DIVINE COMEDY

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A Novel

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California, USA

ISBN-13: 9781545299487
ISBN-10: 154529948X
Library of Congress Control Number: 2017907854
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform
North Charleston, South Carolina

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The author and the publishers of this work stress that some names have been changed to protect the privacy of the people mentioned; the people, however, are real.

To my wife, Marisela
To my sons, Christian and Daniel

FOREWORD

It is ironic that I happen to know the author of *Divine Comedy* likes to be known as Dr. Bebawi, for this book is an extraordinary tale of one man fighting against a never-ending plague of medical conditions to which the author's academic doctorate is totally irrelevant. The tale does, however, make up for the author's lack of medical training with the constant flow of health professionals in the cast. For anyone to have to digest the poisonous soup of diseases with strange names that is the theme running through this fictional tale of nonfiction is punishment enough, but for that same man to have to suffer the trials of an overactive sexual appetite, for which the physical apparatus required to satisfy the same ends up among the many failing organs in his body, must be purgatory indeed. Whether or not the narrator, Alexandre Akpors, would ever get to meet St. Peter is a moot question, such that he may never find out if his radiographically induced halo will ever have a chance to blind

the saint. While the reader is never given a chance to forget the title of the book, the comedic aspect of the real or imaginary life that one learns about is always close to the surface. But in this writer's mind, there is nothing very divine about this endless, overly repetitious tale of suffering and sexual encounters, both successful and otherwise, which leaves the reader both mentally exhausted and longing for a long and healthy life, free from all temptations of the flesh and never, ever having to set foot inside a medical doctor's consulting room.

—Taran Hewitt,
England

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks my muse, all the young women of the world; my closest ally, friend, and companion, Marisela; and my family and all the children of the world from whom I acquire immense knowledge. Thanks also to my dearest friends, who impact my life on a daily basis: Dr. Sony, Dr. Sukhmani, Safwat, Androula, Shahnaz, Lina Simon, Laila Simon, Eddie Shalhoub, Natalie Harb, Simon Simon, Maria Guevera, Dr. Faten Bebawi, Dr. Nardeen Shafik, Fayez Ibrahim, Sultana and Hani Wazzan, Daniela Veizaj, Ginny Offstein, my dear childhood friend Vera, Atef Khalil, Celine Zamoyska and Taran, Dan Dion, Tracey, Jessica, Lily, Dr. Eric Hanson, Professor Kathleen Hanson, and my most cherished friends Dr. Michel, his wife, Renata, and Dr. Irina and all the others whose names are printed in my heart.

I wish to offer my gratitude to my physicians, who work tirelessly and selflessly to save my life: Grammy Award–winner Dr. Mike Vasilomanolak, Dr. David Shen, Dr. David Rosenberg, Dr. Nancy Godfrey, Dr. Farin Azadeh, Dr. Michael Kim, Dr. Kashyap Trivedi, my Italian brothers Dr. Mario Curti and Dr. Thomas Asciuto, Dr. Laura Manuel, Dr. Christopher Witson, Dr. Harry Karp, Dr. George Macer, Dr. Robert Liou, Dr. Stevens Grant, and Dr. Stephen A. Hightower. Thanks also to all my nurses, especially Elizabeth Alvarez, Lucy, and Va, and to all the victims of medical and life challenges.

Thanks to all the nurses and staff at Todd Cancer Pavilion for making my therapy experience as tolerable as possible.

I would like to thank my legal advisers and friends, Mrs. Ruth Shamir and Mr. Jack Golan of the law firm of Popkin Shamir & Golan and my personal honorable barrister, Joseph Henein, Esq.

Finally, I would like to thank and show appreciation for the concierge staff at my beach apartment for their care, kindness, and unceasing support. Special thanks go to Rajive, Danny, Mike, Denise, and Macchon.

In memory of my beautiful cousins, the Honorable Major Samer Rushdy and his brother, the family prince HRH Maged Rushdy.

In memory of my longtime friends, the Honorable George Simon and the Honorable Abbas Alaei, barrister.

Through me you pass into the city of woe: Through me you pass into eternal pain: Through me among the people lost for aye. Justice the founder of my fabric moved:

To rear me was the task of power divine, Supremest wisdom, and primeval love. Before me things create were none, save things. Eternal, and eternal I shall endure. All hope abandon, ye who enter here.

—Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*

PROLOGUE

There are only two ways to react to life's trials and tribulations: become frustrated, bitter, angry, and sorrowful or see all events as comical and somewhat wacky. There has never been a day in human existence that did not have surprises and astonishments; how each of us reacts determines the outcome.

Life is a divine comedy; the line between fiction and nonfiction is very thin and elastic. One writer can stretch the line from fiction to reality or vice versa; another can cross the line altogether. This writer finds the difference so ambiguous and indistinct that often he is oblivious to whether occurrences are fictional or real; he only sees things as a form of divine comedy meant to amuse and charm. He does not mind life's madness at all. To him, whether it is fiction or otherwise is irrelevant; what matters is that it is.

This writer is not disquieted about whether the tale of his past twenty-five years seems factual or fictional. For him, the difference is inconsequential, and he prefers that his readers decide. The fable is such an implausible one that many shall see it as fictional, but to him it is his life as he is accustomed to it.

He shall take you on a stormy journey through the life he has lived—medical, emotional, and personal—since he was thirty-five years old. He has been so fervent, optimistic, and creative that even his physicians have been overawed.

1

My name is Alexandre Akpors. I live in the only modern fascist state in the world of the year 2017. How this state became fascist no one knows, and I assure you no one will ever know. I shall not name the state out of respect for my readers' intelligence. I shall only write that its fascist leader is referred to as POTUS.

It is not a great time, but it is not a bad time either. To borrow from the great Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It is a season of light; it is a season of darkness." I am attracted to the light, and I walk toward it each time I am able to spot it, which doesn't happen too often. This is a suggestive part of the divine comedy of which this tale is being told.

Where do I begin? Well, I came to this fascist state in 1980. It was not a fascist state yet; it was a major drug dealer under

its then leader, Ronald Reagan, whom I respected, and I will never know why, and his deceptive wife, Nancy. I am sure most readers remember the Iran-Contra affair. While Nancy Reagan launched an advertising campaign: "Say No to Drugs," her husband, Ronald Reagan was selling drugs as a way to by-pass Congress. I was a vibrant thirty-five-year-old professor and a lawyer, living in a modest apartment on Paramount Avenue in the city of Downey, California.

On a gloomy day in 1991 or 1992, I cannot remember exactly, while I was reading Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*, I suddenly felt extraordinary chest pain, jaw pain, and general discomfort. I called my first ex-wife, Helen, whom I had married in London when I was living and studying in England, and our only son Christian, who is proudly a British Subject, immediately, and since they lived very close to where I was, they came over.

We called for help, and the ambulance arrived shortly. I was taken to the nearest medical facility, Downey Hospital.

Evidently, I had what they believed to have been a myocardial infarction. I was removed from Downey Hospital via ambulance to the University of California, Irvine, where I had heart surgery. After a couple of days, I returned home. It took me six months to recover, but I was on Cardizem and nitroglycerin for several years.

In addition to the extraordinary fear I felt during that divine-comedy episode, I had to wear a heart monitor around my neck for many months. To this day, I have to go through a stress-echo test once a year to ensure that my valve works effectively, since I have MVP, which stands for mitral valve prolapse. And according to the Mayo Clinic, this "occurs when the leaflets of the mitral valve bulge (prolapse) into the heart's left upper chamber (left atrium) like a parachute during the heart's contraction. Mitral (MY-trul) valve prolapse sometimes leads to blood leaking backward into the left atrium" (Mayo Clinic, 2017).

Watching my health means that I see Dr. Michael Vasilomanolakis, who is also a Grammy Award winner, once or twice a year for an advanced checkup, stress echo, and advice on the many medications I currently take. Dr. Vasilomanolakis has become a great friend, and I trust him blindly. My cardiologist brother, Dr. Alfons Bebawi, has met him, and he agrees with me that Dr. Vasilomanolakis is one of the greatest doctors ever. Having a cardiologist brother is another face of the divine comedy that never ceases to amaze or amuse me. I watch, I feel, and I smile and look at life's large gray eyes. I smile a little longer and dive into an ocean of emotions wondering where I was a hundred years ago and where will I be a hundred years from now – dust in the wind.

2

It was a Thursday morning. By then I was married to a Mexican beauty named Melina. I had met Melina at one of the colleges where I had been teaching. I will not write which college for the protection of the privacy of Melina, which is not her real name. Melina was five feet nine inches tall; her long hair was kohl black, and it plunged over her shoulders. She had sweet, soft lips; slender eyebrows; and sharp dark eyes decorated with long black lashes. Her joyous personality and soothing, sexy voice could make any man fall for her. I did. I do not know, however, whether that was love or lust. I had no understanding of the difference at the time. I still do not understand the difference. I wonder who came up with the idea that wisdom comes with age; I am sixty-one-years-old and far less wise than I had ever been. I believe.

I had earned my bachelor's degree in journalism and my master's degree in English. I had been teaching as a part-time

faculty member at many colleges and universities, including Long Beach College, Golden West College, Rancho San Diego College (which is now Santa Ana College), and the California State University campuses of Fullerton, Long Beach, and Dominguez Hills. Life was reasonably pleasant and the divine comedy was agreeable.

I was happy and content with my life then, but on that Thursday morning, I suffered a severe urinary-tract infection. I had been suffering from urinary-tract infections so often that doctors were puzzled because that happens normally to women not men, yet, they prescribed antibiotics for me. That time, I saw a new young Vietnamese doctor who practically saved my life. I thank nature that most of our doctors in the United States are foreigners. I wish our intellectually challenged president Fascist IL Duce would get it in his skull.

Dr. Sigel, the Vietnamese physician, looked at my medical chart, studied it for a while, and told me he was not happy with the persistent occurrences of urinary-tract infections. He referred me to a bladder specialist, a urologist. I have, sadly, forgotten the name of the specialist, but he was brilliant. He conducted a cystoscopy procedure and went through my penis into my bladder. He did that all without any form of anesthesia. I remember how painful that was. As he was inside the bladder looking around, he said, "Hmm! Ah! I am afraid you have cancer, my friend."

The words did not register because of the pain I was experiencing from being inside my penis with a thick instrument

that I felt damaged my prostate. He pulled the catheter out and explained to me that I had a tumor on the edge of the right side of the bladder and that he was sure it was cancer. I had to go for surgery immediately.

Two days later, I was at the hospital having the tumor removed from my bladder. I stayed a couple of days at Long Beach hospital and left home with a catheter that I wore for two weeks. I had to be off work for a few months. After the pathology report, I learned that the cancerous tumor was grade three sporadic and was rather serious.

I first went to Dr. Robert Pugach, a famous urologist in Long Beach. Later, I decided to go to the City of Hope for chemotherapy, which was, at the time, a very new therapy for bladder cancer called BCG. Every Friday morning, I drove from my apartment in Belmont Shore to the City of Hope for my treatment. For those of us who do not know what a BCG is, it is actually live tuberculosis inserted into the bladder to burn the wall of the bladder and with it the cancerous cells. It was a new invention by a Spanish doctor and my Oncologist, the great Dr. Robert Kawatchi at the City of Hope.

I wish my readers could imagine what burning sensation I had felt in my bladder with this BCG substance in it, and I had to hold it for as long as possible. It felt like Dante's hell for sure.

As I have always done, and continue to do, I smiled at the divine comedy and what life often threw at me. I was never

sad, worried, or afraid. To me, it was just part of the divine comedy of the life we all live. And to test me further, the divine comedy wanted to see how far I would stretch the line between fiction and reality. I discovered that my then wife, Melina, was having a longtime affair with her boss. I must admit that I was devastated; I was astonished and unable to tell whether I was living a fictional event or a real one. Evidently, her affair was not fiction. Or perhaps it was; who knows? Life at its very core is a fictional divine comedy.

This is what happened: Melina used to go to work at six in the morning. That day, I opened my eyes at the moment and I thought I was seeing her stuffing sexy underwear into her purse; I was surprised but did not say anything. I was not sure if I was fully awake or hallucinating. When she came back that night, she was wearing a different dress than the one she had had on that morning. I asked her why. She said that the dress had gotten dirty and she had had to change. I never questioned where she got the clean dress from, but I knew it was hers. I opened the closet to see the dirty dress; it was spotted or splashed with what I believed was semen. When I confronted her, she swore it was milk she had had for her baby—she had a young child who was not mine. I was not convinced.

