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Introduction

A L E C G . H A R G R E A V E S

Samira Bellil's story is deeply disturbing on multiple levels. It begins with the gang rape that Bellil suffered at the age of fourteen and then traces the devastating impact it had on her adolescence and early adulthood. These harrowing experiences raise troubling questions about the environment in which they occur, the socially disadvantaged multiethnic urban areas known in France as the *banlieues*. When the narrative was first published in 2002, it became a symbol of abuses suffered by women in the banlieues and of their determination to fight against those abuses. At the same time, media coverage given to the book raised fears that minority ethnic women who, like Bellil, spoke out against such abuses ran

the risk of being manipulated by politicians and journalists, generating misleading ethnic stereotypes that stigmatize minorities of recent immigrant origin, especially those of Muslim heritage.

Samira Bellil was born in 1972 in Algeria. Her parents had also been born there but as young adults had emigrated to France, where they had met and married. Both had suffered physical abuse as children. In the face of family disapproval of their marriage, they moved several times between France and Algeria, settling in France shortly after the birth of Samira. At about the same time, Samira's father was given a five-year jail sentence for offences committed in France, the precise nature of which is not indicated in Bellil's narrative. In her husband's absence, Samira's mother went out to work full time and, unable to take care of her daughter, placed her with foster parents in Belgium, where Samira lived most of her early childhood, returning at the age of five to the family home in the banlieues of Paris. It is there, in the *département* (county) of Seine-Saint-Denis, to the northeast of central Paris, that most of the events described in the narrative take place.

The banlieues are in many ways a world apart from the older and generally more affluent neighborhoods of downtown Paris, to which the narrative takes us only fleetingly during sporadic visits to cheap nightclubs and similar venues on the northern edge of the central part of the capital, as well as when Bellil changes trains at the Gare-du-Nord station, a central hub linking the downtown metro with several RER (express metro) lines running out into the northern and eastern banlieues of Paris.¹ In its sprawling high-rise tower blocks of subsidized social housing, typical of the banlieues, Seine-Saint-Denis contains greater concentrations of poverty and of minority ethnic groups than any other *département* in France. According to police data, it also contains some of the nation's most violent neighborhoods, with especially high rates of homicide and armed robbery.² In addition, recent research indicates that more

than one in ten young women in Seine-Saint-Denis may have been subject to sexual assaults, with one in four having suffered other types of physical assault.³

Compared with the “ghettos” of American cities, which are often populated almost entirely by a single minority ethnic group (typically, African Americans or Hispanics), the banlieues of Paris in which Bellil’s story unfolds, like those of other French cities, are relatively diverse in their ethnic composition. While home to dense populations of immigrant origin, they also contain a significant proportion of majority ethnic residents. The largest of the minority ethnic groups come from the former French North African colonies of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, while others originate in the parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia that were formerly colonized by France. Most of these territories gained independence from France in the 1950s and early 1960s. During the economic boom years that followed the Second World War, migrants from impoverished colonies or former colonies took up low-paid, unskilled jobs in metropolitan France, where there were serious labor shortages. Initially, their families generally remained in their countries of origin, but this changed amid the oil crises of the 1970s. Fearing rising unemployment, the French government banned fresh labor migrants from outside Europe and attempted to repatriate those already in the country. These efforts backfired, leading many migrants to conclude that during a period of economic insecurity it would be unwise to risk leaving France. Instead, they now brought their families to France and established the permanent settlement of new immigrant minorities.⁴

The Bellil family was part of this demographic shift. Although Samira was born slightly before the 1974 ban on labor migration from outside Europe, she and her younger sisters, born in France in the 1980s, were part of the second generation of North Africans, who became increasingly visible during this period. In the course

of these events, a new appellation—*Beurs*—became widely applied to them.⁵ The Bellils were not in every respect typical of immigrant families from North Africa. There were only three children (about half the average for such families), their income level was sufficient to allow the Bellils to buy their home instead of renting the kind of low-cost social housing in which immigrant families were generally concentrated, and they had the means to send Samira to a privately run Catholic school for at least part of her education. But the neighborhoods in which they lived sat cheek by jowl with the high-rise housing projects that dominate the banlieues of Paris. Frustrated with the restrictions imposed on her at home, the adolescent Bellil spent much of her time hustling on the streets of the banlieues, where she mixed with young people typical of this disadvantaged milieu. Her narrative is peppered with slang and swearwords picked up as part of the daily currency of life on those streets where colloquial French is mixed with terms from Arabic and other immigrant-borne languages and with liberal borrowings from rap and other forms of youth culture originating in the United States.⁶

