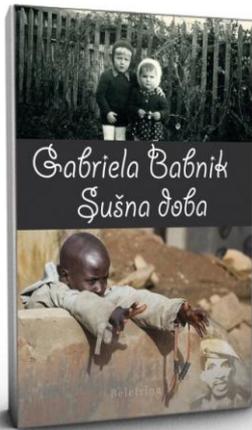




Gabriela Babnik (1979) regularly contributes literature reviews, essays, travelogues, interviews and commentaries for different publications in Slovenia. She holds a Master's Degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Ljubljana with a dissertation on the contemporary Nigerian novel and is currently writing political comments on African issues for the foreign edition of the main newspaper Delo. She has been living in Ghana and Burkina Faso where she also met her husband. They are currently living in Slovenia with their two daughters. Her debut novel ***Skin of Cotton*** (*Koža iz bombaža*) won the Best Debut Novel Award in 2007. Critics agreed that the novel displays exceptional attention to language and uses an inventive way to portray the meeting of European and African cultures and is probably the most significant Slovene novel to date dealing with Africa. She also adopted the novel for a radio play for the Slovene national radio broadcaster. The play was one of three nominees for the Best Adapted Drama Award at the *Prix Italia* in 2011. Her second novel ***In the Tall Grass*** (*V visoki travi*) was published by Beletrina Academic Press in 2010. The novel focuses on the female protagonist from a typical rural Slovene background. It was short listed for the Kresnik Award, the highest national literary award for best novel in 2010. Her third novel ***Dry Season*** (*Sušna doba*) was published by Beletrina Academic Press in 2011 and continues the path of introducing interactions and cultural clashes between Europe and Africa. She has been the guest of several literary festivals in Europe.



DRY SEASON

(Novel, Beletrina Academic Press, 2011, 290 pages)

Gabriela Babnik's novel *Dry Season* is a record of an unusual love affair. Anna is a sixty-two-year-old designer from Central Europe and Ismael is a twenty-seven-year-old African who was brought up on the street where he was often the victim of abuse. What unites them is the loneliness of their bodies, a tragic childhood and the dry season or Harmattan, during which neither nature nor love is able to flourish. She soon realizes that the emptiness between them is not really instituted by their skin colour and age

difference, but predominantly by her belonging to the Western culture in which she has lost or abandoned all the preordained roles of daughter, wife and mother. Sex does not outstrip the loneliness and repressed secrets from the past surface into a world she sees as much crueller and at the same time more innocent than her own. Cleverly written as an alternating narrative of both sides in the relationship, the novel is interlaced with magical realism and accurately perceived fragments of African political reality.

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Gabriela Babnik: *Dry Season*

excerpts from the novel translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh

How did I know how old he was? Well, I didn't. I didn't have a clue who I was dealing with or what he wanted from me. Particularly after he fell asleep. I doubt he did either. These people can be unpredictable. Just when you think you understand them, they do something unexpected. The taxi driver at the airport for example, instead of taking me to the market place he drove me to his family home. When I hinted that I needed the loo, he waited for me at the side of the road, as if from that point on he was my comforter, my lover and my bodyguard. That was the manner in which he later introduced me to his family, despite the fact that we had only just met earlier in the day and that we would never meet again. When I asked him where I could wash my hands and enquiringly pointed to the right, he nodded. He also nodded when I pointed to the left. For him there was water in the sky above and in the ground under his feet. In me he probably saw murky waters so, after much persuasion, fifteen cups of far-too-sweet tea and endless handshakes and enquiries about the wellbeing of my family, my children, even my house, he did eventually drop me off outside a large building named after Gaddafi. I then dragged my case along the street past crazy drivers throwing up clouds of dust (I arrived in Ouagadougou right at the start of the dry season; the guide book stated that this was the best time to visit Sub-Saharan Africa; the rainy season meant impassable roads, mosquitoes, regular blackouts and similar discouraging prospects), past meat sellers with their hacked chunks of meat hosting swarms of flies - big, dark, green-bellied flies, past a group of children who tried to draw attention to themselves with empty rusty ketchup pails that I only later realized, rather than having any practical purpose, were mainly seen as a status symbol, past tall, slim women with shiny dark skin, cutting up vegetables in the palms of their hands.