My training as a prosecutor from my law school days at Cairo University and Oxford University, as well as my journalistic talents went into full gear, and the interrogation started. Before long, Melina admitted that indeed she had had sex with her boss, and the spots on the dress were indeed sperm, but she

said he had raped her. And here is her exact story: "He pushed me onto a couch, lifted my dress up, turned my underwear to the left, and inserted his erect penis into my vagina, but just before ejaculation, he pulled out and ejaculated on my face and dress."

As I believe in law and order, as I am a lawyer and a son of a Supreme Court Justice, I called the police at once. Two police officers arrived within ten minutes. A male police officer spoke with me about various topics, and a female officer took Melina into the bedroom—to this day, I do not know what Melina told her. Both police officers gave us numbers for victims of crimes and said they would be in touch.

Believing Melina had been the victim of a horrendous crime; I was very compassionate toward her. It was not the best of times. It was a time of no lucidity; it was a divine comedy of fiction and nonfiction alike.

I, Alexandre Akpors, was still receiving chemotherapy at the City of Hope Hospital under the supervision of the great scientist, Dr. Robert Kawatchi. For readers who do not know what BCG, I remind you again, it is live tuberculosis bacteria inserted into the bladder to burn the inner wall and the cancerous cells with it; can you imagine the burning sensation I had been experiencing and my inability to hold this substance inside my bladder for long? It was terribly painful. Not to divert from the subject, but the divine comedy offers a reason for the existence of fast-food restaurants such as In-N-Out Burger

and McDonald's; it is to help people like me who are receiving BCG chemotherapy. I could not wait until I reached my home to urinate, so I always stopped at the In-N-Out restaurant at the corner of Pacific Coast Highway and Second Street to get rid of the burning substance in my bladder. Isn't that in itself foreboding?

On a Wednesday morning, my phone rang. It was Mr. De Salvo. He introduced himself as a detective with the Los Angeles Police Department and asked if I could meet him in his office. I agreed, got ready, and drove to the LAPD in downtown Los Angeles. No words can describe how ugly and uncivilized East Los Angeles is, but this is not our concern now. I arrived at the police station, introduced myself, and was led to a small room. Inside were two quite overweight men, who introduced themselves by name and as detectives.

"Please sit down, and make yourself comfortable. Do you want a cup of coffee?"

I accepted. They ordered coffee for me and told me I could smoke if I wanted to do so. I did. I slowly pulled out my pack of Dunhill cigarettes, took one, and placed the box on their desk; then I lit my cigarette, quite calmly, actually. I felt as though the detectives, disturbed by what they were about to tell me, were surprised at my calm and serenity.

> "We are afraid we have some unpleasant news that might be displeasing to you. We visited the person

> your wife accused of raping her, and we found that she actually lives with him. Her clothes are there, the neighbors know her, and they often have parties there in which your wife is always present. We are so very sorry to tell you this, but your wife is indeed living with Juan on a regular basis, and we do not know how she could be living with you too at the same time."

I felt that the detectives were expecting me to faint, collapse, get angry, or react violently; they seemed quite amazed and looked at each other when I smiled, took a puff of my cigarette, and offered my appreciation for their work. They kept apologizing, and I kept asking them not to. To me, the incident was nothing but the divine comedy at work. What could be more divinely comical than what had happened? Had I crossed the fine line between fiction and reality? I did not think so. Had I stretched the elastic line between fiction and nonfiction in either direction? I did not think so. It is up to you, my dear reader, to decide whether this is fiction. I know it sounds so fictional, but it is just life in its clearest, most divine, and comical state.

Now, that my wife had been so deceptive was most perplexing and bewildering. My wife had always been so jealous if I even talked with a woman. She was so protective of me that I could never have imagined she would be with another man. How could that have been possible? I do not know; it is divine comedy indeed. I drove home safely with no incidents.

I, Alexandre Akpors, had already hired a nationally famous female attorney for my wife, an attorney I knew and had met before on several occasions. She had always been known to fight for women in situations where women were forced to do things they did not want to. I did not know what Melina wanted. I sent her to the attorney, who was able to settle Melina's phony rape case for a few hundred thousand dollars.

I filed for a divorce and left the apartment. I did not want any of this immoral and dirty money Melina had received. At that point, I was face-to-face with the darkness, waiting for whatever would happen next. I stayed with my ex-wife. Helen, Christian's mother for a couple of days. Soon after, I found what would become home for twenty-some years: 301 Bay Shore Avenue in Belmont Shore, California. In this beautiful one-bedroom apartment on the bay, I would lead the most exciting life, and the divine comedy and I would become very close friends.

It might or might not be important to mention that after divorcing, Melina took me to court, asking for money. Her famous female attorney got her three hundred thousand dollars, with which Melina bought an apartment building. However, because her divorce lawyer was a shark, and I was spending a lot on my lawyer and court expenses, I decided to agree on what Melina wanted, which was about forty thousand dollars to pay for her credit cards' debts. Soon after the court judgment, I filed for bankruptcy. Melina lost a great deal, since she had her apartment building under lien for her unethical divorce lawyer, who

was shrewd enough and knew exactly where I was going and what I was planning to do.

The divine comedy and I continued playing the game of life. At the apartment in Belmont Shore, although I was still receiving chemotherapy because my bladder cancer returned twice, I had parties and gatherings. The apartment was like an intellectual hub discussing writers, films, politics, and religious hallucination; people would come and go, serving themselves food and drinks, while I had a great time enjoying the comedy of life depicted in my friends' lives, as well as mine.

3

Through the Internet, I met a young Algerian French beauty named Lola. Lola was a petite twenty-something-year-old woman; she was not flat chested. She had a round face and short black hair, cut Parisian style. Her eyes were wide and black; they were sharpened by her long eyelashes and decorated with thin eyebrows. Her mouth was small, and so was her nose. Overall, she was very sensual and sexy. She radiated sensuality. Sadly, not for me.

Lola was the most intelligent, well-read, and well-educated young woman I had ever met in my life. I was in my early forties, and she was in her late twenties. We learned so much from each other, though I am sure I learned more about the arts, science, literature and music. I was able to teach her Arabic, and she was simply brilliant.

Sadly, Lola and I were not emotionally or sexually compatible, though intellectually we were more than compatible. We shared four great years together, but I was seeing other women, and she was seeing other men. It is significant to say that I rescued Lola from her fanatic Islamist husband and sheltered and protected her. Now, I am glad that our relationship did not work out because I learned recently that Lola has converted from atheism to a stricter form of Islam and has become religious. To me, a religious Muslim is a murderer at heart and can do great damage in the name of their satanic Allah and the satanic sharia in which they blindly believe.

Lola suffered a great deal because of my medical conditions, the return of the bladder cancer and the side effects of chemotherapy. Additionally, I had lost all my teeth and decided to have dental implants.

This divine-comedy episode involving the dental implants was a disaster. My dentist was, and still is, Dr. Laura Manuel; I can only describe her as brilliant. My orthodontist was Dr. Ravi Smith, a competent, compassionate, and caring doctor. Poor Lola went through most of the whole painful process. First was pulling my teeth second was implanting bones and crafting gums, and then came the process of the actual implants. The process took years, during which both Lola and I suffered.

While I was living with Lola, I fell in love for the second time in my life, or at least I thought I did. She was a pretty girl from

Chile, whose name I have to withhold for her safety. I shall refrain from writing how, where, or when I met that angel. Her name is Savanna; those days, she possessed the most attractive oval shaped face encircled with here wide Latin eyes above which were the most sensuous eye brows and under which the most kissable full lips. Her hair was neither too black nor too brown, but it was long falling upon her shoulders like a mermaid. She had a beautiful petite pair of breasts that always reminded me of the French saying: "You flat chested women, I adore you, for making love with you make me feel closer to your heart." And each time we made passionate love I was far t too close to her heart and her inner soul.

This love affair was like a Hollywood production. I do not think that I have ever had sexual intercourse with such intensity and pleasure as I had with her. It lasted awhile, but unfortunately, it was based on deception. My Chilean beauty was married.

The divine comedy has a way of playing games of chess with us, and it sometimes wins, but with me often not. On my birthday, September 13, my beloved came on that morning to tell me she had to break off the relationship. It has always been in my character that I never argue or discuss such matters; I smiled and said OK. She left, and I broke into tears and suffered severe depression for a very long time. I would like to write more details about this affair, but I do worry for the safety of the person. I have never seen or talked to her since. If she reads this novel, I am sure she will recognize this writing is about her.

By that time, Lola had found her now husband, and I remained alone in my castle. I dated several people. One who stands out was my ex-student Mona. We dated a short while, and then she also left. Mona was also an Asian beauty that my fiends often envied me for having such an elegant, model-like girlfriend. But all is dust in the wind – dust in the wind.

It had been clear to me that I was somewhat lost. I was looking for something that, perhaps, did not exist. I did not know for what I was searching. Although on the surface my life seemed stable, I was tormented within myself; I was hoping for a complete change. What kind of change, I did not know. I am sure many of my readers feel the same at one point or another. One must never despair.

At that time, I was struggling with my bladder cancer and my dental implants. After my cancer was controlled, I had to have a cystoscopy every six months, and I do so until this very moment. And my dental implants were failing one after another; my bone grafts and gum implants did not take, so my implanted teeth had nothing to hold on to. I lost them all and had to resort to wearing dentures. This was divine comedy at its best or its worst, depending on one's perspective; it was divine comedy, nevertheless.

Remember, dear reader, at that point I was still teaching part time at various colleges. They called us "freeway flyers" because we had to drive freeways from one college to another. And by that time, I had lost Lola, my Algerian princess, and

Mona, the Japanese beauty. Mind you, I had been weary of my age and of how time flies.

Aging this is a form of divine comedy that we all face on a daily basis; some of us are aware of it more than others. I had been, have been, and am fully aware and severely saddened. I do not like or appreciate aging; I also do not like those who call old age the 'golden years' – they are not even the worst of chemical element years.

Before long, I met a beautiful Iranian friend named Afari. She and I had a great rapport except for the fact that she was a true Muslim, and I did not, and do not, like religious people. That is not to say that Afari was religious, but she did believe in Islam, which I detest, and that was sufficient for me to judge.

We lived together for two years. She was working on her medical degree, and I was writing my PhD dissertation. We helped each other a lot and had a wonderful relationship. I think perhaps we loved each other; however, Islam stood like a wall of steel between us. The affair had to end. The divine comedy never ceases to amaze me, and, as always, I laughed. Actually, I remember the moment we said good-bye; it was when she said that Quran was the words of a god and is real. That, I do not accept, so I asked her to leave at once. Tolerance is one thing; stupidity is another. That is why I believe the West's tolerance of Islam is not tolerance at all; it is utmost stupidity and ignorance. And that is divine comedy indeed.

When Lola and I were together, just before breaking up, I was already a full-time tenured professor at San Jose College. I received this post in 1999. I was very happy, indeed, as finally, after so many years working as a part-time faculty member, I received my tenure and I was at that time a full professor. It was the best of times until Afari and I separated, and I was alone again.

Afari also suffered some of my medical problems alongside me. At that time, my problems included prostate issues; I had to have several surgeries to adjust its size and to help my urinary function. I used to see Dr. Robert Pugach and the City of Hope doctors at the same time. Additionally, my body refused to produce testosterone, so, I had to take an injection of testosterone each Tuesday. This reminds me of a great novel titled "Tuesdays with Morrie," written by the great writer Mitch Albom.

I will never forget Dr. Robert Pugach, a brilliant physician. He operated on my prostate several times, and in the process, these surgeries rendered me impotent for life. I considered this one of the risks. I left Dr. Pugach and found another brilliant urologist, Dr. Hightower, who is taking care of me now.

4

The divine comedy is life itself. It does not come and go; it does not rest, and it does not negotiate. It is our every moment of life on this planet. I had my share of cancer, chemotherapy, prostate and impotence problems, and dental implants and tooth loss within a very short period of time.

I continued suffering from urinary-tract infections. I got used to wearing full dentures and adjusted to my impotence, considering that I had been a very sexual being, and sex for me was everything meaningful in life. This has been very hard on me, and I am sure on my current wife, Marisela.