During the 1980s and 1990s, unemployment in France escalated rapidly. The simultaneous rise of new immigrant minorities in the banlieues led a growing part of the population to believe the propaganda of the extreme-right Front National, according to which immigrants from former colonies were to blame not only for rising unemployment but also for virtually every other ill afflicting the nation. In reality, discrimination against non-Europeans was so rife that they suffered much higher levels of unemployment than the majority ethnic population. Bellil's father was among those who, from the mid-1980s onward, languished in long-term unemployment. Unemployment rates went higher still among second-generation North Africans. These rates exceeded 40 percent during the 1990s, compared with a peak of 13 percent among the national population.⁷

Discrimination has often been fueled by Islamophobia directed against postcolonial minorities, the largest of which come from predominantly Islamic countries in North Africa. Second- and third-generation members of these minorities, born and raised in France, are generally less attached to Islam than their parents; but this has not prevented them from being stigmatized and discriminated against by members of the majority ethnic population, leading to deep resentment and upsurges of violence among younger residents of the banlieues.

Seine-Saint-Denis was the epicenter of the riots that tore through the banlieues of numerous French cities in November 2005, the nation's most serious civil disturbances in almost forty years. While unprecedented in scale, such riots were not in themselves new. At a lower level of intensity, similar disturbances had been occurring since the late 1970s in the banlieues, where mainly young minority ethnic men were pitted against police officers seen as representatives of an unjust and repressive social order. This dynamic was in many ways encapsulated in Matthieu Kassovitz's films *La Haine* (1995), the title of which means "*The Hate*" and refers to the hatred or rage felt by young men in the banlieues in the face of police harassment, perceived as emblematic of their victimization by mainstream French society.

In her narrative, Bellil often speaks of a similar feeling of hate, but it is directed primarily against those who are located within the banlieues, rather than outside of them. The rage she feels is against those who raped her and against all those in the banlieues who subsequently shunned or mistreated her as if the rape constituted an ongoing license to abuse her. Profoundly gendered, Bellil's personal experience is also deeply imbricated by wider social tensions. Young rioters in the banlieues are almost exclusively male, as are members of the gangs that often seek to dominate public spaces there. In some cases, gang members and other young men

have been tempted to assuage the frustration arising from their exclusion from mainstream French society by victimizing “soft” targets, especially women, inside the banlieues. This has generated among their victims comparable feelings of rage toward their assailants and those whom they feel side with them.

The phenomenon known colloquially in the banlieues as *tournantes* (gang rapes) were first brought to public attention in the year 2000 by the movie *La Squale* (*The Tearaway*). The first to be signed by a victim of a tournante, Bellil’s narrative was published in 2002, a few weeks after the death of seventeen-year-old Sohane Benziane, who was burned alive in the banlieue of Vitry-sur-Seine by a nineteen-year-old youth. Amid the wave of publicity generated by Benziane’s death and the publication of Bellil’s story, seen as symptomatic of violence against women endemic in the banlieues, a group of minority ethnic women led by Fadila Amara launched a movement called *Ni putes ni soumises* (Neither sluts nor slaves), designed to prevent similar abuses in the future. Bellil agreed to serve as its honorary president.⁸

Ni putes ni soumises quickly gained support among politicians across a broad swathe of the party spectrum. Among them was Jean-Louis Debré, center-right president of the National Assembly. Working with *Ni putes ni soumises* to mark Bastille Day on July 14, 2003, Debré arranged for the facade of the National Assembly, overlooking the river Seine across from the Place de la Concorde, to be covered by huge photographs of fourteen young women from the banlieues described as “Mariannes d’aujourd’hui” (Mariannes for Today). Bellil was among the women whose images were displayed in this way. On one level, Debré’s initiative could be perceived as a long overdue recognition of the status of minority ethnic women as full citizens of the French Republic, which since the revolution of 1789 has been incarnated in the mythical but habitually white figure of Marianne. On another level, however, some saw in the pho-

tographs a manipulative form of paternalism in which women of Muslim heritage were portrayed as being protected by the Republic from Islamic misogyny allegedly enveloping the banlieues.⁹ Only a few years earlier, while serving as interior minister, Debré had earned notoriety by sending in riot police to haul minority ethnic women and children out of the churches in which they had sought sanctuary in the face of a new law preventing them from acquiring residence permits in France. Debré's new alliance with *Ni putes ni soumises* had the benefit of softening his public image, in which he now appeared as the defender of women's rights.