Under the acacias lining the road halfway to the market place, I placed my case against a fence and lit a cigarette. As I sat there smoking, it suddenly dawned on me that this was the kind of contrast I needed. Stepping out of the silence in which I had been cocooned for the past few months and stepping away from my relationship with my son which was tearing – not just tearing but ripping – me apart from inside.

He was about the age of the young man I was about to meet a few hours after this cigarette. And lastly, perhaps chiefly, I also needed to get away from my relationship with my elderly father.

I gazed at my own reflection in the glass door and then at Ismael's reflection. Instantly I understood he was not only prepared for the continuation of our story, but that for me he was prepared to step from one world into another. Earlier on the staircase it had not even occurred to me that it was not so much about the colour of our skin or our age difference, but the fact that we came from entirely different worlds. Ismael was the product of the African street, to some extent also the burnt grass, the Harmattan wind and the scorched birds of the dry season. The supermarket we had just entered was the embodiment of fake prudery and supposed, but overrated evolution. I hoped that a night and half a day were enough for me to forget where I was coming from and even where I was going.

It is not that I miss certain things in the desert - the girl from Chagall, Millais' stained glass, Bach's Fugue - but that there are things I do not know how to see. In the treetops, in the air, on the corner of the house.

I brought a chair down from the hotel room and put it underneath the tree. The receptionist and I had made an agreement. She showed me the fridge where I could keep a yoghurt and a bottle of mineral water. It had been a while since I last saw Ismael. Things had happened in the meantime that we had not shared. I called my father on my own, telling him I would not be back for a while, that I intended to rent a house and sit around on the roof from which I will observe the grass fires and the burning birds flying too low to the ground allowing their wings to catch fire, or the whirling wind. Some here believe that a woman is born from a whirlwind if only you manage to throw a hardboiled egg into its centre. But I didn't tell this to Father – well, his answering machine. My call set off a deep, soft voice, with dark hair and only a whisper of silver at the temples, saying that he was unable to answer the phone right now. I hoped it wasn't because he was still locked in the garden.

The previous night had been swelteringly hot and we all expected a downpour.

I stood so that I could see half the house and half the road. Something static and something vibrant. People rode by on their mopeds, producing clouds of exhaust fumes. Others clap-clapped along in their flip-flops. I looked down at my own feet. I preferred to walk around barefoot here and feel the hot reddish earth trickle between my toes and the cold of the approaching night stroke my ankles, spreading through the rest of the body as the landscape settles, even the clouds stop moving and the trees temporarily lose all meaning. I would continue with my description of the loneliness I harboured within me were it not for the white woman in a printed-pattern, narrow skirt approaching me from the direction of the entrance. We managed a begrudging smile as she pulled a supposedly troublesome lock of hair away from her face and I shyly looked to the ground, though through the corner of my eye I still caught her hips swaying against the batik which made me think how she wanted to stand out; to not be just another woman walking past, but something more than that.

I rubbed my foot against the ground as if searching for something, as if at some point I had lost something on that very spot, something I longed for, though in reality the only thing I longed for was to see Ismael again. Tall and slim, he would stand on the opposite side of the road, looking me over. Would he step closer or not? Would he smile or just say “You were looking at me.” I would not say the same things I said then, but something entirely different.

It wasn't all just violence in the village, there were some nice times. Like the period before the rain. Flies gathered close to the ground, pestering humans, and the clouds in the sky kept changing like the image on a TV screen. I can tell you that we got the first TV set in the village in the early seventies, so we were in fact already the second, third, fifth even, generation to grow up with moving pictures. At first I thought those blonde white women in the box were manipulated by an invisible hand. That chairs, tables, carpets, plastic flowers and shiny bowls filled to the brim with various fruit I didn't even know the name of were all brought onto the set, and when they saw that the children gathered in the courtyard at dusk, the hand of the invisible man arrived just in time to get into position and begin the show. We held our breath, held it so long and so deep that we didn't even manage to think about how one single hand managed to control all the reflex movements of those football players running

continuously up and down the green backdrop, or how it managed to regulate the movements of the women pushing their bare chests against somewhat deflated figures of the opposite sex.