Dear reader let us look at this together and analyze how cruel this divine comedy can be. After I had lost all the women I mentioned earlier, I met a great woman named Lina.

Lina was a pretty woman, who was in her forties when I met her. She was the most confident woman I had ever met in my life. I still see her as spontaneous, very witty, and liberated from conformities. She enjoys a classic beauty: an oval-shaped face and long, soft black hair. She has full lips and brown eyes enhanced by long black eyelashes. Although Lina is not often too concerned with her appearance because she is more of an intellectual, without awareness, she is enthralling.

With Lina, I experienced the most precious of times. We shared unforgettable moments in Paris, Rome, London, Amsterdam, and Barcelona, sometimes with her sister, Laila; her cousin Eddie; and her niece, Natalie. These memories are implanted in my head and shall never be wiped out. Visiting the wine makers in the south of France, and Italy, experiencing Venice in and out and sharing unforgettable moments at St. Marks Square. Experiencing how life is in Monaco, in Cannes during the Cannes Festival. Celebrating Natalie's thirtieth birthday at the most fascinating place in Italy, Bergamo. And watching the football world cup game in Sorrento when Italy won. What a great life I have lead!

Lina and I have always been pals and are to this day. It is just that the divine comedy did not allow us to share life together, for one reason or another. One can never explain the divine comedy's ploys or ruses.

Lina suffered with me a lot and spent nights in hospitals with me. During our time together, I suffered several ailments in addition to my bladder cancer and chemotherapy side effects.

During that time, the doctors discovered nodules in my lungs, and I had to go through a very invasive lung biopsy at the University of California, Los Angeles. This has been perhaps the most serious surgery I have had. I almost died, and in reviving me, two of my ribs broke and still have not healed until this moment. I was out of commission for months together. That surgery did not stop the ongoing chemotherapy or cystoscopies—they continued.

As soon as I was about to recover from my serious lung surgery, I found a tumor on the right side of my neck that was growing rapidly. After visiting a specialist, whose name I have forgotten, I learned that I had a tumor in my parotid gland. Surgery was imminent. The divine comedy had no intention of giving me a break or allowing me to rest.

Let us pause for a moment here and examine that fine line between fiction and reality. Have all these episodes been fictional or real? Does writing something make it believable as truth or make it seem more fictional? How about the medications that my lung surgeon prescribed for me? I took one tablet of the oxycodone, and that was the first and last time I did it. I was in an unknown zone, an unknown world, an unknown dimension. I felt I was with a larger group of people, lecturing and discussing Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. I was suddenly in the year 1320. We, the group, examined the afterlife, and we traveled through hell, purgatory, and heaven—not with a religious flavor but with an intellectual one, since I believe in no God. However, we spoke of Dante's journey through the three realms.

Suddenly I found myself in bed next to Lina, who was trying to reduce my high fever with ice packs. When I asked her where I was, she surprisingly replied, "Right here, darling."

Voilà! That is what pain medication does to one, and that is why I refuse to take them and have trained my mind to deal with pain. I developed a high tolerance for pain; I constantly convinced myself I had no pain, though every part of me was aching.

It was during my time with Lina that my health suffered the most. I had had the most surgeries while I was with Lina until much later when I met Marisela, my courageous and patient wife.

As for my parotid-gland surgery, the doctor had made an error and was supposed to reopen me for another surgery. Strangely and mysteriously, the doctor disappeared and was nowhere to be found. I went to the office for my preop appointment only to be told that the doctor would not be available for some time. They gave me no more information, and I could not decipher this moment of divine comedy despite my attempts with many of my doctors. I have not had that surgery yet up until this moment.

The consequences have not been that pleasant. In addition to the normal side effects of losing saliva and having a dry mouth, the area of the surgery is constantly irritating because of nerve damage—another aspect of the divine comedy in which I have

to participate with my usual smile. I rub that area of my neck practically nonstop because of the irritation, something, with which I have to live.

It was also during my short eye blinks with Lina that I had my right-hand surgery. Dr. George Macer, one of my greatest doctors and friends, operated on my hand for carpal tunnel syndrome and my right thumb for trigger thumb. These surgeries went without incident, and all was fine. One must not forget the many cystoscopies with biopsies and the many catheters I had worn during that time I spent with my dearest friend Lina. She sure did suffer physically and emotionally with me, and that I shall never forget.

The unforgettable dilemma that Lina had to endure with me was when I suffered from what at the time was a disease unknown to Americans. I had eaten a dish at a restaurant on Second Street in Belmont Shore that I was assured it had been made that day; only later did I learn, from the waitress who is a friend, that it was three days old. I thought I had been poisoned. I lost twenty pounds in one week; I had severe diarrhea. I was fatigued, and Lina and my dear friends Daniela, who had been a daughter to me, and Celine Zamoyska, who had been my comrade and confidante for more than thirty years, actually thought I was at death's door. I went to Los Alamitos Hospital at least seven times. Each time, they would test my stool, say there was nothing wrong, and send me home. I resorted to calling my physician brother. After telling him what had been happening, he became angry and said, "Tell the stupid, idiotic

doctors to test you for *C. difficile*." My brother was sure I had *C. difficile* (*Clostridium difficile*) bacteria—a potentially deadly infection. Lina took me to the hospital again immediately and asked that they test me for that disease. Sure enough, my brother, who lived and practiced thousands of miles away, had diagnosed my condition correctly.

In their arrogance, ignorance and belief that this is the greatest country on the planet, Americans never thought that such a third-world disease could infect people in America. So they never tested for it. I wrote a nasty letter to the hospital administration and another to the department of health. I received an apologetic response and a promise that they would, from that point on check for that disease routinely. I know that they do now.

Before I end this chapter with my adored friend Lina, I would like to add that I do not have a monopoly on life's divine comedy; it also plays with others in the same way, sometimes worse than the way it plays with me. I need to mention my dear friend Pierre, who is much younger than I am, has been struck by the worst of diseases, cancer of the brain. This news has devastated me. Here I would like to confess that I have always felt that Pierre's wife, Mona, is gorgeous and toothsome. Mona, who is a very good friend of mine, is Lebanese; she is a young, confident, and attractive lady and is full of life and sensuality. I hope she will give Pierre the courage and power to defeat life's divine comedy and laugh at life in the face when he overcomes his cancer.

The time had come, as it had always had—Lina had had it with my eccentricities and with me. She left me. It is not in my nature to beg anyone to stay with me; it seemed to me that Lina had expected that I would, I wish I had done so, but my nature, which is a divine comedy in itself, had not complied. And thus I lost a great and dear friend. I was alone again. I had finished my PhD studies, and I was a tenured full professor at San Jose College. I would travel to San Jose three times a week and complete the rest of my work from home the other days—alone again as I had often been. This time, because of sickness and weakness, I felt lonely, fragile, and vulnerable—and insecure too—for the first time ever in my life. It was certainly not the best of times.

I had never felt lonely before. I was fearful of loneliness, though I had never experienced it. This chapter of my life had obliged me to change. I have always believed that humans are dynamic in nature, not static, and are capable of change both mentally and psychologically. It was time for me to do so. I did. I became more tolerant. I started accepting what I had not before, like being advised to avoid fixations. I became dynamic myself, willing to grow and to understand it is not age that makes one wise but the experiences—how one relates to them and reacts to them—and what one learns from them.

5

After the stage of Lina passed, the notorious divine comedy brought another one; it was sweet and short. It was more of a test of my willingness to change and grow. Over the Internet, I met a young woman named Sabrina. She lived in Las Vegas, and we had some good communication over the Internet and the phone. Sabrina was a part-black beauty; she was well educated and divorced and had a pretty young daughter. After communicating for about a month and a half, I decided I was going to visit her in Vegas, but I would stay in my own hotel. She pleasantly agreed, and the date was set.

I flew to Las Vegas from Long Beach Airport and arrived at the Bellagio Hotel. Upon my arrival, I called Sabrina and told her where I was. Before too long, Sabrina was waiting for me at the caviar bar, which is my favorite spot at the Bellagio. The

encounter was pleasant, and it was evident that we liked each other. We had caviar, champagne, and some cheeses, and we had a lovely conversation. Sabrina told me that she had booked a helicopter tour of Vegas that same night. I was semipleased because I am not into these kinds of touristy things; however, I was very appreciative. At a particular moment, I asked Sabrina if she would accompany me to my room; she was somewhat surprised at my forwardness but showed evident pleasure I had asked. She immediately said she had never met anyone as brave, direct, and honest as I was. I made no comment. She got up before I did, and she was more anxious to get to the room than I was. It was as though she were *mal fiché*, a French expression for a horny girl who has not been fucked for some time.

Soon I found out that she indeed was. We had sex for a long, long time. I was still impotent, but I was still interested in sex then. She was great, and she thought I was too. Like most women, she was very sensitive toward my feelings of disappointment and embarrassment for my impotence.

We went to dinner at the fabulous Sinatra restaurant, which was opened in honor of "the Chairman," Frank Sinatra. It has unfortunately closed since. We ate, drank, and talked; it was very pleasant indeed. The time had come for our helicopter ride, and we left. The ride was not that bad, but I thought it was pretty silly. After the flight, Sabrina came with me to the hotel room for another sexual marathon. Then she left, with the plan that we would meet the next morning.

Considering that the divine comedy rules my life, I was not in any condition to get seriously involved with anyone; I was merely fooling around, enjoying my time and grieving the loss of my friend Lina. But something happened for which the divine comedy had not prepared me. It was a disastrous tale to the point that I feel embarrassed to write about it; however, it happened, and I have to be a truthful writer, telling it as it was. It is for the reader to make the judgment, not for me.

Before I get into that episode of my divinely comical life, I need to say that Sabrina came with her daughter to visit me in California at 301 Bay Shore, the apartment by the bay that I will forever miss, as it was the only place I considered home in this forsaken country. We had a wonderful weekend together and with my regular friends.

As the divine comedy has it, all things that begin must end. My relationship with Sabrina did not last long. It ended abruptly after I met Adeleh. My desire to change for the first time came with a price. Ah! I shall never forget the notorious, mysterious Adeleh for what she was and what she had done.

Adeleh was Iranian and a beauty despite her advanced age; she was about my age, and it was quite strange for me to accept. To this very moment, I believe that the divine comedy afflicted me with temporary insanity, for I can never explain why I entered into such a relationship. Adeleh was Muslim and Iranian, so she demanded marriage right away. Since I was not myself—I was fragile, vulnerable, and scared—the divine comedy played

a very dirty trick on me, and I agreed. Please note, I am not trying to avoid responsibility here; we are all responsible for our actions, divine comedy or not. I married Adeleh days after we met, which, of course, is absolutely insane, I know. She was very sexual and sensual, and I was a sex maniac trying to compensate for my impotence and loss of sexuality. I never had enough of sex; well, neither did Adeleh. It was a sexual spell comparable only to the days of the Roman Empire.

She accompanied me to two of my doctors. One, I remember, was my cardiologist, Dr. Mike Vasilomanolakis, for my yearly stress-echo test; the second I cannot recall. I got permission from my doctors to travel to Europe and invited Adeleh and her younger daughter to Paris and London. Initially, the plan was to stay two weeks in each city, but she made my life so miserable that I cut our stay to one week in each city. It was in Europe that I began to regain my consciousness and intellect, and I decided that that relationship had to end fast.

I decided to return from London, and she decided to stay longer with her daughter. Upon my arrival back home, her older daughter, whose beauty, elegance, and sensuality were striking, met me at the Los Angeles airport. I cannot fib; I lusted after her, and I am sure she shared my desires—I am an expert in this arena of lust. It was not that late in the evening, so she and I went to dinner at McKenna at the Beach, which is now the Boat House. It was one of the most pleasant moments of my life. It was as though the divine comedy was enjoying torturing me and killing me softly. We finished dinner. I invited her to

stay the night, and she accepted. Now what should I have done? My normal self would say I would have had an amazing, sexually charged night with many orgasms for her like never before; she was better looking than a magazine model. But no—the divine comedy evoked my conscience, telling me that she was my stepdaughter, and I could not touch her. Since when had such matters bothered my conscience? I had slept with devils, for heaven's sake.