Bellil, like Amara, was often accused of playing into the hands of reactionaries and Islamophobes because of her public denunciation of violence inflicted on women in the banlieues.¹⁰ Both women were in fact always careful to avoid attributing violence in the banlieues to Islamic culture per se or to Muslim men in general, but this was often lost in media coverage of *tournantes*, which were commonly presented as a form of abuse inflicted by Muslim men on Muslim women and thereby as indicative of unacceptable tendencies inherent in Islam.¹¹ As she shows in the later part of her narrative, Bellil was well aware of the dangers of media manipulations, which she did her best to resist. Like several other young women authors of Muslim heritage, she was assisted in writing her narrative by a professional journalist. Through this process, these women often appear to have lost control of their stories to sensationalist and sometimes Islamophobic editorial and publicity machines.¹² Bellil was relatively successful in using her collaborator, Josée Stoquart, to sharpen her prose and her self-image without allowing the text to be infiltrated by stereotypical images of Muslim culture. This did not prevent Stoquart from adding a preface to the book, in which she portrayed the sexual violence of young men in the banlieues as a consequence of their being caught between Islamic fundamentalism and the cheap pornography of Western

consumer society.¹³ Bellil's narrative made no reference to Islamic fundamentalism, but Stoquart's representation of events in those terms was given widespread currency by journalists, many of whom may have seen in the preface a shortcut that saved them the trouble of reading Bellil's text.¹⁴

Islam is not inherently misogynist, nor do its basic principles endorse the abuse of women. At the same time, it is unquestionably the case that women in Muslim societies are generally expected to behave in more reserved ways than men. Even when they are not the victims of physical abuse, young women of Muslim heritage in the banlieues often feel unfairly treated compared with their male peers, who tend to be allowed much greater personal freedom. Muslim parents are often preoccupied with protecting the virginity of their daughters prior to marriage, which they regard as a matter of honor. While sons are allowed to roam at will outside the family home, daughters may not be allowed out on their own and are often expected to perform domestic chores from which their brothers are excused. Bellil's mother attempted to inculcate in her daughter values of this kind, but the young Bellil's comings and goings were less rigidly policed than those of young women in other Muslim families, perhaps because the father's long absence from the family home during Bellil's early years made it harder for him to assert untrammelled authority over her. In addition, there were no brothers to serve as male proxies for her father. In her early teens, Bellil frequently ran away from home when her father tried to assert his authority. When living at home, she suffered at the hands of her father a disturbing combination of physical and verbal abuse alternating with bouts of contempt and neglect, notably following the gang rape. His harshness was indeed such that the adolescent Bellil was at times thrown out onto the streets, with all the dangers associated with this. Only a month after the gang rape, she was raped for a second time by the principal assailant in the initial attack.

There is little evidence of Islam having played a significant role in the behavior of Bellil's father and still less of it having motivated the young men who raped her. Bellil's narrative refers explicitly to Muslims only once, when discussing the importance attached to the virginity of women prior to marriage. Elsewhere, she refers in more general terms to the "traditions" or "culture" of her parents and their attempts to literally beat those traditions into her without a word of explanation. Neither her mother nor her father appears to have received much formal education. There is no reference to them observing Islamic practices such as regular prayers or fasting during Ramadan, nor is there any indication of their transmitting to Samira doctrinal knowledge about the teachings of Islam. The traditions that they attempt to inculcate into Samira no doubt reflect in part their understanding of Islam, especially where relations between the sexes are concerned; but the violent manner of the father is clearly rooted in the violence experienced during his own childhood rather than in any precepts to be found in Islamic scriptures. Bellil implicitly points to the un-Islamic nature of her father's behavior when she refers ironically to his way of "celebrating" Fridays, the holiest day of the week for Muslims, by getting drunk, in defiance of Islamic teachings forbidding alcohol, and beating her.

Similarly, Bellil sees the violence of young men in the banlieues as an extension of the tradition of machismo displayed by their fathers at home, a tradition that has little to do with Islamic teachings. She refers to those who raped her as "des gens de couleur" (people of color), a description that does not readily evoke Muslims. It suggests, indeed, that one or more of her assailants may not have been of North African descent but black, originating in sub-Saharan Africa or the Caribbean, a possibility concordant with the fact that Seine-Saint-Denis is home to many migrants from the French Caribbean départements of Martinique and Guadeloupe,

where Catholicism is the dominant religion. None of this fits with the idea that the sexual abuse of women such as Bellil can be attributed to Islamic beliefs or culture.

In the postface to the first edition of her narrative, Bellil sums up her experiences as exemplifying the worst aspects of the banlieues, which are first and foremost a marginalized social space rather than a religious entity. This perspective is in line with the empirical evidence adduced by the sociologist Laurent Mucchielli, who has shown that while the nomenclature of *tournantes* is new, the phenomenon of gang rape is not. Neither is it unique to or especially preponderant among men of North African or Muslim heritage, nor are its victims to be found solely or even predominantly among those ethnic groups.¹⁵ None of this is to reduce or excuse the heinous nature of the assaults suffered by Bellil. It is, however, important not to draw unwarranted inferences linking such attacks to the Muslim heritage shared by some (by no means all) residents of the banlieues.