But despite all the forecasts, I must admit that the clouds, the big, almost grey clouds that filled the entire screen, stupefied me. I would sometimes lie under the mango tree and stare at the sky. Once I had climbed all its branches, smelt, tasted and knew literarily its every nook and cranny, I became interested in the view of its crown from below. I could never understand how the mango tree could branch out so rectilinearly and provide such a dense, proper shade, just as I never understood who was moving the clouds up there, sometimes even making them appear on the TV screen. Mother didn't believe in God, so she was unable to explain things to me. She avoided the television completely. She said it was an evil that came from another world. I had no way of knowing which world.

My greatest fear came true. The fear of getting lost. Ismael was not just a warm body to comfort me at night and sometimes during the day, but most of all my guide. We had gone for a walk in town together and I wasn't sure whether I could find my way back on my own. Of course I could not have anticipated that, standing under the Coca Cola umbrella, he would ask me to marry him, or that after I declined he would turn around and vanish. The plan that I picked up the dog was fine, had it not been for the infinite distance between me and the house. What was I supposed to say to the taxi driver? That I lived next to three trees that burst into purple bloom at the beginning of the rainy season? That in my rented house the electricity sometimes works and sometimes doesn't? He would probably say there are many such houses in Ouaga or, what trees are you talking about, Madame? There are many plants here with purple, reddish or pinkish flowers.

But even after the tro-tro vanished from my field of view, I continued to follow the road, tripping over discarded chicken bones and sleeping dogs in the glaring bright light. If I really "had" to include some kind of animal into the novel, it would be a dog. They have a logic of their own. During the night they lie about on the warm tarmac in groups of two or three. In the day they rarely growl and generally appear rather frightened and quite obviously hungry. Hunger makes them different.

Hunger prevents them from biting, rendering them shadowy apparitions. I thought of following one of these dogs, but all they seemed to be doing was moving out of my way. It seems that since Ismael left I have ceased to be of any interest to anyone, even as a target for mockery. I kept wondering where all the potential lovers or even potential thieves went. Of course I now had very little they could steal from me; the sandals hanging from my waist, my pale skin and some small change stuck in my bra.

I don't know how long Malik and I spent in Cotonou; a week, two, a month, maybe a year, that whole period is blank to me. Waiting for the end of the school year we lived with some French woman called Julie Amado. With her hair tied up high, her slender s-shaped inward curving back, her slow pace, too slow even for her age, that betrayed her uncertain past or at least her exaggerated tendency towards melancholy, she could easily have been the elusive woman from Black Street, but after considering the matter for a while, I decided she was not the same person. Malik could not have had things under such control and Julie herself seemed to be half mad. She never slept at night, her huge bed being occupied by cats; she would sit on the chair and put her feet up on the bed where all the cats, there must have been over twenty, slept amidst plates of rotting fish.

I never asked Malik how he knew Julie or why we were staying with her. All I understood was that we were waiting. Malik introduced me to Julie as a friend who has a way with words and was writing a novel. He even made up a title for it, *The Sea Again* or something like that, which excited Julie. She offered me her typewriter, a huge black antique thing that made an evil noise as you typed and more often than not mangled the inserted paper. Tens of trees worth of paper went down its elongated neck and at critical moments when it jammed I jumped from behind the writing desk and tried to pull out the sheet, carefully at first, but then ever more enraged with torn bits of paper flying around the place like snowflakes. "We are like the snow that eventually ceases to fall", I kept repeating to myself, though I still do not know why this sentence came into my head. After a few days the typewriter broke down completely and the tropical forests were safe for a while. For me this was only the beginning. Julie began to follow me into every corner of the house, relating her memories to me. Apparently they were so interesting I was supposed to hammer out a

book of them. I declined, telling her that in reality I do not have a way with words and that Malik had made this up, but she continued to lean against the wall with her back, nibbling away at pieces of cheese and a baguette, telling her story. This was how I found out that she had arrived in Cotonou as a volunteer teacher years ago. When things didn't work out – that is what she said, I remember exactly – she left the job.

