of these laws was envisaged, and this, even if one acknowledged the excellence of these laws, was for him a deeply alien idea that went against his entire understanding of the world. Admittedly he would hardly have been able to formulate this consideration so clearly at the time; there was no need for him to do so. But it was precisely these associations that formed the basis of his growing displeasure, his disappointment and dissatisfaction with what he was reading.