If offences of this nature can be seen in part as an extension of violent reflexes among poorly educated fathers and in part as a reaction to the self-perception of young men as victims of social marginalization and police harassment, the effect of such assaults has been to create a further class of victims among the young women targeted for physical abuse. In attempting to surmount her traumatic experiences, Bellil in turn abused her own body with drugs, alcohol, and at least one suicide attempt. It was only in her late twenties that she was rescued from this spiral of violence by a form of psychotherapy that treated her body together with her mind. The writing of her narrative was a pivotal part of this therapy. Instead of trying to dull her memory and camouflage her pain through drugs, she resolved to try to understand her past by thinking and writing about it as lucidly as possible. If at times the text takes on a self-justificatory tone, it should not be forgot-

ten that until writing her narrative Bellil had frequently been surrounded by people who, instead of sympathizing with her plight, blamed her for it.

Bellil conceived of writing as a way to cleanse herself of the pain that for years had been bottled up within her. In the narrative she speaks frequently of having felt as if her stomach had been tied in knots or invaded by a ball of pain, likened at times to boiling magma, triggering epileptic fits. In writing the book, she felt as if she finally divested herself of this burden. Sadly, scarcely two years after publishing the book, she died of stomach cancer. Her death at the age of thirty-one makes Bellil's narrative all the more poignant. It also makes it all the more important that as readers we understand the nature of the cruel adversities that befell her and the extraordinary resilience and determination Bellil showed in trying to surmount them.

NOTES

1. On the social and ethnic diversity associated with the RER network linking the banlieues with downtown Paris, see François Maspéro, *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), translated by Paul Jones as *Roissy Express: A Journey Through the Paris Suburbs* (London: Verso, 1994).
2. Jean-Marc Leclerc, "Plongée au coeur de la cité la plus violente du '9-3,'" *Le Figaro*, June 12, 2007.
3. Luc Bronner, "Quatre jeunes filles sur dix ont été victimes de violences en Seine-Saint-Denis," *Le Monde*, March 8, 2007.
4. On postcolonial immigration and settlement in France, see Alec G. Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 2007).
5. "Beur" and the feminine form "Beurette" are now commonly dismissed as labels by those to whom they are applied, including Bellil, who see in such labels cliché-ridden forms of marginalization.
6. On banlieue culture, see "Cities/Banlieues," eds. Roger Célestin, Eliane DalMolin and Alec G. Hargreaves, special issues, *Contemporary French*

and *Francophone Studies* 8, no. 1 (January 2004) and 8, no. 2 (Spring 2004). A prominent type of slang in the banlieues is *verlan* (backslang), formed by inverting the syllables of words. Widely used examples include *meuf*, an inversion of *femme* (woman), and *caillera*, an inversion of *racaille* (scum or street punk). The latter term has frequently been adopted as a self-designation by rebellious youths in the banlieues, including Bellil, as a way of recognizing and playing upon their stigmatized status. It is a form of self-affirmation comparable to that of African Americans who declared in the 1960s, “black is beautiful.” At the same time, *racaille* has retained its stigmatizing power, as was seen in the fall of 2005, when rioting in the banlieues was fueled by anger over the use of that word by the then interior minister (now president) Nicolas Sarkozy to describe disruptive youths there.

7. Michèle Tribalat, *Faire France: Une enquête sur les immigrés et leurs enfants* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995), 174–82.
8. Fadela Amara and Sylvia Zappi, *Ni putes ni soumises* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003). The organization was an offshoot of the Fédération Nationale des Maisons des Potes, a federation of associations working for improved conditions in the banlieues. The first major initiative of *Ni putes ni soumises* was a nationwide *Marche des femmes des quartiers pour l'égalité et contre les ghettos* (March of banlieue women for equality and against ghettos) early in 2003.
9. See Laurent Mucchielli, *Le scandale des “tournantes”: Dérives médiatiques, contre-enquête sociologique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), 85–107.
10. See Chérifa Benabdessadok, “Ni putes ni soumises: De la marche à l’université d’automne,” *Hommes et migrations*, no. 1248 (March–April 2004): 64–74.
11. On the construction of media images of the *tournantes* and the catalytic role of Bellil’s book in this process, see Mucchielli, *Le scandale des “tournantes”*, 11–32.
12. Alec G. Hargreaves, “Testimony, Co-Authorship and Dispossession among Women of Maghrebi Origin in France,” *Research in African Literatures* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 42–54.
13. Josée Stoquart, preface to Samira Bellil, *Dans l’enfer des tournantes, avec le soutien et la collaboration de Josée Stoquart* (Paris: Denoël, 2002), 12–13.

14. Mucchielli, *Le scandale des "tournantes"*, 19–22.
15. Mucchielli, *Le scandale des "tournantes"*, 33–84. Mucchielli's empirically documented findings parallel the specific cases described in Bellil's narrative: while the precise ethnic origins of her assailants are unclear, their victims—of whom Bellil was only one—were certainly of diverse origins, including several women of European appearance.

1. Jaïd and K.

“Thank you, girls. Take care, now.”