“Don't get me wrong, I am still a humanitarian at heart, I help children whenever I can, I ease their way, without me their suffering would be even greater, but if you think that once you are in this business, you can just step out, you are mistaken.”

The more she talked, the less I understood. Children, eight to sixteen-year-olds, with their hands tied, needing to be accompanied. The official explanation: transporting minors up for adoption by white couples. (My thoughts: they will probably be sold into slavery, perhaps prostitution, for goodness sake there aren't that many white couples wanting to adopt a black child!) And who else is involved in the business? People in the right positions; colonels, bureaucrats, ministers.

At that point I laughed inadvertently: “With all due respect Julie, where do I fit into this licentious chain?”

She picked up and started stroking one of the cats rubbing against our feet. “You still don't get it? Maybe you really aren't a real writer.”

This was supposed to offend me, but I was more vexed with being sent to the market to get fish for the cats. I stood in endless queues in the sticky and unrelenting sun (at least we are not right at the rock bottom of the ladder of civilization!), and when I returned to the house and complained to Malik how I could no longer take this, he patted me on the shoulder and told me to bear it until tomorrow. A tomorrow he was forever putting off.

How can I describe the state of things in that house? Everything was absolutely chaotic: you would open a drawer to take out a towel and instead you'd get a meowing cat jumping out. Some cats would leap over the balcony railings, perhaps in an attempt to escape or commit suicide, but Julie would not have any of it; screaming terribly she would run downstairs and bring the cat back into the house. She brought in other stray cats from the street and ended up with over fifty. The good

thing about the house was that I could see the sea from the kitchen window and that I was able to learn how to use a typewriter. After we came to an agreement, once the wild beast it was possessed with gave in or it might have been me who gave in, once the snow inside mixed with blood, I sat at it for days on end searching for the right letters. I could put it differently: for days on end I tried to remember my own self, what I was like when I used to wake up next to Anna. I thought about the smell of her sweat and her soft pink belly. I occasionally stood back and observed Julie, her inward curving pain-ridden back, her bare, scratched arms, her tongue visible in her half-opened mouth showing a gentle lining of teeth – in fact her teeth were probably her best feature and this was what I focused on, closing my eyes and imagining that the woman in the house was in fact Anna. Anna, who by now has most likely returned to her own town, to her drawing table looking out onto the garden.

You will probably ask me what Malik did during this time. Anything I say would be a lie. Sometimes he disappeared for days on end and when he did show up, greenish bags under his eyes, he'd start explaining about the various prices for human organs. "For a head wit da eyes you get three hundred francs, man, with three hundred kids, you know we talking serious cash!" I turned away. Of course I understood that Malik had dragged me right into this worse-than-gruesome business. Although, as I kept telling myself, probably in an attempt to clear my conscience, despite the fact that I did this only through making up sentences, sentences that were supposed to turn me into someone more virtuous, I had myself so far not actually done anything. All I did was listen to the made-up stories of a mad woman and gibberish from the mouth of an African loafer. "Dem Lebanese are just da mid station, it all starts wit da Julie Amado and ends in Saudi Arabya, where you can buy a child heart like a fish on da market. Dey used to deliver plenty from da Sudan, but wit da war and dat business in Chad (you know, wit da three hundred kids on da airplane) da trafick stopped. People like da colonel I told you bout use their position to get in contact with da French humanitarian lady. Dey used to cut da children up like dey want, but now in Arabya dey want da kids live. Dey decide which organs to pick. Get dem fresher, no damage, more money for da suppliers at the start of da chain."

"Where does all da money go? For da cats?" I asked Malik as we sat on the beach watching the sea. "Can't you just get me out of all this, lend me da money to return to Ouaga? I'll get on da first bus and foreva keep my mouth sealed."

“Julie not tell you? You never get out of da business once you inside!” Malik grinned and pointed to an indistinct point in the distance. “Unless you sit on a plastic raft, catch a big fish, a shark even if you want, tie it to da raft and brrrm brrrm swim away. You could be wit what you call her, Anna isn’t it, in three days.”