It was summer and a warm night. After another bottle of divine Jordan Cab wine, we decided to sleep. Oops, what do we do now? I innocently suggested we sleep together in my bed, but I normally sleep naked and have done so since my childhood. I made an exception that night and wore briefs, and she slept in her sexy pink bra and most sensuous sexy pink underwear. She slept on the inside, and I on the outside. She rested her beautiful head with her gorgeous hair on my right shoulder and placed her right arm on my naked chest. I know it sounds absolutely fictional and bizarre to say nothing happened—this was one of the times when the fine elastic line between what is fiction and what is real was stretched to what was real. I felt I had died in her arms that night. It took me forever to fall asleep with my mind racing, tempted to kiss her luscious lips and eat her pink pussy, but nothing happened. She perhaps thought I was gay. I do not think that she thought I did not want to touch her because she was my stepdaughter.

The divine comedy wanted to have some fun with my stepdaughter and me. I woke up with a very strong erection which

was completely unusual –I am impotent and do not ever have erections- that actually it hurt, partly because I was wearing tight briefs. I looked at it. She did too, and I apologized. She shyly smiled and said, "Don't worry about it; it's cute." I wanted the earth to open and swallow me at that moment.

Cute! I screamed to myself, cursing the divine comedy and the day I recognized its existence. My beauty queen spent the day with me. She was studying on the floor below the large window, and I was writing at my desk. Every few minutes, we would chat and share thoughts. She had high regard for my profession as a professor, and I had high regard for her intelligence, knowledge, and beauty. That day shall be printed in my memory forever. I hope she reads this and knows what was going on with me. She then left; with her, she took a piece of me I have never regained.

I had already decided I was leaving her mom, Adeleh. She was an unscrupulous woman and a con artist. She convinced me to let her have access to my account, and in addition to the $7,000 ring I had bought her and the $5,000 I gave her in cash so that she would not have to file for bankruptcy, I discovered that she had withdrawn $50,000 from my savings account. We fought a lot, and it was the worst of times. She even had the courageous, satanic spirit to ask me for $2,000 a month.

I had already made up my mind that Adeleh would be history soon. We had our last dinner at the Italian restaurant, Spaghettini. There we had one of our worst arguments—I do

not recall about what. On the way home, as she was driving her Mercedes, I opened the door. I jumped out when the car was going faster and have never seen Adeleh again. The total time we spent together was a month. I filed for a divorce, and she went mad, wanting it to be an annulment so that she could con other victims. Although I refused, in court, she told the judge I was impotent, and the female judge granted her annulment, to my surprise and dismay. I just hoped that she had not gotten the idea from her beautiful daughter, with whom I could have shared the best sexual experience any human could. A chapter, an ugly one, was closed, and I had to move to a new chapter of life.

6

I, Alexandre Akpors, do not wish my readers to lose the main point of my medical challenges and my relationship with the divine comedy. I hope that my sexual escapades do not have that effect on you and that you can focus with me on life's divine comedy that rules the world in which we live.

I soon forgot that episode with Adeleh; it became insignificant and had no effect whatsoever. Life's divine comedy continued as it has always done. It stuck with me even closer, now that the divine comedy and I had become one at one point. I could not distinguish between fiction and nonfiction; the elastic line that separates the two had become so unclear that I was unaware whether I was living a fictional or a factual life, but, dear reader, does it matter? It had been my life, it has been my life, and it is my life. Fiction and reality did not and do not

mean anything. It is, again, the life I have been living. Perhaps our existence is nothing but fiction.

I was alone again. I like to be alone; I read, and I write. I feel rather content with myself, but the divine comedy controls most of my days with aches and pains in different parts of my body. By this time, I had aged, and my body had started to give out on me. Walking became a serious chore; my sleep was erratic, and I felt tired all the time.

I had experienced death many times when I would wake up in the middle of the night out of breath and gasping for air. Each time I rushed to the hospital, and, not knowing what was happening, I would tell them it appeared that I would forget to breathe while sleeping. They did not understand what I meant and would send me home. This happened so many times that I had to take matters into my own hands.

On my own, I visited a pulmonary specialist, who became one of my best friends, my Italian brother Dr. Thomas Asciuto. He is a brilliant physician who specializes in lung diseases and sleep disorders. Both were a great part of my problems, as the divine comedy dictated. I went through at least four sleeping tests and many breathing tests, and the results were not encouraging. There was the divine comedy again; by that time, I was suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). I had also been diagnosed with apnea and had to be on CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) for the rest of my life. Also, I was diagnosed with a REM sleep disorder. Dr. Asciuto

is a brilliant doctor; he knows what he is doing and is very effective.

Over the last fifteen years, I must have seen Dr. Asciuto more than forty-five times. He did everything possible to save my life, and he surely did save it. Apnea could have killed me, and my lungs could have given me more hell than they did.

Now Dr. Asciuto has forsaken me, for he moved from Long Beach. I wrote him a letter wondering why; I called his nurse Georgiana several times, and she was most kind. I gave up, but I shall never forget Dr. Asciuto. This was just another divine-comedy event that had no rhyme or reason.

7

The divine comedy is life, and life is a divine comedy; therefore, there is no ceasing. I continued to look at every day's affairs as a form of divine comedy and to smile at all things, whether they were positive or negative; I saw them merely as the divine comedy of human existence. As the great Dante wrote, "There is no greater sorrow than to be mindful of the happy time in misery." I am relentlessly mindful. I am continuously aware. Again, as the great Charles Dickens wrote in his masterpiece *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." All is just the same except our mindfulness of the happy time when desolation strikes. I, Alexandre Akpors, have been here and there, at times stretching the fine line between fiction and reality and at other times jumping the line altogether. I have done this so often that I normally have no idea which side I am living on: fiction or nonfiction.

Dear reader, I hope you have not lost track of all the divine comedy's actions thus far. Remember, I, Alexandre Akpors, have been suffering from MVP, carpal tunnel syndrome, COPD, apnea, bladder cancer, a REM sleep disorder, and, in the year 2010, emphysema. Other challenges about which I have written include prostate problems, erectile dysfunction, repeated urinary-tract infections, gum infections, and cataracts that developed soon after my emphysema. One would suspect that all these ailments were sufficient, but no, life and its divine comedy had more in store for me.

I had been working and writing. I had written several academic books and my autobiography, *A Dream Is Just That and a novel titled God on Trial which was a success in Europe*. In the meantime, I had been flirting with several women on the Internet during my uneventful free time. This flirting ended up with my meeting Eman.

Determined to change my life and be more stable, I entered into this amazing relationship with Eman. I realized then how much I had grown and how much I had changed. Life, however, has its own plans.

Eman was a pretty young maiden, who lived in Montreal, Canada. We communicated for several months and took a liking to each other. We had the noblest of times dialoguing on Skype, and we learned so much about each other.

One sunny day, I was at my computer writing, and suddenly I had a curious thought: traveling to Canada would be a novel

idea. Eman and I would meet, and I would see her beautiful, then eight-year-old, son, whom I adored for some reason; he was the most intelligent, polite, communicative child I had ever known. I soon discussed the matter with Eman, and she welcomed the idea with great enthusiasm.

During the Christmas holiday of the year 2009, I took a flight to Canada after I had arranged for a hotel close by where Eman lived. I arrived and was warmly welcomed. Eman and Ali, her son, met me at the airport. It was a jubilant and euphoric time for all of us; it was delightful to see Eman and Ali face-to-face.

Eman is an alluring petite young woman with an oval-shaped face adorned by her stunning, sharp, intelligent, and sparkling eyes; her long, wavy black hair falling upon her shoulders makes her look seductive. Her thin cheeks are slightly decorated with blush, and her lips are neither too thin nor too thick and harmonize her small mouth. This gives her self-confidence. Above her small mouth is her stunning petite nose. Eman's charm and sensuality projected from her small breasts, matching the words of the French writer I mentioned above: "You flat-chested women, I adore you, for making love with you makes me closer to your heart." While her chest is flat, she stands at five feet eight inches, which makes her tempting to anyone alive with any senses.

We drove from the airport to my hotel. We sat in the lobby for a while, and I gave each of them a gift and then took my

suitcase upstairs. They were waiting for me to go have breakfast at Eman's apartment. The mood was all very pleasant and optimistic. For a change, life's divine comedy was being nice to me. Perhaps it was intoxicated, as life at times does appear befuddled and absurd.

At Eman's gracious apartment, we sat around the dining table, eating the delicious breakfast she had prepared. The conversation was unique in many ways, since we all were from different worlds. The thing I remember the most was when Eman went to the kitchen and I went after her. I hugged and kissed her, a cinematic kiss on the lips; she melted into my arms, and as small as she is, it was not difficult to hold her up and kiss her repeatedly. I believe, or like to believe, that she was more than gratified and certainly was as wet as I had anticipated—as I would find out later.

The three of us were together now: Eman, Ali, and I. We talked, I presented Eman with an engagement ring, and she was happy. Ali was also very happy and all smiles. He shocked his mother and me when he asked me, "Why would you go to the hotel and not stay with us here? We have space, don't you think, Mom?"

Eman looked at me shyly, and I looked back nervously. No word was said. I think we had both decided to leave it to the divine comedy of life to make such a difficult decision for us. Strangely enough, the divine comedy was surprising once again. I ended up spending the night with Eman.

When we all went to bed, and Eman went to the same bedroom as I, it was a sexual encounter of the third kind—something extraterrestrial, celestial, and somewhat alien. For unknown reason that doctors cannot explain, I had a strong erection. We were both in a state of ecstasy such that neither of us seemed to remember anything like it. The comedy of life made it even more memorable when she and I fell off the bed together and broke into laughter and joy. I thought heaven had opened a new door for me to enter without fear; I entered. That, I believed, would be my new life forever, and all my searching would stop; I found what I needed—I thought I did.

I spent a month and a half in Montreal. I thought this was what I had been seeking, and I would change to be a virtuous family man from then until my return to my before-birth time. I brought Eman and her son, Ali, back with me to California. We planned to get married. She would gain residency in the United States, and I would file for immigration to Canada and work at a university there. This would allow us to enjoy the better of the two worlds. I had had it with America anyway, and it was time for a change.

I was still teaching at San Jose College and fly there from Long Beach airport about three times each week. It was not bad and life was pleasant and agreeable.

We went through the process; Eman and Ali received their green cards, thanks to my friend, the best attorney in America, Mrs. Ruth Shamir. And I had my immigration to Canada

approved with no difficulties, as though the divine comedian who ruled life had died—but no, there was a sinister and ominous plan in store for me.

Eman and I agreed that the better of the two countries would be Canada and we would move to Canada. My health situation had been stable, but things began to change. Suddenly I started to have seizures; my body would involuntarily convulse, and my legs and arms would move violently. This happened a few times, so Eman and I went to the doctor.

First, I saw Dr. Kaplan, a specialist in epilepsy. She determined that I had what she called myoclonic seizures and referred me to a brilliant neurologist, Dr. David Rosenberg, who would later become my favorite physician and friend ever. His talents and intelligence surpassed anything I had ever known. Dr. David Rosenberg gave me many tests, including nerve-conduction tests, and ordered several MRIs of my brain.

Poor Eman! She thought she would be staying only to test life in the United States and compare it to life in Canada; then we would both decide where to live. But she had to stay a little longer and eventually much longer. At that point, I was a fifty-four-year-old young-at-heart man, vibrant and full of hopes and dreams. I believed I had changed.

I believed I loved Eman and that she felt the same. Religious differences had never crossed my mind because of Eman's high intellect and intelligence. She drank wine with me, and

she had never brought up the matter of religious differences. Moreover, she had known that I was an agnostic who actually detested religions and conformity.

Dr. David Rosenberg concurred with Dr. Kaplan's diagnosis of chronic myoclonic seizures. He treated me for that and for other new ailments, such as balance disorder, memory disorder, and one of the strangest phenomena—so strange that even Dr. Rosenberg cannot understand it—I persistently switch letters in the middle of words while writing. I also transpose tasks; for example, if I want to make a transfer from Bank A to bank B, my brain does the opposite without my awareness. This, of course, causes a lot of problems. Neither Dr. David Rosenberg nor the other doctors I saw could find an explanation for this. It is a mystery of the divine comedy until this moment.

Dear reader, my regular internal medicine doctor, David Shen, must be revealed here. He is the maestro of my symphonic company of physicians. He manages all my medical affairs. Dr. Shen is a brilliant young man, whose talents and skills are admirable. Once, he operated on a large lump on my back. We had no idea what the lump was; after the pathology report, we learned that it was not serious. His nurse, the talented Elizabeth, gives me my weekly testosterone shot. Ah! I have forgotten, evidently, or perhaps not, to mention that life's divine comedy desired to be a little more comic and prevented my body from producing testosterone for many years. I need shots to keep the level normal. If you have read this

earlier, you have experienced first hand a part of my neurological disorder – repeating myself.