The salesman with the big moustache hadn't a clue. He didn't see our checks were forged, he didn't see the fear in our eyes. Didn't see a thing. Unreal.

My girlfriend Sofia and I couldn't stop dreaming of those mega-expensive Westons, so we each swiped a check from our mothers' checkbooks and copied their signatures with carbon paper.

We just wanted to play in the big kids' league, be the kind of girls who wear Westons. I chose dark red golf oxfords and Sophia chose black slip-ons. Talk about burning money, let me tell you, we burned it up!

We flew out of that store carrying our old shoes inside big bags emblazoned with gold lettering, just flying from the rush of it!

Then we split up at the Gare-du-Nord. In the train on the way to Garges, I couldn't stop staring at my shoes, couldn't peel my eyes off them. Unreal!

When I got to Garges, I went to see Rachida and the others, so I could strut around in my brand new pumps. It was like riding on a cushion of air. Man, was I looking good!

Toward midnight, after hanging with the girls a bit, I decided to head home. I'd gotten in the habit of going home by passing through a part of the projects called *la Cité bleu*, to see the gang at the entrance there. You couldn't miss them. Come rain, come snow, come wind, they were always there. That night, there was Li'l Ball, Freezpea, Salim the Shrimp, Krazy Karim, and Schnozzface—the whole crew of “King Jaïd's” goons.

Jaïd was the hottest in the whole neighborhood, the one you respected and feared. His slightest wishes were orders. Yet I wasn't scared of him and his homeboys, I thought they were nice. What I took for friendship was actually vice; what I took for respect was nothing but lies. Because in reality, I was nothing but Jaïd's meuf. But that night, I didn't yet know it.

I was thirteen when I met Jaïd at *la Cité bleu*. It was summer vacation, and I was grounded. I had just been kicked out of Saint Rosary, a private Catholic junior high school. After being thrown out of two other junior highs, my parents had thought it wise to rein me in. It actually calmed me down a bit at first, at least in terms of whom I hung with, the daddy's boys who had had a kind of hold on me. I stopped going out and cutting classes, but I still wasn't hitting the books any better. I'd been a complete space cadet for too long already! School did nothing for me, and neither did those boys. So my parents decided to punish me by grounding me for the entire vacation. There was no way, however, that I

was going to spend the whole summer watching sunbeams bounce through my bedroom window! Soon as I had a chance, I took off for an hour, three or four days, or longer, depending. I came home to wash up, change clothes, sleep, wolf down something, and get my ass kicked, and then I was off again. After my stay with the Catholics, I had reunited with old friends and fallen back into old ways: chilling with the girls.

That summer, I had gone over to la Cité bleu several times and Jaïd had begun to take a shine to me. . . . As I was new, the whole crew kept showing off in front of me. The question was: which of them would “hook” me? It turned out to be Jaïd.

I was thirteen, he was nineteen. . . . Jaïd was the blaze of the hood, dark-skinned, shaved head, eyes so black they should have scared me. With a body like Bruce Lee thanks to Thai boxing, which enabled him to wreck a fair amount of heads around him. As our relationship developed, I saw the fear and respect he inspired and the influence he had over the gang and the whole neighborhood. At the time it all made a big impression on me. Today, I'd run.

I fell straight into his trap, into the web he wove around me. I let his talk and his hot looks intoxicate me. At thirteen you believe in lightning bolts from heaven, you believe in love. It's the age when the wildest films go through your head! I was living in my bubble, in my dreamworld, and this bubble was also my protection against the blows I took along the way. Only Jaïd mattered. In his arms I sought the love I didn't find at home.

My troubles had begun when I turned eleven. Before I became a teen rebel, I was a little girl who loved art. I had started by learning how to read music at the conservatory in order to study piano later. I took classical and modern jazz dance. I was also interested in painting and theater. You might have called me a budding artist, but not a little bandit yet, believe me!

On the streets I became what we call a little caillera. I started to behave like a smartass, to pull cheap tricks with anyone, to go to Euromarché and steal the big craze at the time — granola bars and Burlington socks! In a word, I was always looking for a cheap thrill.

Before Jaïd I went out with boys to look good, to look old, to be able to say that I'd dated a guy. Stupid shit. But I wasn't in love. With Jaïd it was different. For me, it was serious. I was happy being looked at, being asked for, being "loved." I thought I was irresistible in his eyes and respected by the others. So-called friends fed this fantasy and I was consumed with pride. At thirteen being blond or brunette doesn't matter to boys; the important thing is having a "cute little ass."