I looked round Malik’s back, just to check if he had ganja growing out of his arse. He was stoned out of his mind. “If that’s the case, I’d rather take a balloon.” I took off my shirt and stepped into the sea. The vast, colourless sea in all its endless allure. Under these circumstances, the only thing that prevented me from wading out and drowning or going back to the house and killing all of Julie’s cats, was the fact that I could sit at the typewriter, seducing that evil sound from it. I decided I would not only write a letter to Anna, but dedicate the entire novel to her.

At the nearby news stand I bought myself a packet of cigarettes and a phone card for calls abroad and, thus equipped, climbed onto the roof of the family house. Now I know; this was the place from which Ismael stared at the flames of the fires propagated by farmers during the Harmattan season; it was from here that he observed the fleeing animals, the burning birds, flying like phoenixes before being devoured by the flames. This was his place of rest and dreams, but I had this distinct feeling that I had come up here to say goodbye. I wished to go beyond the fantasy of making love to a youthful male body, but I failed. I wished to surpass the bitter sadness and the increasing loneliness, but my investment was unwise. So it was time I left. Besides, there was little point in imposing on Ismael’s aunt for much longer. She kept making up stories about me to satisfy the curiosity of all the people who kept turning up in the courtyard. Few believed her; on one occasion an older woman even grabbed hold of my belly and screamed the worst obscenities of my life into my face. The aunt tried to console me by saying I should not pay attention to the woman who talked nonsense but I still knew I should not have overstepped my mark with my feelings towards Ismael; Ismael was destined for other things.

I entered the phone card PIN into my mobile and dialled Father’s number. Before deciding about anything, before climbing off the roof and leaving the flaming

phoenixes in mid air, I needed to check how things were with Father. Had he written me off entirely because I confessed I had become intimately involved with someone here, someone who was a few decades younger than me, or was it because all his complaints about his debilitating brain were still not enough to make me decide to return, or was it simply that nothing had changed? The easiest for me to deal with would be if things were as I had left them. If he were suddenly to display a kind streak that might mean he had had his heart operation then there wouldn't be anywhere for me to return to.

“Anna, Anna, it's Ismael calling, Ismael, Anna ...” I thought I had fallen asleep and was dreaming. I had not had a chance to think things through or even light my cigarette when they called me from below.

“Keep him on the phone!” I shouted once I grasped who was on the line, “Keep ...” My mobile fell out of my hands, rolling down the metal roof until I could no longer hear which direction it was falling in, probably onto the ground, onto the soft, dusty earth that muffles all sounds. Jumping up eagerly I tried to find the ladder with the tips of my toes. It seemed to take ages for me to reach the ground. When I finally did, it suddenly dawned on me – this was that feeling. Did I not resort to Ismael in an attempt to overcome the realization that instead of being born to live, one is forever being pushed towards death? Perhaps this was something I read somewhere, though I have not been reading anything lately. Apart from the lines on the palms of Ismael's and my own hands.

My hands trembled when I lifted the receiver in Baba's room. Only as I drew back the curtain slightly could I truly comprehend the dark room defined by its photographs and a large clock and notice Baba's reminders of what he used to be like. For a while I didn't say anything, and then I summoned a casual “Hello”.

“Anna, Anna, if only you knew ...”

Then the line suddenly went dead. I turned towards the door as if I was expecting someone, as if I was about to see his approaching silhouette but then, snapping back into reality, I dragged myself over to the corner of the room. My heart pounded, just as my father's heart must have pounded when he learnt he might need to have an operation. I tried to remember Father's face. Two arches extending from

his brow, past his aquiline nose towards his mouth. The way he stood under that chandelier when I brought home my Parisian lover, though he was not yet my Parisian lover at the time, and the way he stood looking at a piece of meat in the shop. As if neither had anything to do with him. As if the 'black guy' was about to leave and the meat was about to be wrapped up so all would be as if it had never happened. Whenever I went to the butcher's with him as a child, a tiny fragile girl, I was always obsessed by the idea that it could be me, Mother or Father hanging in the shop window. Displayed there, to be hacked away at and bought. Perhaps it was that in my childhood I was more acutely aware that we are mere bodies with a few faculties. Later, probably during my time in England, I found out that that Francis Bacon also saw things in a manner similar to how I perceived them in the most metaphysical years of my life, associating slaughterhouses with the crucified Christ and animal fear, something that might well sound sacrilegious. But Bacon was an atheist, so there was no space for the concept of sacrilege in his world.