The divine comedy of life had decided that Dr. Rosenberg would diagnose me with the following: Crohn's disease, peripheral neuropathy, Parsonage-Turner syndrome, fibromyalgia, and gait-balance disorder. Well, dear reader, it is dumbfounding what divine comedy is. "Through me, you pass into the passage of woe. Through me, you pass into eternal pain." And all is comedy, divine comedy.

As Dante wrote, "Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost." Dr. Rosenberg referred me to a great rheumatologist, suspecting that I had rheumatoid arthritis and, perhaps, Lupus.

At that time, Eman, Ali, and I were preparing to leave the United States and move to Canada for good. I had given all my belongings away and shipped some to Montreal already. We were excited despite all that the divine comedy was executing.

The rheumatologist, Dr. Nancy Godfrey, saw me and did some special tests. A couple of days later, she told me, "You are not going anywhere." She explained that I had a severe case of rheumatoid arthritis and—guess what, dear reader—systemic lupus erythematosus, a chronic inflammatory connective-tissue disorder that can involve joints, kidneys, skin, mucous membranes, and blood-vessel walls. It is a form of immune system disorder that requires regular chemotherapy.

Ah! At that moment, I realized divine comedy was at its worst. I could not leave for Montreal, according to Dr. Nancy Godfrey. She said she had to put me on a form of chemotherapy called IVIG (intravenous immunoglobulin) right away. Before I went on IVIG, Dr. Godfrey ordered me to take antituberculosis medications for nine months. I started right away.

At that point, I decided, upon my physicians' advice, to retire from teaching and go on disability retirement at the young age of fifty-five. The California State Teachers' Retirement System was evidently overwhelmed with my medical condition, and they granted me permanent disability retirement effective December 2010. I have not taught a class since. I have missed teaching so very much, and that is divine comedy at work. As the great Dante in his *Divine Comedy* wrote, "O human race, born to fly upward, wherefore at a little wind dost thou so fall?"

Life's divine comedy was merciless indeed. Eman had her green card, which allowed her to live and work in the United States, but she and Ali hated living here, and I never blamed them for that. I had my immigration papers to Canada and was ready to leave except for my health. It was a serious dilemma indeed. Six months passed, and Eman had planned to stay only one month. Ali hated America, school, and the children there; he could not adjust and wanted to go home.

Ironically, though I thought I had changed and that I was a happy man, I felt alone in my struggle with my frail body that was falling apart, and I would not share my pains with Eman

in order to protect her and Ali. My existence seemed a burden in itself. So, alone, I would sit at my desk, writing my inner thoughts and feelings and realizing the changes in my personality and character. Again, I was calmer, more tolerant, more understanding, and much kinder.

Ali was the only child who taught me fatherhood. Although I had two sons, I had them in my early twenties, so I was growing up myself and never had a chance to be a good, kind, and patient father; Ali taught me that. He and I would play every evening before bedtime. He would throw a ball at me, and I would throw it back to him. He would laugh; his laughter was worth a billion dollars. Then we would talk:

"Why don't you like school here, Ali?"

"Dad"—he called me dad—"children here are rude and bullying. All they talk about is how rich their parents are and where they live and how big their house is."

"Aren't children in Montreal the same?"

"No, Dad, they talk about our classes and teachers and fun things like films and theater."

"Well, son, we will go back to Montreal soon, as soon as my doctors allow me, OK?"

"Yes, Dad. I hope very soon."

I could not argue with my beloved Ali. He was absolutely right. I had lived in America for more than thirty years, and I know what interests Americans the most: money.

I must not forget to write that Ali had to go to school in Belmont Shore, and I was the one who walked him to and from school. We would often have charming conversations on life, science, nature, people's behavior, and other matters I had never thought a child could be aware of.

We decided that Eman and Ali would return to Montreal. Since I had to be under the close observation of my doctors, once I finished with my antituberculosis medication, I would go to Canada and ask for the IVIG treatment. Eman and Ali left, and I was alone again, dueling with the divine comedy and the unpredictability of life. Yes, I was married to Eman, but I was alone in my own sphere of life's comedy. I continued to visit doctors and dentists, and I even experienced a few months of physical therapy, the effectiveness of which I have never believed in. It was quite a funny time for me.

I remember that Dr. David Rosenberg ordered that my brain be monitored for a few days. I asked my old friend Tracey to take me to the hospital, where they wired my brain and covered all the wiring so that I looked like a conehead. Pedestrians looked at me with a smile and, sometimes, loud laughter. I must admit that I looked rather funny, and, as I have always done, I laughed at the majestic divine comedy of life and at myself.

After I finished my tuberculosis treatment, I sought permission from Dr. Nancy Godfrey to travel to Canada to see if I could get the IVIG treatment in Montreal. She approved, and I prepared myself for the trip. But I was smart enough not to give up my beautiful apartment at 301 Bay Shore on the bay.

After giving the matter some thought and making an analysis of possibilities and considerations, I summoned my courage and made the final decision to travel to Canada.

Eman and Ali were thrilled, and I was on cloud nine, hoping that I would never return to the United States. But the divine comedy had other plans for me.

Eman was as gracious as she had always been. She took me to doctors, including one specialist, a rheumatologist, who concurred with Dr. Nancy Godfrey that I suffered from systemic lupus erythematosus and that I needed IVIG. The doctor submitted a request to the state for approval, and the treatment was approved. Eman and I were very pleased indeed. However, the divine comedy of life does not allow one to be pleased for long; it has to present one challenge or another. For me, the divine comedy of life presented several severe challenges.

Although Eman and I had had a great relationship, one that was respectful and warm, and Ali added to the joy—the three of us were a model family—things were not as they appeared. Eman wanted me to convert to Islam to please her very Islamic family. In Islam, it is a sin for a Muslim woman to be married to

a non-Muslim man. In some countries, these women could be stoned and executed. Although Eman was not religious, pleasing her family was more significant to her than our marriage. In all fairness, I must add that Eman did not like my affinity for red wine and my drinking a lot of it. To this day, I am not sure whether she thought that I was an alcoholic and was worried that Ali would be influenced. I cannot blame her for that.

Nevertheless, the divine comedy saw to it that my relationship with Eman had to end. Eman tried all persuasive techniques to make me change my mind and convert to Islam as a pretense to please her family. They did not know who I was, really. The divine comedy of life succeeded in ending that relationship; Eman asked for a divorce. I had to return to California. Thankfully, I still had my apartment. I filed for a divorce per Eman's request. I shall never forget this very sad narrative, for Eman and Ali have been two important people in my life.

Alone again, I spent time in my apartment, reading and writing, and I visited doctors. I started the IVIG treatment. Helen, my ex-wife, whom I had married long ago when I had been studying law in England (I was only twenty-one then, and I divorced her after two years), took me to the cancer center for the first session. It was supposed to last for seven hours, but long and behold, I turned out to be allergic to the chemotherapy drug. I started feeling suffocated and unable to breathe, my throat was itchy, and I became terribly irritable. I shared these symptoms with my nurse, and after about four hours, the doctor ordered the nursing staff to abort the treatment.

The divine comedy was at play again. What should we do? Dr. Nancy Godfrey changed the drug to another, and I went for treatment again the following week. This time, I took a taxi. Helen had said she would take me, but she called one hour before my appointment to tell me she would not; to this day, I cannot explain that. Anyway, I had my new chemotherapy drug, and it was fine. This drug was infused in only two hours. I did not tell the staff that I was returning home in a taxi. Since then I have been receiving therapy every four weeks, except when I had surgeries, and I had many.

I continued my life as I had always done, except now that I had seizures and asthma. I decided to refrain from driving in order not to put my physicians at risk; they were supposed to report me to the Department of Motor Vehicles. They did not, and I am sure this was because they trusted my responsible nature. So all my travel to and from doctors and hospitals was either by taxi or with a friend's help.

8

As the great Dante wrote, "Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost." It appeared that my straightforward pathway had disappeared before my eyes. I was now lost. I was an invalid with no partner and no help and living in a country that has no care or respect for human life or human dignity—America, that is. What would I do?

Yes, I do have high qualifications that would allow me to live anywhere else I like. But, sadly, I had given up all my other citizenships and residence, because once I was a fanatic American patriot; in other words, I was an absolute idiot. There has always been one problem going back to where I belong and love, which is Paris: What would I do with my health situation, chemotherapy, and all the ailments? After researching medical insurances, I sadly discovered that all the medical-insurance

companies in Europe are Americans. They function on the basis of bad faith and abuse, just as they do in the United States. So what is the use? It is a sad and frustrating state of affair. Here, I have my insurance provided by the college where I was teaching; yeah, I pay $1,200 per month, but elsewhere in Europe would be worse.

I courageously entered the next chapter of my life. I asked Dr. Nancy Godfrey to give me the chemotherapy in pill form, and I also requested a year's supply of my regular medications so that I could go to Paris, France, my favorite place on the planet, and see if I could live there for good and leave this malevolent country called America.

I have never been happy in America. It is a country with no culture or morals, and I find its capitalistic system inhuman and disgraceful. Additionally, I have given America a lot in terms of hard work, but the rewards were insignificant to me. Furthermore, I do not believe that America is a democratic country; its electoral voting system is quite laughable. It is as though a few selected people, who can be bought as the case was with Il Duce Fascist Trump, freely decide whom the president should be; that is not democracy. I have lived, studied, and worked in England, France, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Holland, and Austria, and I have never seen a government that is as useless and abusive to its citizens as the US government.

I would write a list of the medications the divine comedy of life requires me to take. Such a long list would certainly make the

reader believe this story is fiction; however, it is not. Again, I shall leave it to you, my reader, to decide. Remember that I said there is a fine line between what is fiction and what is real. I sometimes do not know what is fiction and what is nonfiction. That is the main reason this book is being written as a work of fiction.

Is it fiction or nonfiction? How can my story be described? I, Alexandre Akpors, cannot tell. To me, it is my reality, though I know it sounds like fiction; that is the fine line I have been telling my readers about. Though I have neither stretched the fine line in any way nor crossed the line, I am in my reality. That is, my friends, the divine comedy about which we have to laugh out loud. We have to defy nature, looking at life in defiance and repeating, "I shall never be defeated." And I tell you, my dear reader, I shall not be defeated, and I shall always sing, "I did it my way."

The saga continued. As always, I went to doctors and hospitals for various ailments. I also frequented imaging centers for MRIs and CT scans. I think if I were to die now, St. Peter at the gate would be blinded by the radiation that my body emits from all the radiology tests I have been through—more than 185 in the last twenty years. Yes, you read this correctly, my dear reader—more than 185 radioactive tests! St. Peter, in whom I do not believe, since I am an atheist, would not know whether to send me to heaven or hell, as he would be blinded by the radioactive light around me; it would be brighter than that around Jesus's head in *The Last Supper*. The great Dante would laugh his head off when St. Peter would scream, quoting

the *Divine Comedy*, "And now, I pray you, tell me who you are: do not be harder than I've been with you that in the world your name may still endure."

And I would be possessed by Dante's soul and reply, "Through me, the way is to the suffering city; through me, the way is to eternal pain; through me, the way is among the people lost." And St. Peter would be so confused that he might resign from his post.

Comedy, isn't it? And divine in nature, isn't it? And it is life as you and I know and experience it, isn't it? And that, my dear reader, is divine comedy, which refuses to cease to exist.

I left for Paris about October 2011 with the intention of never returning to this wasteland. I had an old –not in age- and good friend who is an Egyptian. Marlene spoke French fluently and had gotten married to a French barrister. However, things had not worked out, and they had filed for divorce. In France and England, getting a divorce requires a very long process. Perhaps that is the reason many people in Europe do not marry these days.

I had known Marlene from Egypt and had always admired her beauty, intelligence, and sensuality; however, she is more than thirty years younger than I am, so the thought of coupling with her was quite obscene. So, I would avoid such thoughts.