Jaïd! I melted like an ice cube in front of him. It was all too beautiful for me. A big guy in the neighborhood, so handsome, so respected, interested in a kid my age, I couldn't believe it! He had a girlfriend, in fact, but that didn't stop him from shooting the shit with me and even doing the "I'm gonna hook you right in front of my girlfriend" routine! Today, I know how wrong I was. I tell myself that if I hadn't been so young and love struck, if I had been smarter, I would have seen the warning signs. But I was already numbed by life and I was too much in need of affection to be able to see anything at all. He played nice with me, and like an idiot I sucked it up! I believed in love at first sight, stuff like "He dropped everything the minute he saw me, even his ho." In the hood I became "Jaïd's meuf." Like there's "the king's noblemen," well, I was "Jaïd's meuf," his main girl, and that title changed my life. People looked up to me, they respected me, I felt important. And I might as well admit it: all that attention went straight to my little head.

It was my eyes that first drew Jaïd, and then the fact that I hadn't yet caught the "ghetto poison." It's true, even if I did stupid stuff,

the “do it to them before they do it to you” ethos hadn’t infected me yet. I was straight out of my Catholic school, I didn’t live in the projects, but in a small private apartment block, and that was enough to make me the “little rich girl.” I changed a lot in his company, I got tougher, but he didn’t push me to steal, I had already done that before him and I would do it after him. Mostly, I just wanted to impress him, to be like him: a real hard-ass, feared and respected. A little kamikaze who didn’t give a shit about anything, who had balls. Pursuing my relationship with him meant fighting the prejudices and taboos of completely outdated traditions and twisted minds. I was caught in a crossfire. Everything was jumbled up in my head and I didn’t know where the truth lay anymore. I felt pulled between what my family background arbitrarily laid out as expected of me and my own dreams of freedom. I dreamed of being free. I didn’t want to live in submission nor locked up at home, like the girls I saw around me. I wanted the same freedom a boy had — to breathe, to bite into life — what could be more natural?

I didn’t realize that our relationship was twisted. I didn’t understand that I was Jaïd’s meuf without really being one. We saw each other from time to time. He’d take me in a corner, or over to his place, and dump his wad. I was a puppet in his hands, I let him do whatever he wanted, and I accepted it in the name of love, because no one had ever defined that word for me.

Despite my feelings for him, he dragged me through the dirt, humiliated me, and dashed all my hopes and illusions. He did nothing to warn me even though he could see me changing, degrading myself, destroying myself, right before his eyes. He didn’t say a word, he just used me, sullied me, whenever and wherever it suited him. If my life was going to hell, he sure didn’t give a damn.

Little by little, people lost respect for me. I was tagged with a reputation as an easy lay thanks to Jaïd, who talked about our

“squeezes” in detail to his gang. He betrayed me with no remorse and I just kept loving him, sad little dipshit that I was, never figuring what a fake he was or what he was saying behind my back. Everyone in the gang knew when I showed up that I was going to get screwed. You can bet they were thinking, “Why not screw her myself?”

From the moment I met Jaïd, I changed almost beyond recognition. For my guidance counselors, the social workers, and my parents, I went from being a difficult kid to being a hopeless case in the space of a year and a half, the time I spent with Jaïd.

Okay, now that the scene is set, I can come back to that never-to-be-forgotten day when I showed up in front of the gang with my killer shoes.

I was walking by, wearing my Westons: “Bitch, those are bad!” Having bolted so much, it had been a while since I’d been back home. That evening, I told myself I’d better not overdo things, better go home, perhaps a bit unwillingly, a bit late, but I would make it home.

The whole gang was there with Jaïd, hanging out by the entrance. Everyone took in my shoes, including Jaïd. He spoke to me, and my eyes saw only him.

“Hey there.”

“Hey there.”

“Got a smoke?” I handed him one. “Nice Westons!”

“Thanks.”

“You comin’?”

With those two pathetic words, I was on cloud nine. Oh, I never asked for much! Forget affection, forget tenderness! He treated me like a dog, and I was in la-la land.

He told me to come and I went with him, like a zombie. He took me to his basement pad. It was a basement room fixed up

with a couch that smelled of gas and mold. I learned later that I was just one of a bunch of girls he led there.

“They’re something bad, your Westons, nice and petite too, real chic!”

I was a little nervous he’d steal them off me and resell them, but a guy doesn’t do that to his meuf! Little did I know that what he was doing to me was a thousand times worse. . . .

He pulled me close. He kissed me. I was flying: first these pumps, now Jaïd. What a day! After he made “love” to me, or rather after he relieved himself, he said I could go.

I am so sad today to have been so blind then. I feel sullied and ashamed to have accepted such wretchedness. To let yourself be dragged into a dark basement stinking of gas and shit, onto a rotten sofa with a real son of a bitch. It was pitiful, it was sordid. And stupid idiot that I was, I thought he loved me and I was floating in the clouds.

When I came out of the basement, the gang was still at the entrance. One of them called out to me for a smoke, so I went over to give it to him. He went ballistic right in my face, inventing some bullshit to draw me closer. While I was trying to understand what he wanted from me, the others came toward us. I couldn’t see Jaïd.