The phone rang again. I could hear the ringing inside my head, inside my body. With everyone outside in the courtyard holding their breath, it all seemed even more intense. For a brief moment the night, the goats, even the farmers burning the grass, all fell silent. As I lifted the receiver and instead of that casual hello, uttered Ismael's name, I realized that our love had lasted for a single dry season. We scattered the seed over barren earth where it could never flourish, and without fresh growth I have the feeling it was all mere coincidence, that I am myself someone robbed of all purpose and meaning. Bacon would probably say that from this angle, Christ was also just such a coincidental someone, playing out the game to the very end without any scope or reason. I tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear. What would my father say about this?

"Anna, don't you recognize me? Are things that bad?" It was the deep, sad voice of an old man who had just had a heart operation. He was someone who still believed that the cross was not the end of an irrational, purposeless game. Despite his long forgotten one-time membership of the former Communist Party, he was someone who still assented to the religious possibility. His membership was used for little more than cover, mostly to allow him to practice his almost bourgeois solicitor's profession during the period of redemptive Yugoslav Communism. So I suspected he believed, not because he would ever tell me about it, but because it was obvious just by looking

at his face. Most intensely in the two melancholy furrows that extended from his brow down towards his mouth.

“I thought it was Ismael.” I suddenly repeated his name. The name of the lover who had gone away. The last time I saw him he was standing under the Coca Cola umbrella, his face shaded from the side, a slight hard-on pressing against his trousers. It could all have been different, but things being as they were now, a distinct touch of anger could be sensed in my voice. Besides, with the line engaged, my distant lover would now not be able to call back even if he wanted to. All we had managed to find out was that he had gone to Benin. As to where and with what purpose, all remained a mystery. Though no one dared say it out loud, we suspected that he had followed that white maggot who will not even allow him to breathe, let alone release him from his claws.

“I tried calling you many times, but I only just realized now that I am supposed to put 00226 in front ...”

I sighed into the receiver. He had deliberately ignored my harsh response, so things were still as they used to be, his heart still in place and I could easily return. Or stay for a while longer and then return. “Are you well?” I asked after that initial sigh, though I didn’t wait for an answer. I stretched out my feet in the corner of the room, briefly glancing over Baba’s photographs hanging on the wall. The story of Baba’s youth was not important right now. I placed the receiver against my thigh and thought about Ismael’s clean, dark face. A face that reveals ‘that true treasure’, ‘that lump of gold’, ‘that hidden diamond’. As Bacon or anyone else like him would say, a face into which I gaze to find a reason to continue persisting with this ‘coincidence’, robbed of all purpose and meaning. In a dream-like state I suddenly grabbed the receiver and, ignoring Father’s moaning, blurted out: “Now I know why you couldn’t bear going to that butcher’s place. It wasn’t that you felt sick, as you used to say, but simply because you couldn’t stand death, that’s what it was all about, wasn’t it?”

A moment of silence. Like with the antelopes when they become aware they are in mortal danger, like with the birds, before the flames engulf their feathers. In that millisecond, I understood that Ismael and I would have gotten on even as children. He would show me how to light a fire in the desert, how to kill a cobra ... no, no, he didn’t do this kind of stuff, Ismael was afraid of snakes; I must have picked

that one up somewhere else, the association between Africa and snakes, I mean. I would show him the place where they slaughtered the pig. We would slip into the slaughterhouse run by strangers who were so unlike my parents. There was a certain charm in leaving me alone in the afternoons without even putting the housemaid in charge of looking after me. I suddenly discovered independence. A screen was raised between me and all the questions about life and death. But, who knows, perhaps I am even now still affected by the blood running out of the pig's head.

“Anna, I shall hire a lawyer to get you out of there ...”