Before leaving for Paris, I had communicated with Marlene and informed her of my plans. She was pleased, excited, and

welcoming, and most of all, she was very helpful. She had arranged for a beautiful fourteenth-floor rental apartment in a high-rise on the River Seine. When I arrived, I was stunned at the view and the beauty of the area. I was full of hopes and aspirations that Paris would once again become my home. It had been home even before I came to the United States.

Marlene and I had a couple of sexual encounters and rekindled what had been long past. It was merely lust and nothing more. Nature pulls us one way, and human nature pulls us in the opposite direction.

I lived in my apartment, and she lived in hers. We met regularly for lunches, dinners, and chats. The comedy of life followed me to Paris—divine comedy was everywhere and controlled everyone alive. Marlene confided in me that she had a lover and that it was a homosexual relationship. The normal thing one would do in a situation like this is panic; but I did not. As I usually do in times of turmoil, I smiled. I told Marlene, however, that we both had to get tested for HIV and any other STDs. We did, and we both, thankfully, tested negative.

I continued living in Paris. I was trying to find a way to reside there permanently and with benefits, and that was, as I had expected, impossible, but I was still trying. Marlene became somewhat distant and unwilling to assist in any way, but that did not trouble me at all. I used my time wisely and wrote the outline of my successful novel *God on Trial*. I immensely enjoyed that year in Paris and made many new friends from all

walks of life. Paris has charm for writers. The city can bestow wings on one's thoughts, so they can flutter and fly to create, conceive, and imagine without fear, trepidation, apprehension, or restraint—not even by life's divine comedy.

One can never know what the future holds or what will happen next. I, Alexandre Akpors, feel a little muddled by Stephen Hawking's idea about life possibilities. Hawking teaches us that all things are possible, and if we wondered about life as children, through the impossibilities, we can find answers to many puzzling questions. I wonder whether any event that seems to take place really does take place. If all things are possible, it is also possible that what we see as real is mere fiction. Hawkins argues, "The past, like the future, is indefinite and exists only as a spectrum of possibilities."

Then divine comedy staged the most unusual, unexpected, and uncanny event for me. One morning in July 2012, I received an unexpected e-mail from Marisela, a former student with whom I had had a fling twenty-one years earlier, when she was only just over twenty years old. Though our fling was short, it was intense, at least on my part. I had loved her so much despite the difference in age, and she simply liked me as a person, a teacher, or, perhaps, a father figure—I shall never be sure until the last breath. Our fling ended by the end of that summer, after my return from a visit to Amsterdam. Marisela had disappeared with no explanation; she no longer wanted to have anything to do with me. It is puzzling, isn't it? But it is never unusual or uncommon.

I was excited and thrilled to receive her message. I replied, explaining my position and asking about her status and how things were in her life. Evidently, life's divine comedy had a plan for me that I had never envisioned. She was free and available. We began to communicate regularly. And then I decided to return to California and start an affair with my old companion (for lack of a better word) Marisela. I returned, and a new chapter began.

9

In California, my apartment at 301 Bay Shore was waiting for me. I had kept it and continued to pay the rent. That had been a very intelligent decision. Caution is an important quality in life.

Upon my return from Paris, I was more than fifty-five years old and ready to meet beautiful Marisela. She is a pretty young woman with a charming oval face adorned by long, dark, wavy soft hair that makes her femininity shine. Her full, reddish lips make her adorable and desirable. She has big brown eyes that often sparkle with a tear or two for my ailments. She is slim and tall but not too tall. Her smile is always a comfort for me; my world lightens up when I see her smile. Her laughter echoes in my ears as a most sensuous melody. I am a very lucky man to have Marisela by my side. For me, life had always been a dark comedy of sorts. Suddenly, and with no warning at all, I

discovered new and remarkable changes in my behavior, physique, aptitude, and overall being. These changes started one day and got worse from then. That was in addition to all the ailments with which I was already dealing on a daily basis.

Clumsiness was the first noticeable symptom. I would wake up in the middle of the night as a result of common insomnia and would walk around the apartment, not knowing what I was doing or what I wanted. I would decide to make a cup of coffee, and after I would have a few whacks to my arms, elbows, legs, feet, and toes, I would start to prepare it. After several mishaps and a lot of cleaning up of the mess I had just made, the coffee would finally be ready.

My physical appearance astounded me; I swear that my face changed on a daily basis. Black circles around the palpably wrinkled areas under my eyes attracted my undivided attention. Wrinkles emerged around my forehead and mouth. And if you remember, my dear reader, that I had lost my teeth, you would understand when I write that my toothless mouth and thin lips reminded me of my grandfather in his late eighties. In short, my lure had vanished. So the idea of meeting Marisela after all these years and all these changes was terrifying.

I had a date with Marisela on a Tuesday afternoon in July. It was an unforgettable day. We were both euphoric about seeing each other again after so many years. And the strangest thing is that—as we agreed later—we saw each other exactly as we had been twenty-one years ago.

Marisela was as gorgeous as ever, and I was as nervous as ever. We walked from 301 Bay Shore to Michel's of Naples on Second Street in Belmont Shore, California, for dinner. We were received warmly, as I was a frequent guest at that restaurant and knew Michel and his manager personally. They gave us the best seat in the house, and we had the most wonderful evening. There was so much to discuss and relearn about each other. I explained my life in the briefest way possible, and she told me about hers in the same manner. It was a promising and optimistic encounter; after dinner, we returned to my home and made the most passionate love ever. Again, my impotence vanished like magic. Marisela spent the night with me and left in the morning with the promise that we would meet again soon, whenever life's divine comedy allowed.

Life's divine comedy allowed it on the days that followed. Marisela and I would meet; go to lunches and dinners; share passionate, uninhibited love; at times I would have erection and many other times I would not. I had to explain to Marisela my dilemma. We would enjoy conversations on many topics. Both Marisela and I were trained lawyers. We related to each other and understood the analysis of life and its tribulations.

Both Marisela and I had baggage when we met each other again. But who at our ages would not? That was just part of life. Her baggage was much more tolerable than mine. She had three children: a twelve-year-old beauty named Alondra, a ten-year-old young man named Richard, and a nine-year-old young man named Sebastian. For me, that was terribly scary; I did not

know much about children, and, in fact, I did not like children except for Ali, my ex-wife Eman's son. My own baggage included a profusion of problems and a plethora of ailments. It was a time for discussions and reflections.

Everything between Marisela and me happened naturally and without much planning or thinking. I believe we needed each other, and we met at the right—no, the *perfect*—moment. She needed a companion, and I also needed a companion to care for me. We found each other.

Within the year, we declared our engagement. I took advantage of the fact that her parents were visiting and planned an engagement party at Sevilla restaurant on Pine Avenue in Long Beach. All the members of Marisela's family were there. I presented Marisela with an engagement ring, and we had a great time. The party took place before we planned where we would live or how we would manage our lives together.

Everything seemed just perfect. I was in my castle on Bay Shore, and Marisela and her three children lived in Downey. These details had to change, however, as we were getting married. As a married couple, we had to live together—that is what society imposes, right?

I, Alexandre Akpors, would be married to my maiden, Marisela De La Cruz. We were both totally honest and open as much as life's divine comedy allowed. "Why comedy?" a reader might

inquire. It is because nothing is 100 percent truthful. There is always something hidden; it is nature versus human nature.

When I met Marisela for the first time, when she was in her early twenties, I was already ailing. I had never shared with her anything about my health problems. I had never shared with her my heart condition or operation, neither had I shared with her my visits to psychiatrists and psychologists to deal with the sudden death of my older brother. My barrister brother, Magdy, had died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack. I had been devastated and shattered. I wished not to burden such a young, beautiful, and innocent girl with adult turmoil and tribulations. I had not believed that concealing such details was devious behavior. I still do not believe that.

Nevertheless, on April 9, 2013, Marisela and I became husband and wife, and then we had to live together. She and her three children moved to my castle, 301 Bay Shore—a one-bedroom castle. It was fine for us all, but not for the landlord.

Marisela began to understand what a predicament I was in regarding my health. We had a doctor or a hospital appointment practically every single day. I think she was initially shocked, but then she got familiar with the state of affairs. She met my doctors and nurses, she took me to surgeries and chemotherapy, and she realized that I was an unusual man. I looked very healthy and vibrant on the outside, but on the inside, I was tormented with various ailments.

Those days were fine because we could manage everything, and, fortunately, the school the children attended was just at the end of Vista Street, where we actually lived. We managed well for a long, long while. The three children stayed in the bedroom, and Marisela and I slept in the entry. It was fine for the children and us, but the apartment owners did not approve. They insisted that we move, so after two years of living there happily and comfortably, we had to move out. I hired an agent, and the search began.

Ah! Divine comedy, ah! For the very first time in my forty-five years away from Egypt, I experienced racial discrimination. Although my credit was immaculate and among the less than one (1) percent of Americans, no one in Belmont Shore wanted to rent to me. That was the shock of my life. I had never experienced racism in the countries in which I had lived, studied, and worked: England, France, Italy, Austria, Lebanon, Cyprus, Greece, Mexico, and the Netherlands. Although I am not a Muslim, and I detest Islam publicly—and I have published many articles and books about that—I wish to add that I detest all religions; I do not discriminate; it is man who created God - people still saw me as a fucking Arab, though really I am not. Many Americans are seriously intellectually challenged. I am a Copt, an original Egyptian, a descendant of the pharaohs, kings, and queens. My origins would put the barbarian to shame, those who came to America, because they had been exiled as criminals or were simply delinquents looking for gold. Let us not discuss superiority here, for I am superior and shall be until my last breath.

Well, finally, I met a decent couple intelligent and lucky enough not to be barbarian. Dr. Sony and Dr. Sukmani Hamandeep are from India. They had a wonderful apartment for rent on the beach in Long Beach, and they knew I was a Copt just by my name, so they had no problem giving me a chance. Besides, my credit has always been beyond superb. I took the apartment. It is at the Aqua Towers on Ocean Blvd. and is on the 8th floor. It is an inspirational place in which I hope to live a long, long time with my wife, Marisela.

Are we now in a fictional or a nonfictional state? I have lost track, my dear reader; do forgive me. I wanted to describe what my beautiful new bride would have to handle. She would have to handle a fifty-five-year-old man with many ailments and troubles. She was, and still is, humane enough to take me to my monthly chemotherapy and keep waiting until I finish. She is charitable enough to take me to doctor's appointments and radiology-test appointments. She is, simply, quite an understanding woman.

Life's divine comedy had to spice up our lives a little more. I started developing other ailments: gastrointestinal problems, spinal deterioration, and more neurological disorders. So our doctors' visits increased more than threefold. I still kept my smile and my defiant attitude.

I had a lumber spine surgery performed by the great doctor Azadeh Farin and it was successful. I had Dr. Grant remove my gall bladder and that was also successful. I had several prostate

surgeries that did not have positive results, and now I shall have another in about a month. I must not forget Dr. Harry Carp who took care of my right side of the cervical spine at Long Beach Surgery Center not long ago.

10

Regular visits to Dr. David Rosenberg, my neurologist, became more of a routine. Dr. David Rosenberg took a liking to me and considered my perplexing and mystifying medical conditions challenging. He was determined to find solutions. He diagnosed me with several diseases whose names are quite difficult to pronounce; I believe I have mentioned peripheral neuropathy, Parsonage-Turner syndrome, and fibromyalgia, in addition to seizures, a gait-balance disorder, semiparalysis of the right arm, and cervical spine nerve pinching. For this last condition, I had to go through a surgery in which Dr. Harry Karp injected, this time, the right side of my neck with cortisone; that eased the pain for a while.

Dear reader, I hope you are not lost in this maze of the divine comedy; please stay with me, though I know how overwhelming it might be. There is a lot more to come in this game of

chess I have been playing with the divine comedy; each time I am cornered and almost checked, I find a way to protect my king.

The saddest part of all is that my dear wife and friends are the ones who suffer more than I do. I am the one in the predicament, and I know how to deal with it; all they see is the suffering—or what they perceive as suffering—and they feel the greatest sorrow. Additionally, they are unaware of my concept of whether things are fictional or real. You too, dear reader, might fall into the trap of wondering whether this story is fiction. This is my real life, however, as fictional as it may sound.