A fist landed in my face, completely out of the blue. I felt my cheek getting hot. I tried to fight back but I was too late, a kick in the back threw me to the ground. I had no idea what was happening. Ten minutes earlier we’d been joking around, now wild beasts were tearing me apart. I heard, “Shut your trap!” as seven or eight animals took turns smashing my head down. They each wanted me to give them a “treat.” I was getting more and more nervous. I knew I was close to losing it, but I tried to hold up as long as I could, despite the punches and kicks coming from every direction. They landed on my legs, my back, my stomach, my face. I held

on, I fought back, I defended myself with all my strength. All of a sudden I heard a voice make them stop. Was it Jaid? No, to my total surprise, it was his buddy, his best friend K.

K. was a hunk, a mass of solid muscle with a capacity for savagery. He was huge, with a neck like a bull, bulging eyes, and enormous hands made for knocking people out. People said he was a real butcher, a psycho. He inspired terror and everyone avoided having anything to do with him. He was the champ in all categories of evil. He'd already killed someone with his fists and gotten away with it by pleading self-defense. One day I saw him force a guy to hit another guy, for no reason at all, by threatening to smash him if he didn't do it. K. had tried to flirt with me several times, to joke around, but I was so scared of him I slipped away each time. That night, after K. yelled, the punches stopped and my attackers let me go. I was saved! The nightmare was over. Full of gratitude, I thanked K.

That's when he walloped me. He picked me up by my hair, dragged me, and then told me to stop crying and follow him. "Scram," he told the others. They split. The more I cried, the more he hit me. My head was almost bashed in and I was barely conscious. Terrified, I did as he said. We reached the highway, him pulling me by my clothes to force me to follow him. I was scared to death, I begged him to leave me in peace, to let me go home. I talked to him, trying to reason with him, but my words didn't make a dent, it was as if he didn't even hear me. At one point I managed to extricate myself from his grip, I ran with all I had. I was completely crazed. I tried to stop a car. I yelled, I screamed that they had to help me but the cars zoomed past, paying no attention to me. Infuriated by my screams, K. hit me again, full force. His fist smashed into in my face, which literally floored me. I was crying from exhaustion, impotence, pain. My face was flooded with tears and blood. Without an ounce of pity for me, he continued to beat

me until I had no strength to react, until I realized that the only way I'd have a chance of surviving was to follow him.

So I did as he said. I followed him, wobbling, exhausted from this unequal, pointless struggle. Along the way he stopped and pummeled me to keep me terrified and passive. He didn't say a word. Even while I was following him, I kept trying to find a way to escape. I felt like I didn't have any strength left though, my legs were numb with terror.

Fear can be unreal. It can make you lose all your defenses, your ability to run or breathe. It's like a total paralysis: your body and your soul are whipped out. No end of people were to tell me later: "If I'd been you, I would have. . . . There's always a way to fight back. . . . Surprise your attacker, kick him in the balls. . . ." How many times I've heard such murderous little phrases, filling me up with guilt, pitiless comments made by people who have never felt the grip of true fear.

Finally, we arrived at the entry of an apartment block, then climbed to the third floor. We stopped in front of a dark door: I had enough time to read the name on it. Then we went into an apartment. It was clean, decorated in a neutral style, beige tones, with a big brown wraparound sofa. There was a television, a VCR, wall-to-wall carpeting: it was simple and rather comfortable. K. knew that after the beating he'd given I wouldn't scream anymore, so he started to talk to me as if nothing had happened:

"So hey, those shoes of yours are really killer. You thirsty? You want something to eat or drink? I hear you been getting it off with Jaïd. . . ."

I had no clue what he was up to. I was in a total panic. What was he after? Why was he speaking to me so calmly after he had just beaten me up a few minutes ago? I sat on the sofa, petrified. While listening to him, I looked around everywhere. I tried to memorize everything, telling myself, "Look around, remember it

all, you never know, if they question you some day, you might need this information. . . .”

I heard myself answering his questions. What was happening to me? How could I talk like that with him? The truth is, I just faked it, I was too scared of getting hit again. The conversation we had gave me the horrible impression that I was going along with it, but what else could I do if I didn't want to die? Later, this thought would torture me for years. I felt guilty for appearing willing. But that day I knew I had no choice. I was trying to save my skin.

“Go clean yourself up. The shower's over there. And wash it real good down there,” he told me, throwing me a towel. He watched me while I washed myself, to see if I did exactly as he had told me to do. I kept quiet, but I was fuming. Son of a bitch, asshole! He took me for a filthy pig. Listen, jerk, even when I was on the street, I always managed to stay clean!

I got out of the shower. He told me to come close to him. He went over to the VCR, put in a video. It was porn. “You scope and you do the same.” I did it. I did everything he told me to do. I felt like vomiting, but I held it back. I was scared of getting hit again. I acted “nice” to get it done as quickly as possible and go home.