I smiled and put the phone down. Were it not dark outside, had I not had to push past the aunt who kept stretching her neck towards the door pretending to be listening out for something else rather than my brief dialogue with Ismael and my cowardly dialogue with my father even once I appeared outside, and had I not just wanted to go back onto the roof to smoke that cigarette, I would have explained to Father that my need for the consolation such as I have found in Africa was no small thing. But I had to say goodbye to Ismael's place of rest and dreams, shrouded in the smell of scorched grass and birds burning in mid air. Outside I found my mobile somewhere between the goat pen and the clay jug from which mostly children drank the cool water, and climbed back up the ladder onto the roof.

When did I stop believing even in Art? After my son's breakdown or once I went into the desert? It happened over twenty years ago in the mid eighties in Paris. We sat in a brightly lit restaurant, me, my Parisian lover, his absent children, two wives, one deceased and the other still going strong, waiting in the blue house by the sea, and probably a few other people I didn't know. My lover was in a particularly good mood, smiling all the time, dressed in a bright orange tunic and boots with a Cuban heel. We met outside in the street. I came out from my hotel room where I had spent my day. All I did before going out was brush my hair and spray on some perfume. He had probably just unglued himself from his computer or maybe dropped into a bar on the way. When he turned up I noticed he was holding a walking stick in his right hand that I could not recall him taking with him in the morning. From a distance he looked like a clown and there was much of the same in his films, not to mention his photographs; colour, kitsch, a sense of drama. But when he hugged me and said we

had to celebrate the success of his latest film, I knew there was a time for rejoicing and there was a time for sorrow.

“How was your day?” I asked, returning his hug and using the back of my palm to straighten out the folds of the rustling fabric he wore over his top and trousers.

I had a feeling he hadn't heard me. He swapped to holding the walking stick with his left hand and started talking about how he had switched from theatre to cinematography, how he had managed to leave all the theatricality behind and how, though he was grateful to Djibril for all the knowledge he passed on to him, he would surely soon outshine him. For a moment I didn't know who he was talking about – at the time I had not yet seen the avant-garde film *Touki Bouki*, my eyes had not yet encountered all the light that emanates from Djibril's films. Maybe my father had noticed it, but for some incomprehensible reason he kept quiet about this small detail. In fact, ever since he started hearing the rumours that I was strolling around Paris in the embrace of some black man, he hardly spoke to me. Later I reproached him that here we were talking about a Senegalese, how not all blacks were the same and how not all came from the same tree, but he just pretended not to hear me. Instead he mumbled away about something going on with mother's brother. He had started writing in the papers, literary or art criticism or something, Father was not precisely sure.

Feeling the brief hug was not enough, I cravingly, almost painfully squeezed against my lover's body. At that time he had not yet told me to behave in public as if nothing ever happened between us. This was all before those words: if you were ten or so years older, this thing between us could be dangerous for you. All he had said was that after the death of his wife I was the only woman to have touched him. And when at the end of my stay in England I returned to Ljubljana, he even attempted to follow me. He got as far as Rome where he got stuck cooking pasta for some brunette for nearly a decade until he decided he needed a house by the sea. So, Senegal. That was when I reappeared on the scene, not in London this time, but in Paris. He kept saying that to him Paris meant Anna in Paris, Anna in the wide metal bed, her white thighs and narrow waist that he could have whenever he wanted and however many times he wanted, though all this time he had never mentioned that throughout, even

when he was mounting me, groaning away like there was no tomorrow or stretching his hands towards me in a restaurant, he was thinking of his dark-skinned children back home.

I would sometimes dream of sitting in the blue house by the sea and, ten years older than I was, buying fish at the market, shouting and running down the beach with him running after me in his tunic, trying to catch me, and in the evenings sitting drawing, transferring the colourful still life on the plate in front of me onto paper.