I must admit that I am a very fortunate man despite all that I have written. I have some of the best doctors, if not the best, in the United States. Among those doctors is my gastroenterologist, Dr. Trivedi Kashyap. Since I have had several snags in my plumbing system, Dr. Trivedi had to operate on me several times. I went through several endoscopies, colonoscopies, and other tests that showed I had a rare problem called slow stomach digestion. Dr. Trivedi extracted many polyps and sent them to pathology; they were precancerous but, fortunately, not cancerous. So in addition to my chronic acid reflux, I have several other issues that I have to confront. I now have to take three capsules of Creon DR—thirty-six thousand units—before any meal. I also have to take one teaspoon of Metamucil and one teaspoon of Miralax every night and one teaspoon of Metamucil and two teaspoons of Miralax every morning. I can say confidently that my plumbing system is similar to that of sixteenth-century France.

However, I am in good hands, the best hand possible—those of Dr. Trivedi, for whom I have utmost respect, admiration, and fondness. My wife, Marisela, feels the same way.

It is quite amazing how each day seems to bring a new medical problem. Is it the systemic lupus? Most doctors say yes. What a disease this systemic lupus is! Now I have red-blood-cell predicaments, and it is not clear exactly why. One of the greatest, if not the greatest, oncologists in the United States, my dear Italian brother, Dr. Mario Curti, is treating me for that issue. At times, he finds that I have more red blood cells than humanly possible; he resorts to phlebotomizing me and providing me with a blood-with-iron infusion. I have gone through this several times. Dr. Curti is a great physician who cares about his patients. Fortunately, because he is pure Italian, he and I have struck up a strong friendship.

Another burden upon my beautiful, courageous wife is that she has to take me often to Dr. Curti and wait for my treatments. What else can one expect from the divine comedy of life? Are there more things for me to defy on the way? Will the game of chess continue? It appears it shall.

The divine comedy does not stop at plaguing us with medical complications; no, it goes beyond that and tortures our inner souls in unimaginable ways. About two years prior, I lost one of my best friends, the honorable barrister Abbas Alaei, who, with his wife, the honorable barrister Shahnaz Alaei, and their two beautiful daughters, Bahareh and Galareh, have been my

family for forty years; he decided to go back to beyond his birth without informing anyone. His death was so sudden that everyone was left stunned. To this very moment, I am unable to comprehend Abbas's departure. Was that part of life's divine comedy? I am not sure; however, I am reminded of the great Mark Twain's words in *Letters from the Earth*:

> Life was not a valuable gift, but death was. Life was a fever-dream made up of joys embittered by sorrows, pleasure poisoned by pain; a dream that was a nightmarish confusion of spasmodic and fleeting delights, ecstasies, exultations, happiness, interspersed with long-drawn miseries, grief, perils, horrors, disappointments, defeats, humiliations, and despairs—the heaviest curse devisable by divine ingenuity; but death was sweet, death was gentle, death was kind; death healed the bruised spirit and the broken heart, and gave them rest and forgetfulness; death was man's best friend; when man could endure life no longer, death came and set him free.

So I look into nature's big gray eye once again; in tears and with defiance, I repeat, "I shall not be defeated. I shall not be defeated." Nature folds in embarrassment.

As we get closer to the present day, the game of chess with the divine comedy is still going on. There is no winner; there is no loser. I believe, however, that I am the winner so far. How

can a human defy nature to the extent I have? I am still eternal, enduring, and perpetual.

Being a victim of systemic lupus, my body has the tendency to grow bone spurs in the weirdest places. I had a new one on my left thumb this time, and its pain was excruciating. After a visit to my dear friend and physician Dr. George Macer and an x-ray, it was decided that surgery was inevitable. As I have written above, my kind wife, Marisela, prepared me for all I needed, and the surgery was done at Long Beach Memorial Hospital. All went well then. However, life's divine comedy refused to make matters easy for my doctors or for me. Here I am depicting my neurological problems and repeating myself. Dr. George Macer placed two titanium plates and screws in my thumb after cutting the bone spur and put my hand in a cast. A month later, the main cast was taken off, and a new cast was put in its place. Every month, poor Marisela would take me to Dr. Macer. He found that the screws had not fused. This continued for about eight months, and each month I got a new cast. Then we decided to operate again and put in larger titanium plates and larger screws. Seven months later, the same situation remained. Finally, Dr. Macer, my wife, and I, after consultation with Dr. Nancy Godfrey and Dr. David Shen, decided that I would undergo a third surgery. Dr. Macer cut bone from my arm and placed it around the titanium plates in the hope that my natural bones would help the fusion. As of now, I am wearing my seventeenth cast. I am waiting for the result of the bone graft.

Through all this, my chemotherapy had to be put on hold. This, of course, has had severe consequences on the way I felt. Lupus has been taking its toll on my body. I began to feel like an invalid, and I almost lost the battle with life's divine comedy, but I have not.

Evidently, because I did not give in to nature, it punished me with another loss. My best friend, whom I had known for years, the honorable George Simon, had called it quits and left us devastated and unable to comprehend how such a young, vibrant, and healthy young man—much younger than I was—became a victim of life's comedy and died of lung cancer within weeks of his diagnosis. My tears were unstoppable, my grief was deep, and my astonishment was unprecedented. To George, I wrote Caruso's song:

George, *mio Caruso*
George, *mio fratello*, *mon frère*
You and I had been here
Where the sun shone

Where the wind howled
On Second Street
On the old terrace
In front of the gulf of life

We shared a tear
We shared a smile
We shared a cry
We shared laughter

Then we cleared our voices
And continued our song

I love you so very much—very, very much, you know

It is a chain by now
That heats the blood inside my veins, you know

We saw the lights out on the sea
And we thought of the nights we shared

They were only a white wake of stern

And we left the pain

But when you saw the moon
Emerging from the cloud
Death seemed sweeter to you

You looked at my daughter's eyes

Her eyes were deep as the sea
Then suddenly a tear fell
And you knew you were drowning

I love you so much, you know
So very, very much, you know

It had been the power of lyrics
Where every life drama was a hoax

And to you all became small
Even the nights

You turned and saw your life
Like the wake of a stern

I love you so much, George, you know

Very, very much, you know.

That heats the blood inside my veins, you know.

Up until now, I am—though brave and courageous—devastated and unable to comprehend the losses I have experienced. My health takes second position to these losses. I often sit on my balcony, watching the vast ocean and conversing with my departed friends. We laugh, and we cry; we share ideas, and we argue; we agree, and we disagree; and I write it all in my daily diary.

In my research for this work, I was taken by analysis of what comedy is. I quote from CliffsNotes about the *Divine Comedy: Inferno*—

> In classic terminology, a comedy is a work that begins in misery or deep confusion and ends in elation or happiness. In Shakespearean comedy, the play often begins in confusion—couples breaking up or separating, but ends with everyone finding the right partner.

> In other words, a comedy is not something one would laugh about, but an ascension from a low state of confusion to one where all people are combined for the greatest happiness.

And that is exactly my idea and purpose. Comedy here is not something that inspires laughter; it is more a state of misperception, bewilderment, and mystification. And that has been my relationship with life and with the world at large; I have a sense of uncertainty and disorder.

11

Nothing is more devastating, destructive, or shattering for a man than losing his sexuality. In chapter three, I wrote about the surgeries that Dr. Robert Pugach performed and their role in making me impotent; however, Dr. Robert Kawatchi of the City of Hope was able to miraculously resolve that issue by prescribing me a very costly compound pharmacy solution called Tri-Mix-PGE 1/phetolamine/papaverine injections, made at the University of San Diego. My beautiful Marisela has to inject me if I had the desire, which I rarely do, for my penis to become erect. Sadly, my body became resistant to the medication; we increased the dose from five milligrams to twenty-four milligrams, but the result was not that satisfactory.

This aspect of the divine comedy was quite damaging to my spirit—and damaging also for my beautiful wife, Marisela, who is seventeen years younger. Life's divine comedy

did not stop here—no! Not long ago, I suffered a serious problem with enlargement of my prostate. My urologist, Dr. Hightower, had decided to operate and shave my prostate. The surgery I underwent at Long Beach Hospital left me in pain, bleeding, and with urinary symptoms I had never experienced before. After the surgery, my dear reader, I was completely impotent; my penis would never be erect again. This would not have been much of a problem except that I still had sexual desires, and I had a young wife to whom I needed to attend. What might be more a sign of both deep confusion and divine comedy? To nature, however, I would be the last man standing.

What perturbed me about these circumstances were the expressions of sympathy from my friends and colleagues. They all knew about my old sexual escapades and felt how troubling my impotence must be for me, so they express their thoughts of pity, and I abhorred that. After the surgery, however, I lived my sexual life vicariously, experiencing it in my imagination through the actions of other people.

Comical measures and trials may vary, but they are always thriving. One occurrence is certainly unforgettable; that is when I had to go to Long Beach Hospital because I had an unsubsiding erection. How whacky is that? It was a Thursday afternoon when my beautiful wife, Marisela, and I decided to play husband and wife. She injected me with twenty-four milligrams of the Tri-Mix. We made passionate love for a much longer time than usual; we were both very happy. One drawback

evolved, though; I suffered, or enjoyed, an unsubsided erection that lasted for hours.

Although I believe in no gods or demons or angels or witches, I think Marisela is an angel who was sent to me from somewhere. I cannot think of anyone who can endure such a life. Indeed, Marisela is what others might call an angel.

My stepchildren came home from school, and I was dreadfully mortified, trying to hide my, at that time, painful erection. There was nothing to make it subside. I called Long Beach Hospital, and the dialogue was very uncomfortable; it sounded like a lewd phone call. I explained to the nurse the condition, and I had to assure her of the veracity and that it had nothing to do with sexual desire. The nurse asked that I go to the hospital without delay. When I arrived at the hospital, in a taxi, hiding my erect penis with papers in my hand, I approached the registration desk and very softly said, "I have an unsubsiding erection."

The female clerk said in such a loud voice that I thought people throughout the United States heard of my dilemma, "You have an unsubsiding erection?"

I felt that everyone at the emergency room was looking at me, and in embarrassment, I replied, "Yes."

The triage nurse moved me to a private room and asked me to take off my pants and underwear; they covered me with a

white sheet. I looked so peculiar when my legs were straight, as my penis showed like a rod under the sheet.

I waited for a doctor, but while I was waiting, many female nurses and other women who appeared not to be nurses came to the room for one excuse or another. I felt that all the nurses called their relatives from around California to come and see "the man with an unsubsided erection." It was both disconcerting and gratifying at the same time, but I cannot explain why it was gratifying. Then came a young female doctor; she asked me if she could touch it—holy shit! She rubbed my penis softly with her delicate thumb and index finger up and down. Instantly, I felt a stronger, more solid erection. What a haunting situation! The condition turned into desire even though I was thinking that my naughty past was receding fast before my eyes and the memories of my yesterdays were on their deathbed. But, like a phoenix, I rose from the ashes and became a gentle butterfly.

I wondered if my growth and change were a forgery. Then I realized that, like in paintings, everything, including love, hate, relationships, and even personality changes, could be a forgery. However, I believe that in every forgery, there is some authenticity.

I was still experiencing the effects of that last prostate surgery in terms of urgency, frequency, and the continuous feeling of a urinary-tract infection. It would take about eight weeks to heal. This was not all that nature presented me with. I also had an urgent surgery of a different kind.

Only weeks earlier, Dr. Trivedi discovered through an MRI that my gallbladder was almost destroyed. It was full of stones—practically blocked. He sent me to surgery at once. As I have written above, my surgeon was the great doctor Stevens Grant, the best in America in this specialty. He operated on me; my recovery was very quick, and it was as though nothing had happened, though my life had been in extreme danger. This was another blow from life's divine comedy; it seemed that it worked so against me, but I did not take it personally. It is for all of us. Nature is about destruction. "Many call this process 'the destruction of nature.' But it's not really destruction; it's change. Nature cannot be destroyed," wrote author Noah Harari. So nature is about change, constant change, and we have to be flexible enough to bend. I try.

On a different note, here I am reminded of Joseph B. Wirthlin's thoughts about taking life for granted; he once told us that the more often we see the things around us—even the beautiful and wonderful things—the more they become invisible to us. That is why we often take for granted the beauty of this world: the flowers, the trees, the birds, and the clouds—even those we love. Because we see things so often, we see them less and less. The reason I remember this is my inability to walk for more than ten minutes before I either fall or must sit down. It was not long ago that I would stroll along the beach, admiring the Pacific Ocean's vastness, the birds of all species flying, the dogs passing by and playing on the sand, the children building sand castles, and the kites flying above as though asking us to join them. Those were good days that cannot be relived. It is

a lesson, nevertheless, that makes me more aware of my existence and the existence of all that surrounds me.