While I was performing to his orders like a robot, I used all my strength to shelter myself inside my head. I had it running a thousand miles an hour. I understood right away that it was the only place I had left. The only place I could escape to. He might have my body, but he didn't have my mind. My mind was mine alone.

So I imagined my parents, my sisters sleeping. I thought of everything in my life. And then I saw that name on the door again. I hung onto it. I called up more images: my friend Sofia, school, vacations in Belgium, Mama Josette, etc. Everything I could think of. Anything to keep from feeling that panting, that smell, that skin. Nor was there any way I was going to think for a single second about what he was doing to me. I didn't want any piece of

that reality, and by forcing myself further into my mind, I managed to dissociate myself from what my body was “experiencing.” It was no longer mine.

At last it was over. I couldn't say how long it went on. Now I was hoping I could leave, but instead he took me into a bedroom at the end of the hallway. The room was covered with posters and red lights. He told me to lie on the bed and he locked the door. Lying in the dark, I waited, not knowing what was going to happen. I lay there with my eyes open. My heart beat so loud it filled my chest and the whole bedroom. I was completely terrified. I thought he was going to kill me.

I heard a noise. A door closed. Then I heard murmurs. The bedroom door opened; another guy came in with K. I didn't know him. He was small, hairy, and much less stocky than K. He didn't say a word. K. did the talking. “You let him do what he wants. Don't get stupid, okay? Just be nice!” And then it started all over again. K. forced me to do stuff with his buddy.

I couldn't keep doing those filthy things. It twisted my guts, it turned my stomach and my heart. So I closed my eyes tight. I did what I was told, robotlike. I didn't resist, I became a kind of slave, a piece of shit, a worthless thing in their hands. “You're not making me hard, you filthy bitch!” he screamed and made me remedy it. He stank and disgusted me. I felt nauseous. I wanted to get them out of me, to get out of myself. But I was scared that the beating might start again at any moment so I did as I was told, consumed by fear and hatred. I begged God to save me, I begged him with all my heart and despair. My prayer rose from my guts, from my soul, exploding in my head.

But after awhile a third guy appeared in the room. I had never seen that one either. He asked the other guy to hurry up and, scoping the whole scene, started to masturbate. Then he wanted to force me to “do things” to both of them at once. I panicked,

I cracked, I started sobbing. I started to scream again, I begged them to leave me alone. K., who had left, came back in the room asking what was happening. When they explained, he threw the second one out, “Get outta here, you had your turn!” I found myself alone with the third one. I was as low as a human could get. . . . I felt like a piece of putty, totally spent, damaged, soiled.

Little by little, I locked myself in a black hole, a deep void. Nothing touched me anymore. It was like my mind had left my body. It wasn't me anymore there, lying on the bed, smothered by those hands, that skin, those smells, that filth, and that savagery, it was just my body, which had become an inert object, completely numb. The process continued and intensified: I had tried so hard to flee into my thoughts in order to extract myself from what was happening to me, that now nothing at all touched me. I was cut off from my body, I was anesthetized. I was somewhere else. It was like my body didn't belong to me anymore. Could it be dead? In any case those grave robbers, those vultures wouldn't have my soul; I found refuge and survived in my soul.

They did as they wanted with me all night long, giving free rein to their lowest instincts. I was even submitted to physical torture by K., about which I will not speak; humiliation has its limits. Reawakening these memories is a pain I accept only in order to bear witness. In the early morning only K. and I were left in the apartment, the others had left. Then K. went through another metamorphosis and I could barely recognize him. Again, he acted as if nothing had happened: he fixed me breakfast, he shined my Westons. “You see,” he seemed to say, “I'm not a son of a bitch!” And after that he let me go.

I emerged outside, feeling like I had just arrived from another planet. I walked up to the bus stop like a robot. There I was with my torn sweater and my shiny Westons, miserable. My legs could barely hold me up. “Hurry up bus!” I didn't even know what my

face looked like, I tried to read it off the looks of people nearby: they saw nothing. It was early morning, a new day was beginning for them, a day like any other day, and there I was. I had just stepped out of a nightmare. I tried to pass myself off in front of them as the-girl-taking-the-bus-like-normal.

I was gulping down a flood of tears. I stuffed back my sobs as far down my throat as possible. I felt a tight wad in my stomach, a ball of screams, of hurling fists, of swear words and tears. The ball was swirling with violence, poised to explode, to shatter into pieces. But nothing happened. There I stood, waiting for that damn bus. When it came, the driver gave me shit about the ticket and I screamed at him to leave me in frigging peace.

Now where was I to go? Home? I wanted to take off, go as far away as possible, so that no one would ever find me again, somewhere where they wouldn't ask any questions, where I'd be free, where I'd be safe.