“It will never happen,” I whispered more to myself than him, probably to cut short his arbitrary monologue that had nothing to do with the two of us. We were supposed to be going to a restaurant to talk about our relationship, not about his films which didn’t feature me in any way, or ever would. As I said it, I moved away from him slightly. “What we have here is here. Here in Paris and only in Paris, forget Senegal.” I don’t know whether he understood or even heard. At that moment we were stepping into a brightly lit joint. All the people inside appeared as if from a film; exaggerated gestures, made up faces, ponderous significance, and if only my lover had wanted to, we could have easily just rewound the whole scene. The waiter showed us the table and offered to help us take off our coats. I refused, sat down and slowly, almost lazily undid my buttons and threw the coat across the back of the seat. My knee then searched for my lover’s knee under the table. This was my last hope to get him back on my side, to lure him back to us as a pair. Nothing. Emptiness. Maybe he did hear what I had said and was trying to show his annoyance. When the waiter approached with a slight bow, my lover began suddenly to talk about Fellini in a rather animated and mocking tone, entirely ignoring me. He started off by saying how Djibril was apparently incapable of bearing the burden of life; an otherwise beautiful, tall man, but far too melancholy, taking things far too seriously, whereas today’s audiences demand entertainment, and then switched to talking about Fellini. Namely how he thought his latest film was, in all honesty, crap.

I looked around the restaurant. I didn’t know what I was looking for. Father’s hand which could guide me in defending both these two masters of cinema? They both come from such different worlds, it dawned on me at that point. I then remembered the photograph of Djibril I must have seen somewhere, his arms, his large dark arms folded across his chest, his left hand gently supporting his beard,

apparently at the point where it was turning grey. There is something classical in his figure, something mature, bordering on wisdom even, as he leans to the right towards the river, though it is not clear whether it is a river or not, all that is visible in the background is a row of houses with open windows; they could be in Dakar or Paris. It must have been cold. His jacket collar is turned up to keep out the Dakarian or Parisian winter. He looks cold, but from the furrows above his eyebrows it seems as if he is worried about something else apart from the cold, something he is unable to resolve. Unable to reach for Father's guiding hand right now, I could at least try to find the words in the family's fledgling literary, sorry, art critic who swore by realistic literary trends. My father had told me this with a sort of grunt, and added how the guy could not even have sworn by these were it not for the material and moral support he had received from his now deceased sister, meaning my mother, of course. After all, criticism is more often than not a non-profit activity. I could just imagine him, (not merely because of the evil tone with which Father related the new phenomenon in the family), reading through fifty odd novels a year and truly believing in what he wrote about them, or perhaps sitting on the floor between a wall of books and a filthy sofa in the flat he was given, scratching his large balls.

"Excuse me, I need the toilet," I suddenly blurted and in doing so smiled apologetically at the invisible children sitting at the table preoccupied with chewing on chicken bones and noisily spitting them out onto the plate. I walked right out into the street. I found the key to the hotel room in my coat pocket. I must have stuck it there without thinking about it as we walked down the corridor. I thought even less about what I was doing as I threw the very same coat over my hand after pulling it off the back of the chair with a brief turn of my body. It was as if I knew prior to entering the restaurant that I would have to make my retreat. I also had to turn away because of the lie. When I lie I can barely stand looking the person in the eye, so I stood up, grabbed my coat and stormed out. My sudden departure was meant as small revenge for avoiding all talk about the two of us and moving his foot away under the table. These people don't know how to love, a friend once told me after presumably also having a bad experience with dating black men, though I never believed her. Right now, in my bout of anger, I was very close to agreeing with the generalizing remark.

I made my way to the bank of the Seine, but instead of thinking about what Djibril might have been wondering about with his hands folded on his chest (it was

the hands that reminded me of that black and white photograph and it is the hands that I will always remember), I felt much like a well known writer did when, somewhere in the middle of France in the eighties, he sensed for the first time what he had never sensed whilst living in Czechoslovakia, not even in the darkest days of the Stalinist era – that he had found himself in a post-art era, in a world from which art was simply disappearing because it was just no longer necessary. I stepped into the light of one of the streetlamps. Perhaps my father was right: it was better to believe than not to believe, better to allow for the possibility of religion than look straight into the eye of Truth, deducing that this was all there was. Paris and Paris again. I pushed up the collar of my coat, closed my eyes and tried to recall what my son was like as a child, but all I could think about was the slightly bent penis of my Parisian lover. I knew that despite his deceased and living wives (the Italian woman didn't really count, just as I will never really count myself) I would still go back to the hotel, get undressed and wait for him in bed, naked.