Whether this is a divine comedy plan or not, I tend to live in the past; perhaps it is because the present is challenging, and the future is oblique. I do realize that the longer I live in the past, the less I enjoy the present, and the further away the future seems. I cannot help it, however.

Another matter of concern is my sense of coordination; I can no longer button my shirts, tie my shoes, or pick up something from the floor. It appears as though each part of my body has a mind of its own and does its own thing regardless of orders from my brain. So my brain is no longer the commander in chief. It is amazing and quite ironic, since the imbecile president is actually now America's commander in chief.

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At the risk of repeating myself, which I am sure I did, I, Alexandre Akpors, accentuate how life's divine comedy has dealt me numerous blows, none of which broke me down. That is not to say I am a superman—not at all. I am as fragile and vulnerable as any human; perhaps I just have the skill of confronting life's trials and misfortunes. There are many ordeals we humans have to manage on a daily basis; I am not any different from other people.

We do not know much about anything. We are imprisoned in bodies that have limitations. We cannot even be sure about anything we encounter; we can never be certain whether our perceptions are real or false. That is why I brought up the idea of fiction and nonfiction. Is all that happens to me merely my perception? Who is to decide? Medical science with its advanced machinery and tests gives us information, but we still have to analyze that information.

The current conditions of my liver and my pancreas are a very good example of what one can endure. Blood tests, MRIs, and ultrasounds show complications; what they are and how to handle them are different matters altogether. As I write this, I could be suffering from liver cancer and pancreatic cancer or at least cirrhosis of the liver, but neither my physicians nor I know for certain, and the investigation continues. In essence, it would be safe to say we know nothing—and that is divine comedy indeed.

This brings to mind a great novel by Christopher Isherwood. The novel is set in the 1960s. The main character is a gay, not too young and not too old English professor, adjusting to living alone and lonely after the horrific demise of his male lover. He tries to continue living as though nothing had happened. In his loneliness and despite his desperation and thoughts of taking his own life, we find that he is a man who loves being alive even with life's injustices.

I too love being alive despite its persistent challenges and deprivation of what Isherwood focuses on "being free," confronting fear as the main cause of destruction. So perhaps life's divine comedy constantly attempts to impose fear upon us, and once we give in, we are doomed.

We are coming to the end of the past twenty-five years of my life and the many changes I have experienced in my inner self and character. My growth as a human and a man has been remarkable. In trying to make sense of the senseless, I shall momentarily share what my brilliant physicians believe to be the main cause of all these atrocious ailments that I am facing.

Before I do that, I would like to quote some touching and meaningful words from *A Single Man*. This quote is significant to me, because I experience the same on a daily basis:

> The creature we are watching will struggle on and on until it drops. Not because it is heroic. It can imagine no alternative.
>
> Staring and staring into the mirror, it sees many faces within its face, the face of the child, the boy, the young man, the not-so-young man, all present still, preserved like fossils on superimposed layers, and, like fossils, dead. Their message to this live dying creature is: look at us—we have died—what is there to be afraid of?

Indeed, what is there to be afraid of? We have already died, and a second later, we are different people altogether in the world of the unknown. Who knows what is in store for you or for me?

Scientists at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the City of Hope have determined that the most likely culprit for my cancer was the DDT to which I was frequently exposed as a child growing up in Egypt in the late fifties and early sixties. My neurologist, Dr. David Rosenberg, and other esteemed physicians have determined that my neurological misfortune and my systemic lupus could have been a result of two deadly diseases I experienced during my childhood. One was the deadly disease meningitis, which is a severe inflammation (swelling) of the protective membranes covering the brain and spinal cord; a

bacterial or viral infection of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord usually causes the swelling. The other was scarlet fever, which is a bacterial illness that develops in some children who have strep throat. Scarlet fever is most common in children five to fifteen years of age. Although scarlet fever is not a serious disease now, when I was growing up in Egypt, it was a dangerous childhood illness.

All my cousins who were about my age and who suffered these two deadly illnesses died. Only I survived, for some miraculous reason, but it was only to have these conditions return to haunt me in my old age.

So life's divine comedy has been present from the start. It is not a new phenomenon; it is life itself. Surely it is not only I who am challenging this comedy; I am certain all of us do in one way or another. It is just somewhat astounding, dumbfounding, and overwhelming in my case.

EPILOGUE

The divine comedy is neither divine, which means like God, nor is it comedy, for it is not meant to bring about laughter. It is divine because it is astounding, beyond belief, dumbfounding, and flabbergasting. In a way, it is hard to deem that it is not fiction—yet it is not. And it is comedy because it is tragic, heartrending, and wretched but does not end in the ultimate finale, which, in Greek and Roman mythology, is death.

The divine comedy is a mere mirror of life, as each of us perceives it. It is also how we react to our perception, which we always tend to believe is true, while, in fact, a perception is only that—discernment.

I, Alexandre Akpors, have placed my life before you and called it fiction, for even I am not sure whether it is real. How can one tell whether a life is real? How can we be sure we are really here? Am I writing this, or do I merely think I am? All these questions make me confront life's divine comedy and defy its relentless attempts to bring me annihilation and ruin. Yes, it triumphs; in that, it affects my inner self. Being an invalid can, at times, be deeply exasperating. I am unable to button my shirts, tie my shoelaces, coordinate my fingers to pick up an object, and walk for more than eight to ten minutes before I tumble. These limitations can be troubling at times; at other times, I find them comical, and I laugh or smile. My most commonly used expression is "Well, I am sixty years old!" At that point, comedy becomes real comedy. Yes, I find it comical that

I walk around with a catheter hanging from my penis. I find it comical that at times I have to wear an adult diaper. I find it comical that I cannot stand for more than ten or fifteen minutes. I find it comical that I have to take out my false teeth and put them in a glass at night. Try to imagine going to a restaurant twenty miles away from home and order your O'rderves, then discover you had forgotten your teeth at home. What would you do? That happened to me. I found it comical. I also find it comical that I bleed as though I were on my period, and I find it funny that I can hardly see. Yet I shall be the last man standing.

I hope I have not been misconstrued; I am not a superman but a simple, ordinary person like all humans; it is, again, a matter of perception. I hope my readers experience first hand what it means to have neurological problems; I am sure my readers feel that through my repeating myself. I intentionally refused to edit these points for that reason.

We are all caged and confined in tenuous bodies that decay with time—I am no different. After 45 serious surgeries and more than 180 medical procedures, anybody would become frail and feeble; mine is no different. I am frail and feeble. Doctors and scientists keep telling us the number one cause of death is this or that; I hope my readers now agree with me that the number one reason of death is birth. No one would die had he or she not been born.

We are also altered by all the external complications that surround us and impose themselves upon us. A great example of

that is when one's parent or parents call it a quit. I remember when I was approaching my fiftieth birthday when my dear father died – or travelled to the land before his birth. That day, I aged a hundred years. My mentor, my rock on which I rested each time I was about to fall, my father died. It is quite astounding when one's father disappears into the unknown, The earth shook beneath my feet, and the fine line between reality and illusion, sanity and insanity, reason and lack of reason faded– that day, I aged a hundred years.

Not long after that, my dear mother whom I adored and am indebted to her for saving my life as a child with severe illnesses also took a flight into the unknown world of demise. The word sadness is not enough to describe feelings.

Now that my parents are dust in love, I asked my scientist brother if they were to have intercourse, would the baby be born dead and dust in the wind. My brother simply laughed at my, what we both believed, a philosophically sound question.

Another example of being alerted by external complications around us is our politics. Here, in these United States of ours, we have suddenly lost all our fundamental values and have become the only modern fascist state in the world, now we are under the rule of a Republican gangster from Vegas. I hesitate to mention his name. Losing our freedom, our democracy, and our character is also a blow from life's divine comedy; in this case, the term *comedy* reflects tragedy. Yes, we are now living a tragedy and will for a long time to come. With our

current government policies, my demise and departure to the time before my birth could be hastened to occur before its natural time.

Ending this remarkable tale of life, I am reminded of the wise words of Sir Charles Aznavour, the French poet and singer, hoping that we all adhere to what he teaches us:

> The happy days are here and now
> Now is the time to love and live
> Sing all the songs
> Drink all the wine that life can give
> All yesterdays are dead and gone
> Tomorrow is so far away
> So, realize and think of now as a happy day.

ANNOTATIONS FROM SUZANNE GATTIS, REVIEWER

What is reality, and what is fiction? Do any of us really know in the end? This is something that the author, and in turn the reader, ponders throughout this novel by Sabri Bebawi, titled *Divine Comedy*. How can one man face so many medical obstacles in a single lifetime? Can one man have such fervent love affairs with so many exotic women and yet never seem to really find true love? Life is, after all, a *Divine Comedy*. As the author wrote, "There are only two ways to react to life's trials and tribulations—either become frustrated, bitter, and angry and feel sorrow or see all events as comical and somewhat wacky."

Bebawi does a great job of reiterating his book's theme throughout the novel. There is no doubt left upon the readers of this book exactly what the author set out to accomplish through his unique style of storytelling. The revolving mention of *Divine Comedy* is interwoven in almost every chapter, showing that life can be full of twists, turns, and upside downs, as well as times of beauty and love. This point was well articulated throughout the storytelling of the book.

As an uncommon angle throughout the story, the narrator has a wandering eye; along with an enticing way with the ladies leaving me wondering what void the character was trying to fill. I believe this humanized the character in a great way and showed great restraint. I believe what outwardly was shown as

a strength was indeed something that many would look upon as a great weakness.

On the surface, this book is easy to read; however, to grasp the connectedness of the writing is a bit more challenging, requiring slowing down at times to absorb the deeper meaning of the story. While the words and overall thoughts flowed well, the reader needs to allow for the theme to be revealed; otherwise, one may find something in the story missing. I believe the rhythm of this author is uniquely different from all others I have experienced. The reveal of the story is only the beginning of the journey; thus, the strength in his writing is accomplished with the addition of allowing time for mulling over the underlying irony of the character's awareness, affording the philosophical undercurrent the opportunity to rise from just the reading of the words.

The author did an excellent job of reminding us of the ever-changing nature of our world. Bebawi threaded a similar situation repeatedly, although the ailments and the faces changed. The ability to be true to a theme while still introducing new challenges and ideas allows Bebawi to truly master the writing of this book.

Bebawi leaves the readers to decide what is factual and what is fictional within the book. It makes the reader always wonder about the threads of reality, which is exactly the point of *Divine Comedy*. Overall, I found *Divine Comedy* by Sabri Bebawi to be a charming, unique story, full of adventure and emotion, with a creative edge for storytelling.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The middle of five children, Sabri George Bebawi was born in 1956 in the town of Fayoum, Egypt. He attended law school at Cairo University. His refusal to carry arms and follow Arab orders to kill Jews forced him to flee from Egypt.

He then left for the United Kingdom. He was invited to study at Oxford University, where he spent a semester, and he never returned to Egypt. A few years later, after living and working in England, Italy, France, and Cyprus, he took refuge in the United States. This has been the biggest mistake he has made in his life. Sadly, it could never be fixed, as he had given up all other nationalities and residences.

He became an instructor of English as a second language. Later, after more studies, he became a professor of English, journalism, teachers' training, and educational technology. He studied for more graduate work at the University of California, Los Angeles, and obtained a PhD in education and distance learning from Capella University while taking courses at UCLA.

Although English is his third language, he has published many works on eclectic topics. *Divine Comedy* is his third novel. His first novel, *God on Trial*, has been surprisingly successful; it has

won many awards, including a British literary award in 2015. As English is a foreign language to him, the task of writing the perfect novel has always been challenging.

As a child, Sabri Bebawi struggled to make sense of the world. He grew up terrified of God and the world. As he grew older and studied law, as well as all the holy books, he developed a more pragmatic and sensible stance; the word *god* became just that—a word. And the world became just a mirage. Bebawi waits for that certain-to-come day when all religions, conformity, capitalism, republicanism, and inhumanity are eradicated. He wishes America well, though it appears to him that it is a little too late; evil forces have possessed America, and no one knows how.

Bebawi is currently a fellow of the Salzburg Institute on Globalization in Austria. He lectures on the negative effects of globalization on poor and abused nations.

READER'S REFLECTIONS

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